

# Hunger in America: 2012 United States Hunger and Poverty Facts

World Hunger Education Service

## Hunger in the United States

Three years after the onset of the financial and economic crisis, hunger remains high in the United States. The financial and economic crisis that erupted in 2008 caused a dramatic increase in hunger in the United States. This high level of hunger continues in 2010, according to the latest government report (with the most recent statistics) released in September 2011 ([Coleman-Jensen 2011](#)).

- In 2010, 17.2 million households, 14.5 percent of households (approximately one in seven), were food insecure, the highest number ever recorded in the United States <sup>1</sup>([Coleman-Jensen 2011](#), p. v.)
- In 2010, about one-third of food-insecure households (6.7 million households, or 5.4 percent of all U.S. households) had very low food security (compared with 4.7 million households (4.1 percent) in 2007. In households with very low food security, the food intake of some household members was reduced, and their normal eating patterns were disrupted because of the household's food insecurity ([Coleman-Jensen 2011](#), p. v., [Nord 2009](#), p. iii.) .
- In 2010, children were food insecure at times during the year in 9.8 percent of households with children (3.9 million households.) In one percent of households with children, one or more of the children experienced the most severe food-insecure condition measured by USDA, very low food security, in which meals were irregular and food intake was below levels considered adequate by caregivers ([Coleman-Jensen 2011](#), p. vi).
- The median [a type of average] food-secure household spent 27 percent more on food than the median food-insecure household of the same size and household composition ([Coleman-Jensen 2011](#), p. vi)..
- Background: The United States changed the name of its definitions in 2006 that eliminated references to hunger, keeping various categories of food insecurity. This did not represent a change in what was measured. Very low food insecurity (described as food insecurity with hunger prior to 2006) means that, at times during the year, the food intake of household members was reduced and their normal eating patterns were disrupted because the household lacked money and other resources for food. This means that people were hungry ( in the sense of "the uneasy or painful sensation caused by want of food" [[Oxford English Dictionary 1971](#)] for days each year ([Nord 2009](#) p. iii-iv.).

## Poverty in the United States

The official poverty measure is published by the United States Census Bureau and shows that:

- In 2010, 46.9 million people were in poverty, up from 37.3 million in 2007 -- the fourth consecutive annual increase in the number of people in poverty . This is the largest number in the 52 years for which poverty rates have been published ([DeNavas-Walt 2011](#), p. 14).
- The 2010 poverty rate was 15.1 percent, up from 12.5 percent in 1997. This is the highest poverty rate since 1993, but 7.3 percentage points lower than the poverty rate in 1959, the first year for poverty estimates. ([DeNavas-Walt 2011](#), p. 14).
- The 2010 poverty rate for Hispanics was 26.6 percent, for Blacks 27.4 percent.
- In 2010, the poverty rate increased for children under age 18 from 20.7 percent to 22.0 percent. ([DeNavas-Walt 2010](#) p. 14).
- 20.5 million Americans live in extreme poverty. This means their family's cash income is less than half of the poverty line, or about \$10,000 a year for a family of four ([DeNavas-Walt 2011](#), p. 19).

- 49.9 million people or 16.3 percent of the American people, do not have medical insurance (DeNavas-Walt 2011, p. 23).

In 2011 the Census Bureau published a supplemental poverty measure for the first time (US Census Bureau 2011b). This new measure addresses seven concerns that have been raised about the official poverty measure, including the fact that the official poverty measure does not reflect the effects of key government policies that alter the disposable income of families and thus their poverty status, such as the SNAP/food stamp program. (For a good brief discussion of these issues see 2011b, p.1-3.) Taking these adjustments into account, the supplemental poverty measure showed a 3 million increase in the number of poor people in 2010, compared to the official poverty rate. Who is poor shows some striking changes. The percentage of children in poverty is 27.7 percent of the total population in poverty with the supplemental measure and 36.1 with the official measure; while people over 65 are 12.7 percent of the total population in poverty in the supplemental measure and 7.6 percent in the official measure (2011b, p.3-8). The supplemental poverty measure does measure poverty more accurately, and it is gratifying to see that programs to reduce poverty and hunger among children have had an impact.

## Causes of hunger and poverty

*(Hunger is principally caused by poverty so this section will focus on causes of poverty.)*

There are, we believe, three main causes of poverty in the United States: poverty in the world; the operation of the political and economic system in the United States which has tended to keep people from poor families poor, and actual physical mental and behavioral issues among some people who are poor.

*Poverty in the world* There are a lot of poor people in the world. An estimated 2 billion people are poor, and the same amount hungry (**World Hunger Facts**) They are much, much, poorer than people in the United States. As can be imagined, people do not want to be hungry and desperately poor. In the world economic system there are two main ways in which relatively poor people have their income increased: through trade, and through immigration. Trade, we believe, is the most important.

- Trade. It is important to understand some basic economics. We in the United States live in a rich country, that has a large amount of capital--machinery, etc.--to produce things relative to the amount of labor--people that want to work. Poor countries have a lot of labor, but relatively little capital. There is a basic idea of economics--the factor price equalization theorem--that states that wages in rich countries will tend to go down and increase in poor countries through trade (Wikipedia 2010b). Thus China, with low wages, puts pressure on wages in the United States, as production is shifted to China from the United States. This movement of production from richer to poorer countries is initiated by corporations, not individuals, but it does shift jobs and income to poorer countries and people, and has been doing so for the last 30 years or so. Lower income people in the United States are particularly vulnerable to such shifts.
- Immigration. A clear strategy for poor people is to go where there are higher paying jobs (often opposed to the alternative of no jobs at all). Thus immigration has been a major response to poverty by people in poor countries.

*The operation of the US economic system* The operation of the US economic and political system has led to certain people/groups being relatively disenfranchised.

The normal operation of the economic system will create a significant amount of poverty.

- First, in a free enterprise economy, there is competition for jobs, with jobs going to the most qualified. On the other hand, there is almost always a significant amount of unemployment, so that not everyone will get a job, with the major unemployment falling on the least qualified. It might be tempting to identify them as 'unemployable' but what is in fact happening is that the private enterprise system is not generating enough jobs to employ everyone.
- Secondly, the top echelon of business has the power to allocate the profits of the enterprise, and certainly they have allocated these profits to themselves in recent years.

*The operation of the US political system*, The US political system, which should address the major problems of its citizens, is to a great extent not focused on fundamental concerns of poor people, but on other concerns.

- Military and security expenditure represent half of US federal government discretionary expenditures, much larger than expenditures to assist poor people, and this budgeting is assisted by a strong web of political and financial connections which has been termed the "military-industrial complex."
- Corporations and the rich, through their ability to lobby Congress and the Administration effectively by such means as spending large amounts of money on lobbying efforts and on political campaigns of elected officials have succeeded in establishing their priorities, including tax breaks and subsidies..
- The Democratic party, which used to be a party of the 'working class' has now set its sights on the 'middle class' as the target base of voters it must appeal to.

*The culture of inequality*

- People are typically segregated by income and often race.
- Jobs are low paid and scarce. This can lead to crime as a way of obtaining income, and also to unemployed men not willing to marry, which can play a significant role in developing a cultural model of single parent families.
- The lack of income, as described in the poverty section above create problems, including poor housing, lack of food, health problems and inability to address needs of one's children.
- As a result of their situation, people living in poverty can themselves have patterns of behavior, such as alcoholism or a 'life of crime' that are destructive to them.

## Programs to address hunger and poverty

*Hunger*

Fifty-five percent of food-insecure households participated in one or more of the three largest Federal food and nutrition assistance programs ( USDA 2008, p. iv.) The programs are the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the new name for the food stamp program (Wikipedia 2010), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) (Wikipedia 2010), and the National School Lunch Program (Wikipedia 2010).

*SNAP/Food stamps* The Food Stamp Program, the nation's most important anti-hunger program, helps roughly 40 million low-income Americans to afford a nutritionally adequate diet. More than 75 percent of all food stamp participants are in families with children; nearly one-third of participants are elderly people or people with disabilities. Unlike most means-tested benefit programs, which are restricted to particular categories of low-income individuals, the Food Stamp Program is broadly available to almost all households with low incomes. Under federal rules, to qualify for food stamps, a household must meet three criteria (some states have raised these limits):

- Its total monthly income generally must be at or below 130 percent of the poverty line, or roughly \$1,980 (about \$23,800 a year) for a three-person family in fiscal year 2010.
- Its net income, or income after deductions are applied for items such as high housing costs and child care, must be less than or equal to the poverty line.
- Its assets must fall below certain limits: households without an elderly member must have assets of \$2,000 or less, and households with an elderly or disabled member must have assets of \$3,000 or less. (Taken from CBPP **Food Stamps**. Also see Wikipedia **SNAP** and USDA **SNAP**.)

*WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children)*

WIC provides nutritious foods, nutrition education, and referrals to health and other social services to low-income pregnant, postpartum and breastfeeding women, and infants and children up to age 5 who are at nutrition risk. WIC participants receive checks or vouchers to purchase nutritious foods each month, including infant cereal, iron-fortified adult cereal, vitamin C-rich fruit or vegetable juice, eggs, milk, cheese, peanut butter, dried and canned beans/peas,

and canned fish. Other options such as fruits and vegetables, baby foods, and whole wheat bread were recently added. Participants family income must fall at or below 185 percent of the U.S. Poverty Income Guidelines (in 2010, \$40,793 for a family of four). Eligibility is also granted to participants in other benefit programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Medicaid, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Children are the largest category of WIC participants. Of the 8.7 million people who received WIC benefits each month in FY 2008, approximately 4.3 million were children, 2.2 million were infants, and 2.2 million were women. The cost of the program is \$7.252 billion for WIC in FY2010. WIC is not an entitlement program: Congress does not set aside funds to allow every eligible individual to participate in the program. Instead, WIC is a Federal grant program for which Congress authorizes a specific amount of funding each year for program operations.

*National School Lunch Program* The National School Lunch Program is a federally assisted meal program that provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children from low income families, reaching 30.5 million children in 2008. Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level are eligible for free meals. Those with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals, for which students can be charged no more than 40 cents. (For the period July 1, 2009, through June 30, 2010, 130 percent of the poverty level is \$28,665 for a family of four; 185 percent is \$40,793.) Children from families with incomes over 185 percent of poverty pay a full price, though their meals are still subsidized to some extent by the program. Program cost was \$9.3 billion in 2008. (USDA [School Lunch Program](#))

### *Poverty*

Perhaps the three principal programs that provide income and other assistance for poor people are the minimum wage, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), and the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program. Other important programs, not discussed here, include Medicaid and the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) and, for older people, Social Security and Medicare.

*Minimum wage* The United States enacts a minimum wage (as do some individual states) that tries to establish a floor for what can be paid as a wage by firms. The current minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour. In 2008, the official U.S. poverty level for a family of 4 was \$21,834 ( Census Bureau "[Poverty Thresholds](#)"). With a 40 hour week, a family of 4 with one minimum wage earner would earn \$15,080, only 69 percent of the poverty level. The minimum wage level is not indexed to inflation, which means that the real benefits will be eroded by inflation.

*The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).* The Earned Income Tax Credit is the mechanism through which, by filing a tax return, low income people and families can receive an income supplement.

The EITC is designed to encourage and reward work. In 2009, the EITC lifted an estimated 6.6 million people out of poverty, including 3.3 million children. The poverty rate among children would have been nearly one-third higher without the EITC. The EITC lifts more children out of poverty than any other single program or category of programs. One way the EITC reduces poverty is by supplementing the earnings of minimum-wage workers. At the minimum wage's current level, such a family can move out of poverty only if it receives the EITC as well as food stamps (CBPP [EITC](#).)

*Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)* In 1996, TANF replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, which had been in existence since 1935. The TANF program provides block grants to states to provide assistance to needy families. States have discretion on how to use the funds. The number of TANF recipients fell substantially in the first five years of the program, in part due to a significant increase in the number of single parents who work, but also due to other factors, such as an inability of families to meet the regulations. Studies of families that stop receiving TANF assistance show that 60 percent of former recipients are employed—typically at poverty-level salaries between \$6 and \$8.50 an hour—while 40 percent are not employed. Lack of available child care can well keep single mothers from working as required, for example. Other factors that undermine TANF's contribution to people's security include a five-year time limitation on benefits; permitting benefits to legal immigrants only 5 years after establishing legal immigration, and a declining level of real funding for the program (Coven 2005). (see CBPP [TANF](#) and Wikipedia [TANF](#).)