

Rising Poverty, Widespread Unemployment: America's Economic Pain Brings Hunger Pangs

USDA report on access to food 'unsettling,' Obama says

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The nation's economic crisis has catapulted the number of Americans who lack enough food to the highest level since the government has been keeping track, according to a new federal report, which shows that nearly 50 million people — including almost one child in four — struggled last year to get enough to eat.

At a time when rising poverty, widespread unemployment and other effects of the recession have been well documented, the report released Monday by the U.S. Department of Agriculture provides the government's first detailed portrait of the toll that the faltering economy has taken on Americans' access to food.

The magnitude of the increase in food shortages — and, in some cases, outright hunger — identified in the report startled even the nation's leading anti-poverty advocates, who have grown accustomed to longer lines lately at food banks and soup kitchens. The findings also intensify pressure on the White House to fulfill a pledge to stamp out childhood hunger made by President Obama, who called the report "unsettling."

The data show that dependable access to adequate food has especially deteriorated among families with children. In 2008, nearly 17 million children, or 22.5 percent, lived in households in which food at times was scarce — 4 million children more than the year before. And the number of youngsters who sometimes were outright hungry rose from nearly 700,000 to almost 1.1 million.

Among Americans of all ages, more than 16 percent — or 49 million people — sometimes ran short of nutritious food, compared with about 12 percent the year before. The deterioration in access to food during 2008 among both children and adults far eclipses that of any other single year in the report's history.

Around the Washington area, the data show, the extent of food shortages varies significantly. In the past three years, an average of 12.4 percent of households in the District had at least some problems getting enough food, slightly worse than the national average. In Maryland, the average was 9.6 percent, and in Virginia it was 8.6 percent.

The local and national findings are from a snapshot of food in the United States that the Agriculture Department has issued every year since 1995, based on Census Bureau surveys. It documents Americans who lack a dependable supply of adequate food — people living with some amount of "food insecurity" in the lexicon of experts — and those whose food shortages are so severe that they are hungry. The new report is based on a survey

conducted in December.

Several independent advocates and policy experts on hunger said that they had been bracing for the latest report to show deepening shortages, but that they were nevertheless astonished by how much the problem has worsened. “This is unthinkable. It’s like we are living in a Third World country,” said Vicki Escarra, president of Feeding America, the largest organization representing food banks and other emergency food sources.

“It’s frankly just deeply upsetting,” said James D. Weill, president of the Washington-based Food and Action Center. As the economy eroded, Weill said, “you had more and more people getting pushed closer to the cliff’s edge. Then this huge storm came along and pushed them over.”

Obama, who pledged during last year’s presidential campaign to eliminate hunger among children by 2015, reiterated that goal on Monday. “My Administration is committed to reversing the trend of rising hunger,” the president said in a statement. The solution begins with job creation, Obama said. And he ticked off steps that Congress and the administration have taken, or are planning, including increases in food stamp benefits and \$85 million Congress just freed up through an appropriations bill to experiment with feeding more children during the summer, when subsidized school breakfasts and lunches are unavailable.

In a briefing for reporters, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said, “These numbers are a wake-up call . . . for us to get very serious about food security and hunger, about nutrition and food safety in this country.”

Vilsack attributed the marked worsening in Americans’ access to food primarily to the rise in unemployment, which now exceeds 10 percent, and in people who are underemployed. He acknowledged that “there could be additional increases” in the 2009 figures, due out a year from now, although he said it is not yet clear how much the problem might be eased by the measures the administration and Congress have taken this year to stimulate the economy.

The report’s main author at USDA, Mark Nord, noted that other recent research by the agency has found that most families in which food is scarce contain at least one adult with a full-time job, suggesting that the problem lies at least partly in wages, not entirely an absence of work.

The report suggests that federal food assistance programs are only partly fulfilling their purpose, although Vilsack said that shortages would be much worse without them. Just more than half of the people surveyed who reported they had food shortages said that they had, in the previous month, participated in one of the government’s largest anti-hunger and nutrition programs: food stamps, subsidized school lunches or WIC, the nutrition program for women with babies or young children.

Last year, people in 4.8 million households used private food pantries, compared with 3.9 million in 2007, while people in about 625,000 households resorted to soup kitchens, nearly 90,000 more than the year before.

Food shortages, the report shows, are particularly pronounced among women raising children alone. Last year, more than one in three single mothers reported that they struggled for food, and more than one in seven said that someone in their home had been

hungry — far eclipsing the food problem in any other kind of household. The report also found that people who are black or Hispanic were more than twice as likely as whites to report that food in their home was scarce.

In the survey used to measure food shortages, people were considered to have food insecurity if they answered “yes” to several of a series of questions. Among the questions were whether, in the past year, their food sometimes ran out before they had money to buy more, whether they could not afford to eat nutritionally balanced meals, and whether adults in the family sometimes cut the size of their meals — or skipped them — because they lacked money for food. The report defined the degree of their food insecurity by the number of the questions to which they answered yes.

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