

Fear of food scarcity hits US capital, outlying suburbs

By Nick Barrickman
31 December 2012

In the outlying areas surrounding Washington DC, students qualifying for free or subsidized meals face a difficult period ahead while schools prepare for their springtime curriculums, according to a recent report by the *Washington Post*. The existence of widespread food scarcity in the outlying suburbs of the nation's capital, some of which reside within some of the wealthiest counties in the US, gives the lie to claims that the DC area is "recession-proof."

The report mentions that although school systems in the region generally institute food programs for children during the summer months, no such program exists during wintertime. "Our hearts are in the right place, but there's no provision," Marla Caplon, director of food and nutrition services at Montgomery County schools in Maryland, told the *Post*.

With a median income of over \$92,000 per year, Montgomery County is one of the 10 richest counties in the country. It is also home to some of the starkest circumstances of social inequality. At Broad Acres Elementary School, for example, 95 percent of all students qualify for subsidized meals. "Here we are, one of the wealthiest counties in the country, but the reality is there are pockets of deep poverty here," the school's principal, Luis San Sebastian, told the *Post*.

According to federal guidelines, a family making less than 130 percent of the official poverty line can qualify for free meals programs, while those making between 130 and 180 percent qualify for a subsidized lunch. In Arlington County, across the Potomac River from Washington DC, there are roughly 7,000 students qualifying for free lunches.

In Virginia, the country's wealthiest county, Loudoun, with a median income of roughly \$120,000 annually, has seen a growth of about 16 percent in individuals qualifying for free meals. The county has

also recently seen a 5 percent growth in homelessness in the past year. Despite this, over Thanksgiving the county was short in delivering free turkey meals to the region's underfed by about 200 people.

As these indices of destitution mount, assistance from local, state and federal governments has dropped off precipitously in the past year. According to the Capital Area Food Bank, a central hub that donates to over 700 local charities and non-profits in the region, donations of food from government have declined by 38 percent.

Instances of homelessness have skyrocketed throughout the region. In Virginia, Fairfax County alone has seen a 38 percent rise in the number of homeless students since 2008, an increase of over 2,500 individuals. That number is more than 10 times higher than it was just 15 years earlier.

Far from being an exception, the District of Columbia has seen a growth in food scarcity as well, with over 52 percent of its student population qualifying for free or subsidized school lunches. An even starker statistic shows that the district has seen a nearly 75 percent rise in homelessness since 2008.

As reported by the *World Socialist Web Site* last summer, this has resulted in city shelter systems turning to witch-hunting parents in homeless shelters as a method of reducing the total number of applicants for a bed spaces. (See "Homelessness, social misery on the rise in US capital")

The district alone has some of the sharpest manifestations of social misery on the planet, with half the children in the impoverished 8th Ward living under the official poverty line. In the city as a whole, nearly one in three children lives in such conditions. This is while the city's top 5 percent has one of the country's highest median incomes, over \$500,000 per year.

DC education chancellor Kaya Henderson recently

announced a plan to close a portion of the cities
“underperforming” school at the end of the school
year, and action that will only worsen living conditions
for children and families in the region. (See “
Washington, DC chancellor announces closures of
dozens of public schools”)

In relationship to the “underperformance” of schools,
it was recently revealed in an audit by the government
that a private DC schools vender,
Chartwells-Thompson Hospitality, had overbilled the
city by nearly \$10 million, while underserving schools
by nearly 15,000 students. Of course, no such
“accountability” will be required from private vendors
as the city moves to privatize its education system.

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