

Agriculture by Suzanne Rose

Growing hunger in America

Over 10% of Americans are on food stamps, 20 million more may be eligible, and children and the elderly suffer most.

While commentators are quick to assure us that hunger as it exists in Africa is not a problem in the United States, and that the nation only suffers "pockets of malnutrition," evidence abounds of a growing, desperate hunger crisis in the United States. The indications are that the number of Americans on food stamps and the number of homeless is growing, and that the increase in infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis, are related to poor nutrition and poor living standards now afflicting the poorest of the poor, the homeless, and undocumented immigrants.

By March of this year, it was reported that 27.4 million Americans were receiving food stamps, which is 10% of the population. This is almost a 30% increase since 1989. Some estimates indicate that 20 million more may be eligible to receive food stamps.

According to the November/December issue of the *Utne Reader*, between half a million and a million of the country's senior citizens are malnourished, and 30% regularly skip meals. The Urban Institute released a study in November based on a national mail survey and 16 local community surveys, which found that between 2.5 and 4.9 million elderly Americans suffer from food "insecurity," that is, they experienced days when they had no food in the house, had no money to buy it, and had to skip meals to buy other essentials.

Relief workers report that it is not just the long-term unemployed and homeless that they see at the soup kitchens and food pantries but, in-

creasingly, recently laid-off workers, permanent part-time workers, and industrial workers who have had their pay scale reduced. The Mayors Conference reported a 26% increase in emergency food requests in 1992.

While we do not have children on the streets with swollen bellies, hunger problems in the United States are increasingly visible in the growing numbers of disease-ridden homeless. The exact figures remain unknown and uncounted, according to the *New York Times*. The scope of the problem is partially revealed in a Tufts University study published by their Center on Hunger, Poverty and Nutrition Policy released in May. It concluded that 30 million Americans don't get enough to eat. The fastest growing number is in the Midwest, including in rural areas and among farmers, the producers of our food. According to an AP wire, food stamp recipients increased 59% in Indiana between 1988 and 1992. In Missouri, the increase was 44%.

The Tufts study also reported that 18% of U.S. children, about 12 million, go hungry. The study found that the most severe problem is in the South, where 25% or more children don't get enough to eat. Another study done by the Washington, D.C.-based Food Research and Action Center, which claims to be the most thorough study of childhood hunger ever undertaken in the United States, estimates that 5 million children under age 12 go hungry at some point each month.

The Clinton administration has chosen not to spotlight the problem. It has failed to release the findings of its widely touted Hunger Summit, con-

vened by U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Mike Espy on June 17. Instead, they have announced a national series of hearings on the quality of school lunch programs, which serve more than 25 million children. In a statement released Oct. 25, Secretary Espy focused on the fat content of the lunches being served. But a more pressing subject is, how many children would go hungry without the lunch, or, as is increasingly the case, cannot afford it?

One of the factors is the mounting costs to school districts because the USDA has been deliberately reducing the stocks of surplus food commodities available to be donated to the programs. This policy, carried out in the name of surplus reduction, only benefits the giant international food traders, not the producers or consumers.

The scope of the problem can be estimated by looking at the operations of the Greater Chicago Food Depository, the largest free meal relief center in the world. In 1992, the center, which is located in a residential neighborhood on the West Side, gave out 22 million pounds of food, or 48,000 meals worth per operating day, through a network of 500 grocery giveaway pantries and soup kitchens and other free-meals programs at different charities throughout the city and suburbs.

In Leesburg, Virginia, an affluent suburb of Washington, D.C., the community is unable to keep up with the demand for emergency food. One private charity, Interfaith Relief, serves an average of 65 free meals every evening. Since Feb. 1, it has provided a total of 12,000 meals to impoverished people in the town. Another service in the same town, the Food Distribution Center, provided five tons of food per month over the summer to families and individuals on an emergency basis.