

1 in 8 get help at food banks

14 million kids among hungry

By Wendy Koch USA TODAY

One in eight Americans — 37 million — received emergency food help last year, up 46% from 2005, the nation's largest hunger-relief group reports today.

Children are hit particularly hard, according to the report by Feeding America, a network of 203 food banks nationwide. One in five children, 14 million, received food from soup kitchens, food pantries and other agencies, up from 9 million in 2005, the year of the group's last major survey.

"This is a crisis," says Vicki Escarra, president of Feeding America. "People need to understand that this is America, and we're seeing this kind of need." She says the report is her group's most comprehensive study on emergency food distribution.

It comes as a record number of Americans are receiving food stamps — 33.7 million last year — and as President Obama, who has set a goal of ending childhood hunger by 2015, proposed in his budget Monday to add \$1 billion annually to school-based food programs.

The report "reinforces what we know, which is that poverty and hardship are rising," says Stacy Dean, director of food assistance policy at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, which researches how public programs affect low- and middle-income people. She says some of the same people who get food stamps also go to soup kitchens or food pantries, because the government aid might not be enough.

The Agriculture Department reported in November that 14.6% of households didn't have enough food at some time in 2008.

Feeding America based its report on 61,000 interviews with people seeking food aid and 37,000 surveys of food pantries, soup kitchens, emergency shelters and other programs affiliated with Feeding America food banks.

More than a third of those interviewed said they had to choose between food and other necessities, including rent, utilities and health care. The average monthly income of households seeking help, \$940, is below the \$1,214 federal poverty level for a two-person household.

"Our system is overburdened," Escarra says. She says companies, individuals and the federal government have increased donations, but food banks are still struggling to keep up with demand.

The Food Bank of Northern Nevada served 124,200 people last year, four times as many as in 2005, spokeswoman Jocelyn Lantrip says.

"We're a very hard-hit state," Lantrip says, noting Nevada's 13% unemployment rate. She says the food bank is able to meet demand largely because it got a new privately funded facility in July 2008 that tripled the bank's size and expanded its ability to accept perishable food, much of it donated by grocery stores.

In Austin, the Capital Area Food Bank is holding more food drives and sending trucks to local grocery stores to pick up food about to expire, spokeswoman Kerri Qunell says.

She says the bank collected 3.3 million pounds of food last year, up from 1.8 million in 2008.

Qunell says most of her food bank's clients have jobs but aren't earning enough to make ends meet. Like Lantrip in Nevada, she sees more newcomers.

She recalls meeting a man in his early 60s who lined up for food at a mobile pantry. He told her that, in the past, "my wife and I were always the ones who helped."
