



CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES

NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
Revised December 20, 2004

CONTACT: Michelle Bazie
202-408-1080

ONE IN NINE HOUSEHOLDS AT RISK OF HUNGER; HALF OF POOR FAMILIES FACE MULTIPLE HARDSHIPS

Roughly one in nine American households was hungry or at risk of hunger at some point last year, new government data show, while a Center analysis based on other government data on family hardships finds that half of poor families face multiple hardships, from hunger to unsafe housing. A new Center report uses these largely unreported data to examine the continuing breadth and depth of hardship in America.

“Statistically speaking, if you drove across the country, every ninth household you passed was unable — or in danger of being unable — to afford sufficient food at some point in the past year,” said Arloc Sherman, a senior researcher at the Center and author of the report. “Especially during the holiday season, when we’re surrounded by images of material abundance, we need to remember that millions of Americans are having trouble making ends meet.”

Number at Risk of Hunger Climbs for Fourth Straight Year, to 36 Million

Data from a recent U.S. Department of Agriculture report show that “food insecurity” among American households has climbed since 1999. (Under USDA’s definition, “food insecure” means that at “some time during the year, these households were uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food for all their members because they had insufficient money or other resources.”) Nearly 13 million households, containing 36 million people, reported that at least one household member was food insecure that year.

Thirty-six million people represents one-eighth of the total U.S. population, and one-ninth of the households. It is also roughly equivalent to the combined populations of Florida and New York.

Figures for 2004 are not yet available, but dramatic improvements in food insecurity are unlikely. The employment rate has merely held steady this year (at 62.3 percent of all adults in the first 11 months of both 2003 and 2004), while wages at the bottom of the economic ladder have not kept pace with inflation.

Hardships Widespread Among Poor and Near-Poor

A second report, from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), looked at a wide range of hardships affecting households with children, including hunger, trouble paying rent or utility bills, and housing problems such as leaking roofs and exposed wires. The Center analyzed the report’s data to

820 First Street, NE, Suite 510
Washington, DC 20002

Tel: 202-408-1080
Fax: 202-408-1056

center@cbpp.org
www.cbpp.org

Robert Greenstein
Executive Director

Iris J. Lav
Deputy Director

Board of Directors

David de Ferranti, Chair
The World Bank

John R. Kramer, Vice Chair
Tulane Law School

Henry J. Aaron
Brookings Institution

Ken Apfel
University of Texas

Barbara B. Blum
Columbia University

Marian Wright Edelman
Children’s Defense Fund

James O. Gibson
Center for the Study of Social Policy

Beatrix Hamburg, M.D.
Cornell Medical College

Frank Mankiewicz
Hill and Knowlton

Richard P. Nathan
Nelson A Rockefeller Institute of Government

Marion Pines
Johns Hopkins University

Sol Price
Chairman, The Price Company (Retired)

Robert D. Reischauer
Urban Institute

Audrey Rowe
ACS, Inc.

Susan Sechler
German Marshall Fund

Juan Sepulveda, Jr.
The Common Experience/ San Antonio

William Julius Wilson
Harvard University

discover how many families experience *multiple* hardships. It found, among other things, that:

- half (52 percent) of poor families faced two or more of the 14 hardships identified in the HHS report;
- more than a third (37 percent) of poor families faced three or more hardships; and
- 1.6 million poor households, containing about 4 million children, experienced hunger, seriously overcrowded housing, or having their phone or utilities shut off.

The HHS report uses data from 1998, but other data suggest the situation today is similar. There were a million and a half more poor Americans in 2003 than in 1998, for example, and steadily rising housing costs have forced families to pay a growing share of their income for housing.

“It’s been suggested that poor Americans today somehow aren’t ‘really’ poor because some of them own things like a VCR or television, which were once considered luxuries but have since become remarkably cheap,” Sherman noted. “These data show that large numbers of poor people are indeed having trouble affording basics like food and shelter.”

Hardships were more widespread and more serious among the poor than among other families. But the Center also found considerable hardship among those living a little *above* the poverty line. For example, one-fifth (19 percent) of families with annual income between one and two times the federal poverty line — or roughly \$19,000 to \$38,000 for a family of four — experienced hunger, severe overcrowding, or phone or utility shutoffs. These households contained close to 4 million children.

“It’s easy to forget that most poor and near-poor families are working families. The fact is, millions of jobs simply don’t pay enough to support a family,” said Sherman.

Government Programs Cut Poverty in Half

The findings of both government reports would almost certainly have been far worse if not for the assistance the federal government provides through programs like Social Security, unemployment insurance, nutrition and housing assistance, and tax credits for working families. Altogether, these programs lifted 28 million Americans above the poverty line in 2002, cutting the size of the poor population in half. The programs also provided vitally needed assistance in helping people meet their food, housing, health, and other basic needs.

“These accomplishments should remind us of the importance of maintaining a strong safety net,” said Sherman. “Instead, parts of the safety net weakened in 2004.” He noted that last December, Congress let the emergency program for the long-term unemployed expire; more than 3 million workers have run out of unemployment benefits since then without finding a job.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization and policy institute that conducts research and analysis on a range of government policies and programs. It is supported primarily by foundation grants.