

HUNGER & POVERTY IN AMERICA

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"I don't know whether these (reports of hunger) are anecdotal things from which some members of the press and political opponents are generalizing or whether there are genuine pockets of hunger."

Presidential Counselor Edwin Meese III.



"One part of America is having a difficult time acknowledging that another part is hungry."

U.S. Representative Leon I. Panetta

HUNGER & POVERTY

While most Americans have enjoyed a share in the bounty of our rich and abundant land, the number of people living in poverty has increased considerably over the past few years. These are the findings of several important new studies on poverty and hunger in America conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, the Congressional Budget Office and the non-profit Center on Budget and Policy Priorities in Washington, D.C. Taken together, the new reports help form the backdrop to a tragic and needless picture—a picture of poverty and hunger in America. It is a challenge that all of us are called upon to meet.

Counting the Poor

The figures tell the story. According to the Census Bureau, over 34 million Americans, some 15 percent of our total population, lived below the poverty line in 1982—an increase of 2.6 million in just one year. That means that one out of every seven Americans lives in poverty. A closer look at this figure reveals an even more frightening reality. The poverty level among blacks, officially pegged at 35.6 percent, is nearly three times as high as the 12 percent figure for whites, while nearly one in every three Hispanic Americans is officially classified as poor. The very young and the very old also figured prominently in the recent studies, with 13.5 million children under the age of 18—about one in every five—living in poverty, as do nearly four million elderly people, almost 15 percent of all Americans age 65 and over. Once again the burdens of poverty are borne unequally by the nation's minorities, with the poverty level among black youth, at 45 percent, three times the 15 percent figure for young whites.

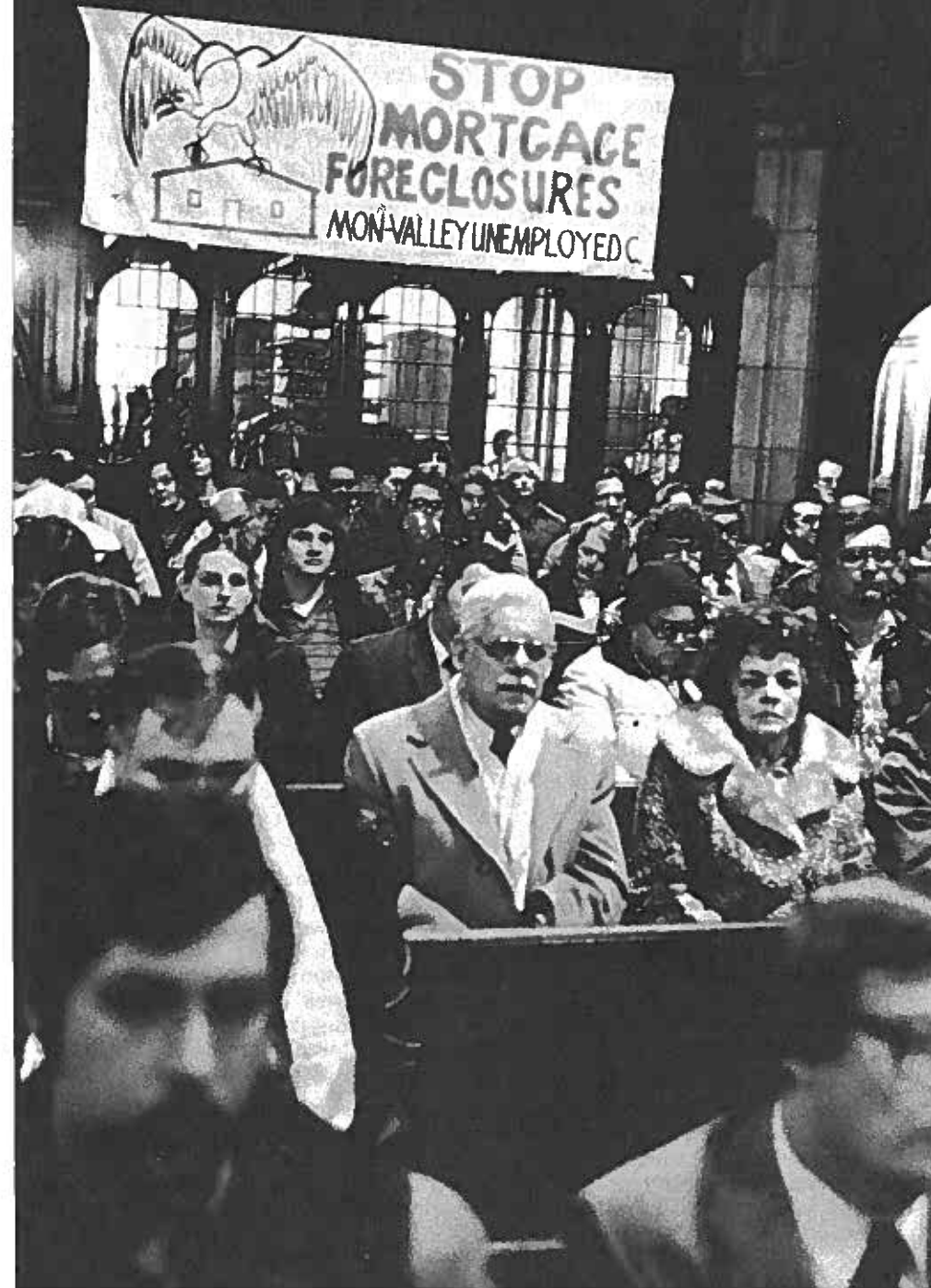
The same racial imbalance in family incomes can also be found. According to Census Bureau statistics, the median income figure for white families declined 1.4 percent in 1982 to \$24,600. But even that reduced figure remains well above the \$16,230 figure for Hispanic families and nearly double the \$13,600 figure for black families. Two decades after the civil rights campaign removed racism from the nation's lawbooks, black families earn on average only 56 percent of the income of their white counterparts, just one percentage point above the 1960 level.

The disparity between men's and women's incomes is even greater, with women earning a median income of only \$5,890 compared to the men's \$13,950—a gap of 58 percent. This figure takes on added significance when combined with the percentage of black families headed by women, nearly half the total.

Cutbacks Hurt the Poor

At a time when the government's own statistics show a sharp rise in the number of poor people, federal health, nutrition and social welfare outlays have been sharply cut back. In 1983 the Congressional Budget Office reported that cuts in federal poverty programs over the 1982-85 fiscal period, including a 28 percent cut in child nutrition programs and a 13 percent reduction in food stamps and welfare payments, disproportionately affect low-income households. Tightened eligibility requirements for school lunch programs, for instance, forced one million children from poor families out of the program. Overall, CBO reported, the 23 percent of U.S. households with incomes under \$10,000 (the official 1982 poverty level for a family of four stood at \$9,862) absorbed 40 percent of the federal spending cuts. Over the same period, defense spending as a percentage of the federal budget will rise from the 1982 figure of 25.7 percent to nearly 30 percent in 1985.

IN AMERICA



Meanwhile, plant closings, business and farm foreclosures, widespread joblessness and the lingering effects of the devastating 1982 recession have created a vast group of so-called "new poor" people. Thousands of Americans have watched as their jobs in heavy industry, such as auto and steel making, have left America forever. And now they find that they are ineligible for a broad range of federal and state assistance programs under the new, tighter, eligibility rules. Significantly, job training and employment programs suffered a 60 percent reduction in federal funding while the percentage of black men with jobs dropped from 74 percent in 1960 to just 55 percent in 1982.

Responding to the Need

The President has asked private voluntary organizations to help fill the void in assistance to the poor left by the current budget. But the sharp increase in the numbers of the poor, combined with cuts in federal antipoverty spending, has produced a staggering increase in the number of people using the services of food pantries and soup kitchens. In Omaha, Nebraska, the city's interfaith emergency food pantry network fed a record 64,728 people in 1982—an 81 percent increase over 1981. In 1983, says Pastor Victor Schoonover, director of Omaha's Lutheran Metro Ministries, the demand for food ran 20 per cent higher than the 1982 level. "And we only see the tip of the iceberg," Schoonover noted. "There are plenty of hungry people out there we never see."

Similar figures were collected in a May 1983 national survey of emergency food providers conducted by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. That study found that over half the food providers surveyed experienced an increase of 50 percent or more in the number of meals or food parcels provided over the past year. One third of the responding agencies reported that the number of meals or parcels provided doubled over the same period. Nearly all of the emergency relief agencies (93.6 percent) reported an increase in the number of unemployed people served and 75 percent reported an increase in the number of families with children needing food. A quarter of the food providers surveyed said they had turned hungry people away for lack of food.

The Church and Hunger

In 1980, the Presidential Commission on World Hunger concluded, that, "the primary cause of world hunger is poverty." This seemingly self-evident link between hunger and poverty has long been the foundation upon which LCA hunger advocacy is based. In the view of the church, a root cause of hunger is poverty and the only enduring solution is economic justice. Yet as the quotes on the cover suggest, there remains no national acknowledgment that "genuine" hunger exists in America, nor any consensus on the means and resources required to eradicate it.

At a time of reductions in government spending on social services and programs for the poor, a great deal of attention has been focused on volunteerism and private charity as the mainstay of our national effort to feed the hungry. But as Christians we are called upon not only to feed the hungry but to eliminate the causes of their sufferings. And no level of charity—public or private can disguise the fact that the fiscal and legislative decisions made by our leaders have contributed greatly to the spread of hunger and poverty.

Responsibility for the national tragedy must be borne at every level of society: from the President, who together with the Congress establishes national budget priorities, to the average American to whom both Congress and the President are ultimately accountable. As Christians and as citizens we all share an obligation to act to eliminate hunger and its causes. And, individually and collectively, there is much we can do.

What Does the LCA Say About Christian Responsibility for the Poor and Hungry?

The LCA Social Statement on Poverty compels Lutherans to action:

"The Lutheran Church in America commits itself in the struggle against poverty in full community with the biblical testimony about concern for the poor. While it recognizes that the forms of this struggle are subject to human judgment and are open to differences of opinion among fully committed Christian persons, it does not believe that commitment to the struggle is an open question for Christians."

What Is Your Church Doing?

During 1983, approximately \$2 million of your contributions to the LCA World Hunger Appeal was spent in North America. That money was used to meet human needs in the following ways:

- * *To support food pantries, soup kitchens and other emergency providers of food*
- * *To support economic and community development in poverty-stricken areas*
- * *To provide day care centers to poor families, thus allowing parents to actively seek employment*
- * *To aid community and other organizations working to eliminate institutional, social and economic obstacles to change*
- * *To support advocates of legislation intended to alleviate the sufferings of the poor*

The LCA also advocates directly at the local, state and national level through testimony before government bodies, public statements and through the Office of Governmental Affairs of the Lutheran Council of the U.S.A.

What Are You Doing?

There is a natural tendency among all of us to say, "Well, my church (government, charity, etc.) is taking care of this problem, so I don't have to get involved." But hunger concerns us all and as Christians we must accept personal responsibility for ending it. One way to do that is through charity. God has commanded us to feed the hungry, and thousands of churches in the United States and Canada operate free kitchens and food pantries. If your congregation is not involved in such a program, you can join with your pastor, church members and others to start one. Never think that your community has escaped hunger—it is there if only we look.

But charity alone is not enough. We are called to end the causes of hunger as well. We can join with others seeking to ensure employment for everyone able to work and a decent standard of living for all. We can speak out against injustice and register our concerns and opinions at all levels of government. Working towards a just society is a function of our faith and a prerogative of our citizenship.

ADVOCACY CHECK LIST

Check the ways you are already working for justice. Consider additional ways to become involved

- Have organized on-site visits for members of my congregation to social service agencies, summer feeding programs, food stamp outreach centers and other similar projects
- Have written a letter to the editor of a newspaper about hunger
- Have written a thank-you letter to members of Congress for the way they voted on a particular bill
- Know my representative and senators by name and communicate with them from time to time on relevant legislation
- Have run for a public office in which I could make my influence felt
- Am a member of a national letter-writing network such as IMPACT¹
- Belong to a state IMPACT chapter
- Am monitoring the food stamp or other feeding programs in my community
- Have helped someone obtain food stamps
- Am working with a local food pantry program
- Have helped establish a school lunch program
- Have led a Sunday morning program on a particular food policy bill under current consideration
- Am serving on a local land-use planning committee
- Have encouraged local newspapers to carry articles on eligibility for federal food programs
- Have written to a corporation in which I hold stock, asking for its policies on corporate social responsibility in matters of land holdings, wages, and advertising²
- At a stockholders' meeting have used my vote rather than a proxy card³
- Have participated in Food Day activities in my community⁴
- Have distributed church materials on particular food policy legislation
- Have established nutrition centers for the elderly in my community
- Have checked with local officials on the use of vacant land for community gardening
- Have shown films on hunger and malnutrition at my church or community center
- Have written the advocacy office of the LCA for further information on any of these items

1. IMPACT is an ecumenical network that keeps subscribers informed of legislative actions and the best timing for letter writing. Send \$10.50 to IMPACT, 110 Maryland Avenue N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002, for annual membership.

2. For guidance in monitoring the corporate social responsibility of a company in which one holds stock, write for *Social Criteria for Investments* from DMNA/LCA.

3. An undesignated or proxy vote is a vote automatically in favor of management policies. Even if you agree with management, have your vote recorded.

4. Contact Bread for the World, a Christian citizens' movement on hunger. Publishes a monthly newsletter and occasional QUICK-

GRAMS when action is needed on legislation. To join, send name, address, phone number, and name of your U.S. representative, along with \$15 to Bread for the World, 6411 Chillum Place, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20012.

For additional information on what you, your congregation and your community can be doing to advocate just government and corporation policies and practices, write to Advocacy/Global Justice, Division for Mission in North America, 231 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016.



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