

Hunger crisis hitting U.S. college students

By Ned Resnikoff, MSNBC

Hungry students don't enter the on-campus food pantry at New York's LaGuardia Community College; instead they sit in an office in the college's financial services center while a staff member or volunteer runs upstairs to get their food, bringing them unmarked grocery bags to take home.

Little more than an unlabeled office, containing a series of unmarked file cabinets, the pantry goes undetected to most – and that's the point.

Michael Baston, the college's vice president of Student Affairs, says the whole process is designed to be invisible.

"We did this because we feel like it is a stigma reducing strategy," he said. "Because we want students to feel like whatever the resource they need to sustain themselves, that would be available to them."

Battling stigma is a challenge for food pantries of all stripes, but the struggle appears to be especially pronounced on college campuses. After all, universities are supposed to be islands of relative privilege. If you can afford to spend thousands of dollars a year on a college education, the thinking goes, you can't possibly be hungry enough to require emergency food assistance.

Rhondalisa Roberts, a LaGuardia sophomore and food pantry client, has witnessed that stigma firsthand. She says that when she suggested that a hungry classmate of hers visit the pantry, the classmate told her, "Oh, I'm not going to go there. I'm not poor."

“It’s very, very alarming,” Roberts told MSNBC. “Most students have a negative stigma when it comes to receiving help for food. Everybody doesn’t want to receive food or seem needy, even when they are in dire need of resources.”

It’s difficult to track just how many college students are in dire need, but new data from the country’s largest emergency food service network suggests that the number is at least in the millions. Feeding America’s 2014 Hunger in America report estimates that roughly 10 percent of its 46.5 million adult clients are currently students, including about 2 million people who are attending school full time. Nearly one-third of those surveyed – 30.5 percent – report that they’ve had to choose between paying for food and covering educational expenses at some point in the last year.

Feeding America, a network of some 46,000 emergency food service agencies in the United States, releases its Hunger in America report once every four years. This latest iteration of the report, which is based on a survey of more than 60,000 Feeding America clients, is the first to include data about college students in need of emergency food services. The new research suggests that America’s chronic hunger emergency has not spared institutes of higher learning.

Maybe that should come as no surprise, given that food insecurity – defined by the Department of Agriculture as lack of “access ... to enough food for an active, healthy life” – has been rising steadily for years. In part that’s due to the Clinton and Reagan administration’s significant revisions to the welfare state. Yet the situation didn’t become a true crisis until after the 2008 financial collapse, which caused food insecurity to rise by 24 percent in the space of a single year, according to USDA figures. In response, the federal government approved an emergency transfusion of funds into the food stamp program; but then it began to roll back those additional funds in November 2013, even though food insecurity had never returned to pre-2008 levels. The result was an

unprecedented state of permanent emergency for emergency food assistance programs across the country.

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