



## **A Tale of Two Countries: Hunger Spikes in Affluent America**

By David R. Jones  
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Over 17 million families – about 15 percent of the nation’s households - suffered from “food insecurity” in the past year, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Among Latino families, 26.9 percent of households experienced food insecurity. That’s nearly twice the percentage as the rest of the population. What we are talking about, of course, is hunger.

The latest Community Service Survey of low-income New Yorkers, “The Unheard Third,” revealed that nearly one in four poor respondents – those living with a household income of less than \$18,300 for a family of three – often skipped meals because there wasn’t enough money to buy food. In addition, 17 percent said they went hungry at some point in the past year because of a lack of funds.

The recession officially ended in June 2009, but not for those who continue to be jobless. The job layoffs keep on coming. Just last week, Mayor Bloomberg announced that 10,000 city jobs will be cut in the next two years. Meanwhile, Congress balks at extending unemployment insurance while our representatives get ready to extend tax cuts to the wealthiest Americans and corporations celebrate record profits. According to the Department of Commerce, American business profits topped \$1.65 trillion in the third quarter of 2010. It’s as if we are living in two different nations - one affluent, one desperate.

In this crisis situation, food stamps are a life-savings benefit. One in eight Americans – 38 million - survives on food stamps. About 1.7 million New Yorkers now receive food stamps. Even before the latest recession, more than five million Latinos nationally received food stamps each month, representing more than 10 percent of the Latino population. Food stamps constituted 25 percent of total monthly income for a typical Latino family that participated in the program.

The old argument against food stamps is that it is welfare, a dirty word in America. But the truth is that food stamps help keep people off of welfare. Food stamps allow low-wage workers to maintain their employment and make ends meet. The food stamp program has the additional benefit of being paid for by the federal government, thereby costing state and local governments only the cost of administering the program.

Yet millions of Americans – and several hundred thousand New Yorkers – who are eligible for food stamps do not get them. For some Latinos, language proves a barrier to applying. Some do not know they are eligible while others do not want to go through the process of applying for them. The Bloomberg administration still insists on fingerprinting food stamp applicants, thus deterring thousands of New Yorkers from applying and foregoing millions in federal funds that would be injected into the local economy.

Many New Yorkers still go to emergency food assistance agencies, especially near the end of the month when funds and benefits start to run out. In the recession, the number of New Yorkers seeking food at these agencies increased by more than 20 percent. It’s hardly surprising that as people lose jobs, food banks and soup kitchens are flooded. The New York City Coalition Against Hunger reports that hard hit segments of the population include families with children, senior citizens – often living on fixed incomes – and immigrants.

That so many people suffer food deprivation is a shameful fact in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. We may have the backstop of a food stamp program, but hunger still haunts America.

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David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 165 years. For over 10 years he served as a member of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer.