

Hunger Still Haunts America

Today is Thanksgiving, and many Americans are celebrating the holiday with a feast with friends and family. Thoughts about real life problems ended for most last night and probably won't intrude until Monday morning.

But for millions of Americans, Thanksgiving is a grim reminder of their desperate situation - it is just another day when they struggle to put food on the table for their families. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, over 17 million families – about 15 percent of the nation's households - suffered from what is politely called “food insecurity” in the past year.

What we are talking about, of course, is hunger. The latest Community Service Society survey of low-income New Yorkers, “The Unheard Third,” revealed that nearly one in four poor respondents – those living with a household income of less than \$18,300 for a family of three – often skipped meals because there wasn't enough money to buy food. In addition, 17 percent said they went hungry at some point in the past year because of a lack of funds.

A national survey co-sponsored by the Gallup organization found that skipping meals and running out of food were widespread. We should not be surprised that one of the hardest hit places was in New York's 16th Congressional District, including the South Bronx, where almost 37 percent of residents lacked enough money to buy food at some time in the past year.

Job and Service Cuts

The recession officially ended in June 2009, but not for those who continue to be jobless or families who eke out an existence in low-wage employment. There was a time in this country when a public service job was the best place to be during a recession. Not anymore; with state and local governments forced to balance their budgets, job and service cuts predominate over tax increases to bridge the budget gaps. Just last week, Mayor Bloomberg announced that 10,000 city jobs will be cut in the next two years.

The official unemployment rate is near 10 percent nationally. But this does not take account of the millions of Americans who have given up looking for work in an economy where there are five workers for every job opening. Meanwhile, Congress balks at extending unemployment insurance while our representatives get ready to extend tax cuts to the wealthiest Americans.

Food Stamps Help

In this crisis situation, the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930's, food stamps are a life-savings benefit. Today, in the wealthiest country in the world, one in eight Americans – 38 million - survives on food stamps. About 1.7 million New Yorkers now receive food stamps, double the number from eight years ago when the Giuliani administration threw roadblocks in the way of enrolling for food stamps.

The argument against food stamps back then was that it was welfare, a dirty word in America. But the truth is that food stamps help keep people off of welfare. It is a “work support,” allowing low-wage workers to maintain their employment and make ends meet. The food stamp program has the additional benefit of being paid for by the federal government, thereby costing state and local governments only the cost of administering the program.

Yet millions of Americans – and several hundred thousand New Yorkers – who are eligible for food stamps do not get them. Some do not know they are eligible while others do not want to go through the process of applying for them. For instance, the Bloomberg administration still insists on fingerprinting food stamp applicants, thus deterring thousands of New Yorkers from applying and foregoing millions in federal funds that would be injected into the local economy.

Many New Yorkers still go to emergency food assistance agencies, especially near the end of the month when funds and benefits start to run out. In the recession, the number of New Yorkers seeking food at these agencies increased by more than 20 percent. It’s hardly surprising that as people lose jobs, food banks and soup kitchens are flooded. The New York City Coalition Against Hunger reports that hard hit segments of the population include families with children, senior citizens – often living on fixed incomes – and immigrants.

There are people in this country who do not believe that hunger exists in America. Or if it does, it’s because people are too lazy to work. These are the “don’t confuse me with the facts” crowd. That so many people suffer food deprivation, however, is a shameful fact in 21st century America. We may have the backstop of a food stamp program, but hunger still haunts America.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 165 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS’s website: www.cssny.org.

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