

# Who are the hungry?

Contrary to what most people believe, the hungry are not primarily transients, homeless or even adults on welfare. Children and the elderly make up the largest groups of the nation's hungry — children 43%, elderly 22% — according to a recent survey by Second Harvest, the national food bank network.

Hunger is also creeping into the middle class, according to a Tufts University study. From 1989 to 1992, poverty rose 21% in suburbs, compared to 5% in inner cities — a significant finding since rates of hunger closely follow poverty rates.

March 1994 findings from Second Harvest's nationwide survey confirmed that emergency food programs are now widespread in the suburbs. Because Second Harvest serves 26 million people a year, a number close to the estimated 30 million hungry in this country, its survey results are considered strong indicators of national hunger needs.

The survey also found:

- Food bank clients are not only the poorest of the poor, transients and the homeless. Of free food recipients, 77% live in stable housing. Food banks and food stamps, in fact, do little to reduce hunger among the homeless who lack kitchens to store and prepare food.

- Most clients are in the labor force or recently unemployed: 60% have gotten help less than a year; 32% less than 3 months.

- Unemployment and underemployment are the chief reasons people seek food. Of Second Harvest client households, almost one-third have a worker in the labor force. Of unemployed clients, 66.5% are actively seeking work; 44% have been out of work a year or more.

- Even though many needy and hungry people work, the prevalence of low-wage jobs often leads to inadequate household incomes: 88% of cli-

ent households earned less than \$14,000 a year — under the poverty threshold. The federal minimum wage of \$4.25 an hour equals about \$800 a month or \$9,600 a year, almost \$2,000 below the poverty line for a family of one adult and two children in 1993.

## Who is hungry: nationwide

John Cook, Research Director at Tufts University's Center on Hunger, Poverty and Nutrition Policy, confirmed that poverty and hunger are on the rise nationally, particularly in suburban areas. From 1973 to 1992, poverty rose 76% in suburbs, 56% in inner cities and 36% in rural areas. Part of this change is due to demographics as more people move to suburbs and cities from rural areas. But it also reflects

economic conditions leading to hard times, which many people try to hide, he said.

People may look affluent, Cook said, but "Then you discover they come to your food pantry. Then you find out they've been laid off, and they're sweating their mortgage payments."

Compared to images of malnourished and starving children in Africa, hunger in America is largely invisible and often cyclical, occurring in the last 2 weeks of the month when paychecks and food relief run out. Hunger disproportionately affects children, whose chronic undernourishment can lead to permanent losses in learning and development.

The Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project (CCHIP) —

## How to help

Farmers are waging a war against hunger not only by producing food, but by donating their surpluses to the needy.

F.O.O.D. Crops in Castroville provides a prime example. The volunteer food distribution effort, started by growers working with food assistance agencies, serves Monterey, Santa Cruz and San Benito counties. Growers and shippers who want to donate surplus produce can call the organization, which picks up and delivers the food to local food banks. By working with the agency, donors are assured that the produce is not channeled into secondary markets, they obtain protection under the Good Samaritan Law and they receive receipts for the tax deductible donations.

The service has expanded quickly, said F.O.O.D. Crops director Leslie Sunny. The group moved 2.8 million pounds of food in 1993 and 4.3 million pounds in 1994. "This year it has been so successful that we took in more than the tri-county area could handle," she said. The excess food was directed to California Emergency Foodlink, a nonprofit agency that picks up food that cannot be used or stored by a single food bank and distributes it to others in the state.

It is impossible to quantify the volume of food donated statewide by growers because most of it is contributed directly to local food banks, but the amount handled by Foodlink alone in 1994 totaled 15 million pounds.

Contacts for growers wishing to donate surplus food include:

- F.O.O.D. CROPS (800) 331-FOOD
- California Emergency Foodlink (800) 283-9000
- Second Harvest (800) 771-2303, which can refer growers to the closest local foodbank.

considered one of the most rigorous and comprehensive studies of childhood hunger ever conducted in the United States — found that 23% of U.S. families with young children are either hungry or at risk of being hungry. Five million children (from 12% of all families with children under 12) were going to bed hungry. Children from another 11% were at risk.

CCHIP conducted house-by-house surveys of 2,335 low-income households in seven states, including California. Surveyed households had incomes of 185% poverty level or less, and at least one child under age 12. (For a family of four, 185% of poverty level was \$26,520 in 1993.) People were asked eight questions relating to hunger. If they answered yes to five of the questions, they were considered hungry. If they answered yes to four or less, they were considered at risk of being hungry, said Laurie True, a senior policy analyst with California Food Policy Advocates, who helped produce the report.

The report documented that although the majority of low-income families were either hungry or at risk of being hungry, some had found ways to cope, either by relying on relatives or depending on emergency assistance, True said.

### Who is hungry: California

Overall, California ranks 14th among the states in numbers of hungry people, with 13.2% of its population experiencing hunger, according to a 1992 analysis by Tufts University.

The CCHIP study further illuminated the hunger problems of low-income Californians in the Central Valley, with low-income households surveyed in Fresno, King, Stanislaus and Tulare counties. More than half (57%) said they ran out of money to buy food at least once a year; 36% relied on emergency food programs



Suzanne Paisley

Statistics show that an increasing number of children go to bed hungry. Here, children bed down in a homeless shelter in Northern California. People working full time for minimum wage often do not make enough to stay out of poverty.

such as soup kitchens, food pantries and commodity foods; and 62% relied on friends and relatives for help in feeding their children.

Even those who worked full-time were not always able to make enough to avoid the risk of hunger, the report noted. The California families also spent on average 44% of their income on housing.

The CCHIP study called for loosening restrictions on eligibility and making additional efforts to reach those who are eligible but do not receive emergency food aid.

### Who is hungry: L.A. County

A 1990 Los Angeles County Cooperative Extension survey revealed again that children were the largest class of the hungry: 76% of emergency food recipients were families with children. Barbara Turner, Los Angeles County CE home economist, reported that among those surveyed, the average monthly income for a family of four was \$834, or \$224 below poverty level.

Families on average spent 60% of their income on housing, twice the amount the government considers to

be the "maximum affordable." The average food budget for a family of four was 59% less than the amount recommended by the Thrifty Food Plan, which is the government's calculation of the bare minimum needed for a nutritionally adequate diet.

The federal government will attempt to measure the nation's hunger problem by including questions about food security on its 1995 annual Current Population Survey conducted in April. The questions are designed to measure several levels of "food insecurity," from people who are at risk to those who are skipping meals, going to bed hungry, or otherwise actively experiencing hunger.

This is the first time the government has tried to institutionalize a measurement, according to Cook. "We will have hunger and food insecurity estimates the same way we have poverty estimates," he said. —Editor

*Material for this sidebar was derived from publications of Second Harvest, Tufts University, the Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project and Los Angeles County Cooperative Extension.*