

Hungry and homeless ranks swell in US cities

By Rick Kelly
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The demand for emergency shelter and food in US cities has risen significantly over the past year, straining a tattered social safety net beyond the breaking point, according to a report released Tuesday by the US Conference of Mayors. The “Hunger and Homeless Survey” covering America’s 27 largest cities showed that requests for food aid increased by 14 percent in 2004, while the demand for shelter rose by 6 percent.

The most striking conclusion of the survey was that working families now constitute one of the largest groups in need of regular emergency assistance. Contrary to the image portrayed by the mass media, those going homeless and hungry in America are not just the “down and out,” the alcohol or drug-dependent, mentally ill or people otherwise unable to earn a living. They include many people who are working, but earn so little that they cannot make ends meet.

Chronic poverty afflicts wide sections of the working class, particularly those employed in the predominantly low-paid and casual service industry. Of all adults requesting food assistance, 34 percent were employed. Children and their parents accounted for fifty-six percent of all recipients of food aid. Families now make up 40 percent of the total homeless population in the United States.

These stark figures are another indication of the economic and social catastrophe confronting millions of Americans. While Bush boasted of an economic recovery during the presidential campaign, the reality is that only a small layer at the top has seen significant income gains in 2004. For millions of Americans, mass layoffs and the spiraling cost of living—particularly food, housing and fuel expenses—have made it increasingly difficult to get by.

“Working poor, unemployed, multi-generational, single and traditional parent families have to make

difficult decisions as whether to pay for utilities, rent, medicine, gas, health or car insurance,” city authorities in Louisville reported. “Food is being pushed further down the list of priorities.”

“The time when households used food assistance facilities primarily for emergency situations is long over,” noted officials in Philadelphia. “At least 86 percent of the people receiving assistance from the food cupboards return every month. The network is used to sustain families every month so they can use their limited resources on rent, heat, medical bills, and transportation.”

The report included a number of case studies. In Phoenix, the Robertsons, a married couple and their three children, became homeless after the father lost his job at a telemarketing company. He struggled to develop his own landscaping business, while his wife worked day labor jobs. “The family has no money and is having trouble accessing services because they do not have appropriate documentation, and do not have the money to pay for new birth certificates... Currently the Robertsons are on a waiting list of a large family shelter, but will need appropriate identification to enter the program.”

In St. Paul, a 24-year-old woman, Tara, her husband Martin, and their three young children became homeless after she lost her job as a home healthcare worker, which paid \$6.20 per hour. The family was forced to move into a shelter run by the local Catholic church.

Assistance for the poor remains grossly inadequate. Charity organizations are overwhelmed by the demand, and both the federal and state governments have gutted the budgets for social programs over a number of years.

The survey reported that in the past 12 months, one in five requests for food assistance went unmet—nearly a 50-percent increase over the previous year. Twenty-three percent of requests for emergency shelter

were turned down, and this rejection rate rose to 32 percent for homeless families.

In many cities, the shortfalls are far higher than these averages. In New Orleans, 66 percent of food requests were rejected, and in San Francisco 50 percent. In Los Angeles, 66 percent of all shelter requests made by families were turned down, and in Boston 50 percent.

The report provides a glimpse into some of the innumerable hardships and indignities suffered by those who seek assistance. More than half of the responding cities routinely forced homeless families to be broken up in order to be accommodated in emergency shelter.

Two-thirds of all cities surveyed reported that emergency food assistance facilities, in a desperate attempt to meet demand, were forced to cut back on the quantity of food they provided. Restrictions are also enforced on the number of times people are permitted to receive food.

Punitive government welfare cutbacks and restrictions, introduced by both the Clinton and Bush administrations, have only added to the hardship. "According to the Boston Medical Center Pediatric Emergency Department," the report noted, "25 percent of homeless families interviewed in their clinic had been cut off of welfare benefits within the past year (compared to 11 percent of non-homeless families) due to failure to comply with behavioral or procedural requirements, such as not being able to provide a mailing address to the welfare office."

The swelling of the ranks of the working poor has seen a parallel increase in the demand for subsidized housing. Requests for such housing by low-income families and individuals increased in 68 percent in the surveyed cities. Applicants for public housing now wait an average of 20 months before they receive any assistance. Fifty-nine percent of the surveyed cities are refusing to accept any new applications because they already have long waiting lists.

City authorities reported that they expect no improvement in hunger and homelessness in 2005. Eighty-eight percent said that they anticipate another increase in the demand for food assistance, and 92 percent expect a rise in requests for emergency shelter.

The Conference of Mayors made a somewhat bizarre attempt to put a positive spin on the survey's findings. Bill Purcell, mayor of Nashville and chair of the

conference's task force on hunger and homelessness, admitted that the "bad news is that the increased demand [for assistance] is all over the country." He then added: "The good news here is that the increase in demand overall has slowed somewhat."

In other words, the "good news" is that things are getting worse but—at least for the moment—at a slower rate. Every year the survey, first conducted 20 years ago, has registered an increase in the demand for food and shelter assistance.

Over the last year, the demand for food aid increased 17 percent, while requests for emergency shelter rose by 13 percent. In 2003, the demand for both food and shelter increased by 19 percent. As the survey demonstrates, the continued growth in the numbers of working people who are unable to earn enough to house and feed themselves has already overwhelmed the limited assistance programs that exist in America.

To focus on a decline in the rate at which hunger and homelessness is growing only confirms that the government and the corporate-controlled two-party system are unwilling and unable to take any action to alleviate the suffering.

What emerges from the survey is a devastating portrait of the human cost of American society's unprecedented level of social inequality. While the wealthiest strata are anticipating a lucrative new year (see "America's super-rich look forward to a merry Christmas"), millions of people will spend the holiday season in desperation and destitution.

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