

AARP Bulletin today

Going Hungry in America

How Could It Happen Here?



With food and energy prices soaring, millions of older Americans are going hungry—and, increasingly, going it alone as the safety net frays. Beginning today, in an exclusive five-part series, AARP Bulletin Today investigates the causes and consequences of hunger in the generations that helped to build the Great Society.

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Photo by Mario Tama/Getty Images

When Carole Drew retired from her job with Volunteers of America four years ago, she thought that her modest savings would help assure that she could make ends meet. If for some reason she ran into trouble, Drew figured, help would be there if she needed it.

It wasn't.

Early this year, when rising food and energy prices outpaced the \$649 in Social Security she

gets each month, Drew turned to the local food bank for help.

She was turned down. "They said they couldn't sign me up because they already had too many people," says Drew, 70, who lives in Long Beach, Calif. Every month since then, she's checked back. Every month, she's been told the program still has a moratorium on new clients.

"I'm having to use up the little I have in savings to pay for food and gasoline," Drew says. "On a set income, you worry a little more every time the price goes up."

Around the country, with food and energy prices soaring, more older Americans—especially those on fixed incomes or among the working poor—find themselves struggling. Like Drew, they're dipping into meager savings, asking relatives for help, lining up at food banks or soup kitchens for the first time in their lives, or simply going to bed hungry.

"As gas and food prices rise, people who had no wiggle room before are facing tough decisions on what to pay for," says Shelley Borysiewicz, a spokeswoman for **Catholic Charities USA**, a network of more than 1,700 agencies and institutions that provide food, housing and other assistance. "You're afraid to miss a payment on your rent or mortgage for fear of eviction or foreclosure. You're paying more every time you go to the grocery store or fill the tank. What do you cut back on? Medicine? Food?"

For many, those are the only alternatives. In a recent CNN poll, 30 percent of the people surveyed nationwide said that they were already cutting back on food and medicine—a choice that almost certainly compromises their health and well-being.

"I hear it all the time, people having to choose between buying medicine or groceries," says Lucy Stokes, 71, who lives in Washington, D.C., where she volunteers for the **We Are Family Senior Outreach Network**, a program that provides food and services in the city's poorest

areas. “Mostly they do without medicine. Maybe they’ll get sick. But you have to eat to survive.”

Measures of desperation

One gauge of desperation is the surging number of people turning to food banks, soup kitchens and other emergency food assistance programs. Many organizations that operate such programs report that the ranks of people lining up for free groceries or a free meal are up at least 15 percent from a year ago. The Clayton County Aging Program in Georgia estimates that the number of older people coming in for food assistance has doubled in the past year. Some particularly hard-hit communities have seen even bigger increases.

“A year ago we budgeted what we thought we’d need,” says Julie Murray, CEO of **Three Square**, which operates a 120,000-square-foot food bank in Las Vegas. “This year we’ve had to quadruple those numbers.”

As the ranks of needy Americans have increased, the demographics of hunger have also changed. “I’ve seen a lot of up and down cycles after 30 years in this business,” says Bill Bolling, executive director of the **Atlanta Community Food Bank**. “What’s fundamentally different is who we’re seeing at the door of the agencies we serve. Half of the people have full-time jobs but don’t earn enough to keep up with the rising prices of health care, energy and food. The working poor increasingly compete with seniors on fixed incomes.”

The changing demographics of hunger are also reflected in the federal food stamp program. Working Americans now make up 41 percent of participants in the program, up from 30 percent a decade ago. Older adults are less likely than any other age group to use the program: Of people age 60-plus who were eligible for food stamps, only 34.5 percent received them in 2006, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"A lot of these are proud people who never thought for a minute they'd have to ask for a handout," says Rosanna Smith, program manager of the Clayton County Aging Program in Georgia.

On a blazing-hot day in St. George, Utah, a 72-year-old man loading a bag of groceries into his car outside the local **Dixie Care & Share food bank** declines to provide his name, embarrassed to have anyone know he's had to ask for a handout. A retired storeowner, he's gone through most of his savings to provide health care for his wife, who has Alzheimer's disease. "I never wanted to ask anyone for help," he says with an angry shake of his head. "It's a humiliation. But you do what you have to do to survive."

Over the edge

The crisis in food and energy prices has unfolded with startling speed. Economists first began to worry when food costs climbed almost 5 percent in 2007. The worry has turned to alarm as prices continue to surge in 2008. Some staples have seen double-digit inflation: Milk, 13 percent. Bread, 15 percent. Eggs, 30 percent.

To put those numbers in perspective, consider that food price inflation averaged just 2.1 percent a year from 1996 to 2006. From June 2007 to June 2008, it jumped 6.1 percent.

And food prices tell only part of the story. Gas and heating oil prices have nearly doubled over the past two years. Higher energy costs are also driving up the cost of almost everything, including food and clothing.

As always, those near the bottom of the economic ladder suffer the most when inflation hits the essentials. The average American family spends about 7 percent of its income on food. Those at the poverty line spend as much as 30 percent.

"All it takes these days is a health crisis or the loss of a job to send people over the edge."

says Mark Andersen, cofounder of the We Are Family Senior Outreach Network.

Consider the explosion in foreclosures and bankruptcies. In 2007, more than a million Americans filed for bankruptcy, according to the Consumer Bankruptcy Project, which called it "a public manifestation of the most extreme financial difficulty." Since 1991, the sharpest increase in bankruptcy filings has been among Americans 55 or older; the rate for those 65 and older has more than doubled.

James Willoughby, 65, of Riverdale, Calif., knows how quickly disaster can devastate a household. Six years ago he was making a decent living as a commercial air-conditioning technician. "After raising our kids, my wife and I were just beginning to tuck money away," he says.

Then Willoughby lost first one leg and then the other to diabetes and had to quit work. Now on Social Security, he and his wife have just \$240 left after paying their monthly bills for groceries, gasoline and other expenses.

"We've got to beg, borrow and steal to get a ride to the doctors," he says. "We can't go to buy clothes. My wife is learning to stretch the food we get. I've got tens of thousands of dollars in doctors' bills. I tell them straight out I can't pay. That's my grocery money."

How many go hungry?

By all rights, older Americans should be holding their own. Fifty years ago, a shocking 30 percent of people 65 and older were living in poverty. President Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" ushered in a dramatic decline in poverty rates, which reached a 26-year low in 2000. Today, the federal government counts 10 percent of Americans 65 and older at or below the poverty line. But that number may hide a harsher reality, some economists say.

Certainly more are struggling to stay afloat. According to a recent AARP survey, 60 percent of Americans 65 and older are having a tougher time paying for food, gas and medicine. More than 10 percent have been forced to turn for help to families or charities.

Experts also worry about the effects of persistent undernutrition, especially among the very young and the very old. Even before the nation's recent economic woes, a 2002 study by the Department of Agriculture found that lower-income older people consume fewer calories and fewer servings of the foods recommended on the official food pyramid. New research confirms that chronic nutritional deficiencies jeopardize health in many ways, including weakening the body's immune defenses.

In his 1969 book, *Let Them Eat Promises: The Politics of Hunger in America*, journalist Nick Kotz called hunger "a scar across an affluent nation." For a time that scar was healing. Now it has returned, deeper and rawer than before because it has come at a time of unprecedented prosperity—for some—but a widening of the gap between the richest and the poorest Americans.

At the same time, the safety net set in place to prevent people from going hungry has frayed. Food banks and meal programs have seen their shelves grow bare as the value of federal surplus food donations has fallen from \$242 million in 2003 to \$59 million in 2007. The National Association of Area Agencies on Aging reports that half of the organizations it represents have cut back on home-delivered meals and nine of 10 expect to cut back in the coming year. And the food stamp program, which was created to keep Americans from going hungry, has failed to keep pace with rising food prices.

Meanwhile, all across America, older people like Carole Drew count their pennies. It's the end of the month that worries her.

"I don't drive unless I absolutely have to," she says. "I read the market ads and clip the

coupons. But I'm still falling behind. If I run through my savings, I don't know what I'll do."

Peter Jaret is a freelance writer in Petaluma, Calif.

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