

Child hunger in US rose by 50 percent in 2007

By [Kate Randall](#)

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Some 691,000 children went hungry in America in 2007, a rise of 50 percent over the previous year, while one in eight Americans overall struggled to feed themselves. The figures are reported in a study on food security conducted annually by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Of the 36.2 million people who struggled with hunger during the year, almost a third of these adults and children faced a substantial disruption to their food supply, meaning they went hungry at some point. The number of these most hungry Americans has grown by more than 40 percent since 2000, rising to 11.9 million individuals in 2007.

These statistics are all the more alarming since they do not reflect the impact of the current economic crisis. James Weill, president of the Food Research and Action Center, predicted the 2008 numbers would show even more hunger.

“There’s every reason to think the increases in the number of hungry people will be very, very large,” Weill said, “based on the increased demand we’re seeing this year at food stamp agencies, emergency kitchens, Women, Infants and Children clinics, really across the entire social service support structure.”

The USDA study covered about 45,600 households, selected as representative of the approximately 118 million households in the US. Households were classified as being “food secure,” having “low food security” or having “very low food security,” according to their answers to a set of questions, including:

- In the last 12 months, were you ever hungry, but didn’t eat, because there wasn’t enough money for food?
- Did you or other adults in your household ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn’t enough money for food?

Households with children up to 18 years of age were asked additional questions, such as:

- In the last 12 months, did you ever cut the size of any of the children’s meals because there wasn’t enough money for food?
- In the last 12 months, did any of the children ever skip a meal because there wasn’t enough money for food?

Children were identified as having “very low food security” if they lived in households that answered “yes” to 25 percent or more of the questions asked (calculated according to a formula designed by the study).

Some 691,000 children met the criteria. At some point during the year, these children went to school without breakfast, ate meals providing inadequate calories and nutrients, or went to bed hungry. Their families could not provide for them because they did not have the financial resources to do so.

These statistics translate into real and lasting suffering for society's youngest members. Research has shown that hunger and malnourishment have a profound impact on the mental and physical development of preschool and school-aged children. They are more likely to exhibit higher levels of chronic illness, anxiety and depression, and behavioural problems than well-fed children.

Uncertainty about the ability to provide adequate food is devastating for parents and families, both physically and mentally. Of the 4.7 million families estimated to suffer from very low food security, 98 percent worried that their food would run out before they got money to buy more. Some 94 percent reported that they could not afford to eat balanced meals.

Close to a third of these households reported that on occasion an adult did not eat for an entire day because there was not enough money for food. In 45 percent of these households an adult had lost weight because he or she could not afford enough food. Often parents went without so that the children could eat, or the youngest children ate at the expense of older siblings.

Conditions of hunger for these households were not adequately counteracted by assistance from the three largest federal food and nutrition programs—the Food Stamp Program, the National School Lunch Program and the Special Supplemental Nutritional Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)—or by help from food pantries or soup kitchens.

Not surprisingly, the study showed that poverty is the greatest contributing factor to hunger. In 2007, the federal poverty line was set at \$21,027 for a family of four, an amount woefully inadequate to provide for sufficient food and nutrition, let alone pay for housing, utilities and other necessities. In households where income fell below this line, food insecurity stood at 37.7 percent.

The rate of food insecurity was 22.2 percent for African-American households and 20.1 percent for Hispanic households. Food insecurity was also more prevalent in households headed by a single parent where there were children—30.2 percent for those headed by women, 18 percent for those headed by men.

Southern states saw the highest rates of food insecurity. Measured over three years, from 2005 through 2007, the states reporting the highest figures were Mississippi (17.4 percent), New Mexico (15 percent), Texas (14.8 percent), and Arkansas (14.4 percent).

Food insecurity is not restricted to inner-city or urban metropolitan areas, but is prevalent in rural and less-populated areas as well. The highest growth in food insecurity over the last nine years has been in the states of Alaska and Iowa, both of which saw a 3.7 percent increase in families who faced substantial food disruptions.

A majority of US households are concerned about the cost of food. A study released last month by the Opinion Research Group, commissioned by Minnesota-based Hormel Food Corp., showed that 84 percent of Americans are worried about rising food prices and 58

percent have had to make cuts in their food purchases as a result.

More than half of those surveyed have had to take steps to reduce food costs, including using more generic or store brands, eating out less often, buying less expensive cuts of meat and increasing their purchases of cheap staples such as potatoes and rice.

Of those polled, 14 percent said they or an immediate family member had received food from a food bank, soup kitchen, shelter or other charitable organization in the past year due to a lack of money for food.

Among those who had not, 21 percent said it is very or somewhat likely that rising food costs, a job loss or other circumstance might force them to seek help for food from a charitable organization in the future. These conditions will inevitably worsen as the economic crisis intensifies.

The growing hunger crisis should be seen within the context of the massive use of taxpayer funds to bail out Wall Street bankers and financiers. Hundreds of billions are being handed over to these interests, while no serious measures are being contemplated to confront a social crisis that will intensify rapidly over the coming months as layoffs mount and the recession deepens.

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