

Homelessness, hunger grow for tenth consecutive year

by Anthony K. Wikrent

For officials of U.S. cities, the heralded “jobless recovery” is turning out to be a cruel joke. The economy remains enmired in the Second Great Depression, and the ranks of hungry and homeless continue to grow. Two factors appear to be at work: First, the exhaustion of state and local budgets has blown gaping holes in the “social safety net,” through which uncounted thousands of destitute people have fallen; and, second, formerly “somewhat affluent” people and families who have been tossed aside in the tsunami of corporate restructurings that have supposedly made U.S. companies “leaner and meaner,” have exhausted their savings, and are beginning to appear as applicants for emergency food and shelter assistance.

Ten years ago, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, alarmed at a sudden surge in the number of destitute and homeless citizens needing food and housing assistance in America’s cities, organized a temporary Task Force on Hunger and Homelessness. This past December, the task force issued its tenth annual survey of the 26 cities its members preside over. In introductory remarks, St. Paul, Minnesota Mayor James Scheibel, co-chair of the task force, noted that the task force “was created to work on what we believed would be a serious but relatively short-term problem. Unfortunately for all concerned, it didn’t work out that way.”

“Again this year,” Scheibel continued, “we asked those responsible for delivering services to the hungry and the homeless to tell us what they experienced during the past year. Again this year they reported that requests for help—for both food and shelter—were greater than the year before.”

A systemic crisis

Reflecting the systemic crisis of falling living standards of the U.S. working class, the task force survey found that 30% of the adults seeking food assistance were employed. “They simply don’t earn enough to buy food for themselves

or their families and at the same time pay for the other basic necessities of life,” Scheibel explained. Scheibel made special note of the fact that, for the first time, families with children comprised as large a percentage of those seeking housing assistance as single men (**Figure 1**).

Los Angeles registered a 35% increase in the number of requests for emergency shelter, including a staggering 50% increase in requests for shelter by families. Of the 26 cities surveyed, only Portland, Oregon saw greater increases: a 43% increase in the number of requests for shelter, including an 88% increase in requests by families. The next largest increases were by Kansas City, with a 24% increase in both overall requests, and requests by families; and Boston, which saw 28% more families requesting shelter.

While Los Angeles reported 10% more requests for food, including 15% more by families, the largest increase registered by the 26 cities in food requests, was by Santa Monica—part of the Los Angeles basin—which reported a 28% increase in food requests overall, including a 35% increase in requests by families. Portland also registered a 35% increase in the number of families seeking food.

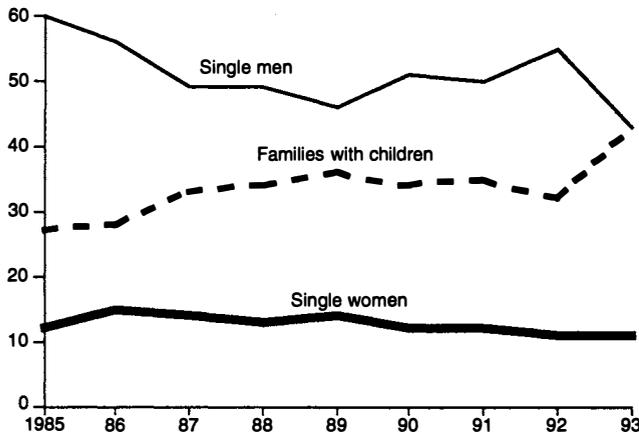
On Jan. 8, officials in Boston reported that the number of homeless families had nearly doubled in the past 12 months. Boston’s annual homeless census showed a total of 4,809 people living on the streets or in shelters, a 9% increase over 1992. But the number of homeless families—men, women, and children living together—was up by nearly 92%, the survey found. There were 38 men, 544 women, and 1,018 children living as families in emergency shelters across the city, compared to 21 men, 290 women, and 522 children at the end of 1992.

At the same time, the number of Boston homeless men and women in state detoxification and mental health programs dropped by 27% and 45%, respectively, according to the census, indicating that people were forced out onto the

FIGURE 1

Composition of homeless population in 26 U.S. cities

(percentage of homeless population)



Source: The United States Conference of Mayors, *A Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America's Cities: 1993; A 26-City Survey*, December 1993.

For the first time, in 1993, families with children were as large a homeless group as single men. Cities covered by survey: Alexandria, Boston, Charleston, Chicago, Cleveland, Denver, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Louisville, Miami, Minneapolis, Nashville, New Orleans, New York City, Norfolk, Philadelphia, Phoenix, Portland, Saint Louis, Saint Paul, Salt Lake City, San Antonio, San Diego, Santa Monica, Seattle, Trenton.

streets.

Boston Mayor Thomas Menino said that the shocking statistics point to the need for more affordable housing, job training, and facilities for the homeless mentally ill. "It is time that every community in this state and nation . . . stepped forward," he said, according to a UPI report.

John Pearson, head of the Community Action Program Office of Children and Family Services for Multnomah County, Oregon, which includes Portland, said, "We tried to pinpoint exactly what the cause is. . . . We are seeing a lot of little changes, and they add up." First, Pearson said, "I think we're getting much better at knowing who's out there as homeless. We have a much better count on how many people are out there, on the streets. We have better information, more refined information."

Then, Pearson continued, a number of local and state property tax measures have had a devastating impact on budgets for social services. This comes at a particularly bad time, just when "more and more folks are getting squeezed out of jobs, or being forced to work reduced hours. So, they make less money, and they're just barely making it. You have a lot of people with less than full-time employment."

This means less income for many people, which in turn means "the stock of affordable housing is getting filled up. People have less wages, and can't afford where they were living. They're getting evicted, and looking for cheaper housing. The problem is, it's just not there."

Pearson noted that the state of Washington had disbanded its general assistance program "long ago," even before the state of Michigan made headlines early last year by shutting down its welfare program.

The biggest problems, Pearson concluded, are the lack of low-cost housing, declining wages, and loss of jobs. "That's pushed more people over the edge. The big changes relate to poverty. If we can reduce poverty, we can solve a lot of the problems."

A new class of needy people

Arnold Garcia, senior management analyst for the Community Development Department of Los Angeles, said, "The only reason in general [for increasing requests for assistance] has been the reduction in general relief benefits for the low and moderate income population. For example, there is now a longer waiting period for families that receive assistance from Aid for Dependent Children. Before, they could apply for renewal of assistance every year. Now, they can only apply once every 24 months."

Asked about the effect of layoffs from the aerospace and defense industries, Garcia responded, "We've been seeing that happen to people around the Burbank area." Because they once worked in very highly paid jobs, these people have more of a cushion than the chronically un- and underemployed, and substance abusers, who comprised most of the homeless population in the 1980s. Garcia reported that these formerly well-paid workers are now "living in trucks and motor homes. They're having to stay [parked] on streets. So there's a problem, because a city ordinance precludes them from staying in the same area for more than 72 hours."

"Now we're starting to see a new class of needy people," Garcia continued. "At one time or another they were somewhat affluent. The most we can do with our limited resources is provide them with a brochure instructing them how and where to get clothing, or emergency food, or apply for other assistance."

The collapse of state and local budgets is of particular concern. In the Council of Mayors' report, the cities' officials estimated that, on average, they were unable to meet about one-quarter of the requests for emergency shelter. Some 21 cities reported that they were unable to meet all requests for food assistance; in those cities, 17% of the demand for emergency food assistance was estimated to have gone unmet.

The other co-chair of the task force, St. Louis Mayor Freeman Bosley, Jr., summarized the survey findings. "What is the single most important thing Washington can do to make the future a little brighter, to prevent homelessness from occurring in the first place? We posed this question to those dealing with homelessness in the survey cities. The answer from most cities . . . is create more jobs. More housing with supportive services also would help, they said, but an improved economy with additional job opportunities is clearly the key to solving the problem."