

More Americans hungry, homeless in 2006: mayors

By Lisa Lambert *Thu Dec 14, 5:03 PM ET*

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - More Americans went homeless and hungry in 2006 than the year before and children made up almost a quarter of those in emergency shelters, said a report released on Thursday by the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

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"The face of hunger and homelessness right now ... is young children, young families," said the conference's president, Douglas Palmer, the mayor of Trenton, New Jersey.

The survey of 23 cities found civic and government groups received, on average, 7 percent more requests for food aid in 2006 than in 2005, following a 12 percent jump in 2005.

Requests for shelter rose by an average of 9 percent in 2006, with requests from families with children rising by 5 percent. More than half the cities said family members often had to split up to stay in different shelters.

As the numbers who could not buy their own food grew, more than half the cities, including Los Angeles and Boston, said groups spread resources farther by giving less food to individuals or cutting the number of times people could receive help. The group estimated 23 percent of requests for emergency food assistance simply went unmet.

Franklin Cownie, the mayor of Des Moines, Iowa, who worked on the study, said he was troubled that more than a third of the adults asking for food aid were employed.

"If you look at the data, you'll find folks that have jobs that don't have enough money to feed themselves," he told reporters.

People remained homeless for an average of eight months in 2006, the report said. Trenton had the longest span, with those in poverty spending an average of 22 months in cars and shelters or on the street.

The survey relied on census statistics along with data that city officials collected from local agencies.

Calling the report "not so much science as perception," the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, which includes state and federal agencies, said in a statement nearly 30 cities were reporting reduced homelessness due to a federal program run in partnership with the Conference of Mayors.

It said the Bush administration was also working to help connect homeless people to government agencies and private aid groups.

In the mayors' report, Cleveland was one of the cities that saw demand for food assistance drop in 2006. Officials said it was still much higher than in 2000, before the city experienced an economic downturn. From 2000 to 2005, the number of people using food stamps, or federal subsidies to cover groceries, increased there by 29 percent.

Food stamps and other public nutrition programs account for 60 percent of the U.S. Agriculture Department's spending. The USDA said almost 11.2 million U.S. households received food stamps in 2005.

Congress is expected to consider changes to the food stamp program as part of broad-ranging agriculture legislation in 2007.

(Additional reporting by Charles Abbott)

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