

Extra Feature Story

Hungry in America: New Food Insecurity Numbers Are A Wake Up Call

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A new report released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture confirms that almost 50 million Americans had a hard time putting food on the table in 2008 -- one in seven American households, an increase of 13 million people from the year before.

The total number of Americans who are having a tough time affording nutritious food includes 17 million children —22 percent of all children in the United States. The report asserts that the number of young people who sometimes were outright hungry rose from nearly 700,000 to almost 1.1 million.

These new numbers do not reflect a starvation problem but rather describe a growing trend in American families called "food insecurity": a condition in which people lack basic food intake to provide them with the energy and nutrients for fully productive lives. The new figures are the highest since data collection began in 1995 and the Agriculture Department predicted the numbers for this year, 2009, are likely to be still worse.

Unemployment and the economy hurting families

Although global food production has been increasing substantially for the past several decades, 800 million people around the world still go hungry. In the United States one of the largest factors of food insecurity is unemployment. At the beginning of 2008, unemployment was at 4.9 percent. By the end of 2008, it was almost 8 percent, and now it is in double digits: 10.2 percent.

"All the food banks have said that, over the last 12 months, they have seen an increase of about 30 percent statewide. So, we can expect those numbers to go up against next year," J.C. Dwyer of the Texas Food Bank Network told the NewsHour.

Just who is "food insecure"?

These new figures do not mean that millions of people in the United States have absolutely no food in the house or are constantly hungry. The report shows American families struggling to find enough nutritious food for all members of the family and turning to food stamps or other government aid, or getting food from food pantries and soup kitchens.

Local food banks are seeing more working families needing assistance. In some cases, families who donated to food banks last year are showing up at the same doors now in need themselves.

"This is unthinkable," says Vicki Escarra, president of Feeding America, the largest organization representing food banks, "It's like we are living in a Third-World country."

Most of the families facing "food insecurity" contain at least one adult with a full-time job. The highest hit are single-parent families: more than one in three single mothers reported that they struggled to feed their children.

Food insecurity can affect learning and performance

In some nations where famine is widespread, children are visibly sick. In the United States, however, hunger manifests itself in a less severe visible form but can have great consequences in school and social development.

Food insecurity can affect social skills and behavior, reading performance, mathematical skills, and weight gain.

Not only does the brain need vitamins, minerals and protein, but physical hunger and worrying about money problems can distract students from their work, as well as cause depression and anger, recent studies show.

Congress and schools respond to increased need

In response to rising need, the federal stimulus package passed at the beginning of the year provided money to raise the average per-person food stamp benefit, which provides vouchers that people can use to pay for food, instead of money.

The families of 50 percent of children in this country have been on food stamps at one time or another in their lives, according to the New York Times.

In addition, lawmakers are set to reconsider the recently expired Child Nutrition Act, which lays out the rules for school breakfasts and lunches. Senators are debating ways to make the meals more accessible, tasty and healthy.

“The scale of these programs means that reforms can have a major impact on tens of millions of school children,” said Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack.

The final reauthorization bill is not expected to be passed until after the holidays.

Meanwhile, Feeding America, the national network of food banks, has set up Kids Cafe programs nationwide to provide free meals and snacks to low-income children through Boys & Girls Clubs, churches and public schools.

To find a food bank near you look [here](#).

-- Compiled by Lizzy Berryman for NewsHour Extra

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