

Behind the economic “recovery”

Hunger and homelessness in US continue to rise in 2003

By Jamie Chapman
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Hunger and homelessness in the United States continue to rise at double-digit rates in 2003, according to a December 18 report released by the US Conference of Mayors (USCM). In the 25 cities that responded to its survey, requests for emergency food assistance were up 17 percent over last year, while requests for emergency shelter increased by 13 percent on average.

The report cites unemployment and other employment-related problems as the leading cause of hunger, giving the lie to Bush administration claims that an economic recovery is lifting workers out of poverty. While there has been an increase in corporate profits, productivity and stock prices this year, millions of workers remain mired in long-term unemployment and underemployment, with savings and other resources long since exhausted.

Other causes of hunger listed in the report include low-paying jobs, the high cost of housing, medical care costs, substance abuse and mental health problems, reduced public benefits, childcare costs, and transportation expenses.

The leading cause of homelessness is the lack of affordable housing, followed by the lack of needed services for mental health and substance abuse problems, low-paying jobs, unemployment, domestic violence, poverty and prison release.

Continuing the trend of recent years, more families with children as well as the working poor are seeking emergency assistance. Fully 59 percent of those turning to soup kitchens and food pantries this year were children and their parents, while 39 percent of the adults seeking food were employed.

The number of homeless families seeking shelter increased 15 percent in 2003, constituting 40 percent of

the overall homeless population. In 15 of the 25 cities surveyed, families may have to break up to be sheltered, while in 12 cities, families usually have to spend the day outside of the shelter they use at night.

Seventeen percent of homeless people work, down slightly from recent years. Five percent are unaccompanied youth, and 10 percent are veterans. Fourteen percent of the shelter population consists of single women, but advocacy groups point out that many of these women are “single” only because they have managed to leave their children with a relative or a close friend.

The average stay in shelters was five months this year. The length of the average stay increased over 2002 in 60 percent of the cities surveyed.

While demand for emergency food and shelter is increasing, the supply in both categories has failed to keep up. Over half of the cities reported having to cut back on the number of bags of food provided, and to limit the number of times people are allowed to receive food. In every city surveyed, families and individuals relied on food assistance both in emergencies and as a steady source of food over long periods. Fourteen percent of those asking for food were denied due to short supply.

The report also documents the lack of sufficient emergency shelter. Thirty percent of applicants for emergency shelter overall, and 33 percent of homeless families were turned away, leaving them to fend for themselves on the streets overnight.

Applications for subsidized housing by low-income families increased this year in 83 percent of the cities surveyed. The average wait for public housing units is 24 months, while the wait for Section 8 vouchers, a

federal housing subsidy for approved private rentals, is 27 months. In nearly half the cities, officials had stopped accepting applications for at least one form of subsidized housing because the waiting list is too long.

According to city estimates, low-income households are forced to pay an average of 46 percent of their income on housing, down slightly from 49 percent in last year's survey. The percentage is much higher in cities with the highest housing costs.

Most US cities with populations of over 1 million are included in the survey, with the prominent exception of the nation's largest, New York City, and the southwestern metropolises of Houston, Dallas and San Diego. A number of smaller and medium-sized cities also responded to the survey, ranging from Burlington, Vermont, to Salt Lake City, Utah.

In New York City, the situation is no better than elsewhere. The number of people housed in the shelters set a record of 38,638 in one night this month. The number of homeless families stands at 9,211—more than double the number five years ago—and is climbing. This does not count the thousands of people, who, due to the horrible conditions in the shelters, prefer to sleep out in the open, even in winter.

The authors of the USCM report neither draw any conclusions about nor make any recommendations to ameliorate, let alone abolish, the injustice of rising hunger and homelessness in the world's richest nation. The report does include, however, a number of comments from the surveys. While couched in the carefully worded language of city bureaucrats, these remarks nonetheless point to ways in which today's starvation conditions are being imposed on the broader sections of workers.

In discussing the poor prospects for next year, a Boston official cites the "termination of unemployment benefits for longer-term unemployed," referring to the recent refusal of Congress to renew a 13-week federal extension of unemployment benefits that formerly kicked in after the basic 26-week state benefits expired.

A Cleveland respondent points to the reduction every month over the last three years in benefits for welfare recipients, a function of the strict two- and five-year time limits imposed by the Clinton administration's 1996 welfare "reform."

A Portland, Oregon, official expects "more people will be in lines and on waiting lists" due to state and

local budget cuts. "Mainstream social service systems have faced severe declines in funding and have had to make cuts in services even as the needs have grown," he writes, continuing: "Local sources of revenue to develop and fund truly affordable housing for the poorest are now almost non-existent. The homeless systems and emergency shelters will feel the pressures of these cuts."

Among other factors, the San Antonio survey response cites "demolition and non-replacement of public housing, zero tolerance housing policies, and low-wage jobs" as fueling further homelessness. (The zero tolerance policies refer to the practice of evicting whole families from public housing whose children may be charged with minor drug offenses.) The San Antonio response also points to the illegal and usurious lending practices plaguing the poor: "The financial inability to access conventional services forces an already exploited population to utilize payday loans, pawn shops, rent-to-own and other predatory vendors."

Under these circumstances, the outlook for "those on the margins" in America remains bleak. Some 90 percent of the cities surveyed expect both homelessness and hunger to get only worse in 2004.

See also:

New York: Homeless man crushed to death by sanitation truck

[1 December 2003]

Homeless, poor freeze in US cold wave

[5 February 2003]

US mayors' report chronicles rising hunger and homelessness

[27 December 2002]

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