

Report: More Americans going hungry

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The number of Americans who lack dependable access to adequate food shot up last year to 49 million, the largest number since the government has been keeping track, according to a federal report released Monday that shows particularly steep increases in food scarcity among families with children.

In 2008, the report found, nearly 17 million children -- more than one in five across the United States -- were living in households in which food at times ran short, up from slightly more than 12 million youngsters the year before. And the number of children who sometimes were outright hungry rose from nearly 700,000 to almost 1.1 million.

Among people of all ages, nearly 15 percent last year did not consistently have adequate food, compared with about 11 percent in 2007, the greatest deterioration in access to food during a single year in the history of the report.

Taken together, the findings provide the latest glimpse into the toll that the weak economy has taken on the well-being of the nation's residents. The findings are from a snapshot of food in America that the U.S. Agriculture Department has issued every year since 1995, based on Census Bureau surveys. It documents both Americans who are scrounging for 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.

"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," Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said during a briefing of reporters.

The report released Monday is the first produced during the tenure of President Obama, who pledged during his campaign for the White House last year to eliminate hunger among children by 2015, a goal that no previous president has set. The administration has not produced a full-fledged plan to meet that objective, but White House and Agriculture officials said in recent interviews that they are developing policies. Among the first is a decision to use \$85 million freed up by Congress as part of a recent appropriations bill to experiment with ways to get food to more children during the summer, when subsidized school breakfasts and lunches are unavailable.

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. "It's no secret. Poverty, unemployment, these are all factors," he said. Vilsack 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 just an absence of work.

The government's next significant forum for debating how to improve access to food is likely to come next year, when Congress is scheduled to renew the country's main law covering food and nutrition for children. In the meantime, the White House has been convening frequent meetings with officials from several federal departments -- including Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, in addition to Agriculture -- that deal with youngsters' well-being.

The report suggests that the main federal programs intended to help people struggling to get adequate food are only partly fulfilling their purpose. 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 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.

Poverty and food shortages are linked but are not the same thing, according to the report. Just half the households in which food is scarce have incomes at or below the official poverty level, the data show, while most of the rest live at less than twice the poverty level.

Around the Washington area, the extent of food shortages varies significantly. In the District, an average of 13.7 percent of households between 2006 and 2008 have had at least some problems getting enough food, although the problem in the District is not as severe as it was from a three-year period a decade earlier, according to the report. In Virginia, the prevalence of food shortages also has fallen in the past year to less than 9 percent. In Maryland, the problem has grown slightly worse, increasing to an average of 9.6 percent the past three years from 8.7 percent a decade before.

Overall, the data show that people who do not consistently have enough food experience the problem repeatedly, but not all the time. On average, households with such scarcity had the problem seven months out of the year, while about one-fourth said the problem occurred almost every month.

In the survey used to measure food shortages, people were considered to have food insecurity if they said that 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 enough 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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