

Nearly Half of Americans Struggling to Stay Afloat

WASHINGTON — Nearly half of all Americans lack economic security, meaning they live above the federal poverty threshold but still do not have enough money to cover housing, food, healthcare and other basic expenses, according to a survey of government and industry data.

The survey, released on Tuesday by the advocacy group Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW), found that 45 percent of U.S. residents live in households that struggle to make ends meet.

That breaks down to 39 percent of all adults and 55 percent of all children, the group found.

"This is a wake-up call for Congress, for our state policy-makers, really for all of us," said Donna Addkison, President and CEO of WOW.

"Nearly half of our nation's families cannot cover the costs of basic expenses even when they do have a job. Under these conditions, cuts to unemployment insurance ... and other programs families are relying on right now would push them from crisis to catastrophe."

The WOW survey compared 2009 pre-tax incomes to a budget of basic and essential monthly expenses for various families that it developed along with researchers at Washington University with funding from the Ford Foundation and W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

For example, in a budget for a family of one worker, it put housing expenses at \$688 and food at \$244. In a family of two workers with two young children, it assumed housing would cost \$821 per month and food \$707 a month.

It did not include nonessentials such as vacations, recreation, hobbies, college tuition, and other common expenses of the middle class.

A congressional effort to find \$1.2 trillion in spending cuts over 10 years failed on Monday, raising fears that emergency benefits for the long-term unemployed would not be extended when they expire next month.

Other social programs including Medicare are also under threat as lawmakers seek to slash the nation's huge debt. Some economists said while they agreed that the debt had to be reduced, targeting programs that helped the low income group survive the harsh economic environment was not the correct path to take.

"I am in favor of austerity, but not in this area," said Harm Bandholz, chief U.S. economist at UniCredit Research in New York. "This is the only austerity going on and this is hitting the long-term unemployed. It's not improving the long-term budget situation anyway."

Currently, the poverty threshold for the United States is an annual income of \$22,314 for a family of four.

A little more than 15 percent of the country lives at or below that level, and the group wanted to look at the remainder, "many of whom live on the edge and are chronically at risk of financial crisis or falling into poverty."

More than four out of 10 adult women live in households that cannot cover those basic expenses, slightly more than the proportion of men, 37 percent.

That may be because in 2009 women's median earnings were 70 percent of men's median earnings, the group said.

More than 60 percent of single women live in economic insecurity, it added.

"While married women are more likely to have economic security than unmarried women, much of the stability is attained through a husband's earnings or other household income," the group reported, which can put those women in economic jeopardy if their husbands die or lose their job or if the couple divorces.

The group also found "that full-time work fails to provide economic security for 25 percent of adult workers," because of stagnating and falling wages over the last decade.

"A chief cause of economic insecurity is 1970s level wages that fail to cover modern expenses," it said.

While households with two full-time workers can help boost a family's economic security, 22 percent of adults with children who work full-time and have a partner who also has a full-time job cannot cover basic needs.

At the same time, 21 percent of homes headed by a college graduate lack economic security.

"In the past, threats to economic security were supposedly clear -- dropping out of high school, being a single parent or having a large family. In today's economy, we cannot assume we know who lacks security," it said.

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Existing Cropland Could Feed Four Billion More by Dropping Biofuels and Animal Feed

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/08/130801125704.htm>

Aug. 1, 2013 — The world's croplands could feed 4 billion more people than they do now just by shifting from producing animal feed and biofuels to producing exclusively food for human consumption, according to new research from the Institute on the Environment at the University of Minnesota.

Even a smaller, partial shift from crop-intensive livestock such as feedlot beef to food animals such as chicken or pork could increase agricultural efficiency and provide food for millions, the study says.

"We essentially have uncovered an astoundingly abundant supply of food for a hungry world, hidden in plain sight in the farmlands we already cultivate," says graduate research assistant Emily Cassidy, lead author of the paper published in *Environmental Research Letters*. "Depending on the extent to which farmers and consumers are willing to change current practices, existing croplands could feed millions or even billions more people."

Demand for crops is expected to double by 2050 as population grows and increasing affluence boosts meat consumption. Meat takes a particularly big toll on food security because it takes up to 30 crop calories to produce a single calorie of meat. In addition, crops are increasingly being used for biofuels rather than food production. This study sought to quantify the benefit to food security that would accrue if some or all of the lands used to produce animal feed and fuel were reallocated to directly produce food for people.

To get at that question, Cassidy and colleagues first mapped the extent and productivity of 41 major crops between 1997 and 2003, adjusting numbers for imports and exports and calculating conversion efficiencies of animal feed using U.S. Department of Agriculture data. The researchers assumed humans need an average of 2,700 calories per day, and grazing lands and animals were not included in the study. Among the team's findings:

- Only 12 percent of crop calories used for animal feed end up as calories consumed by humans.
- Only 55 percent of crop calories worldwide directly nourish people.

- Growing food exclusively for direct human consumption could boost available food calories up to 70 percent.

- U.S. agriculture alone could feed an additional 1 billion people by shifting crop calories to direct human consumption.

- When calculated on the basis of protein rather than calories, results were similar. For instance, of all plant protein produced, 49 percent ends up in human diets.

In addition to the global findings, the research team looked at allocation of crop calories in four key countries: India, China, Brazil and the U.S. They found that while India allocates 90 percent of calories to feeding people, the other three allocate 58 percent, 45 percent, and 27 percent, respectively.

Noting the major cultural and economic dimensions involved, the researchers acknowledged that while a complete shift from animal to plant-based diets may not be feasible, even a partial shift would benefit food security. Quantifying the impact of various strategies, they found that a shift from crop-intensive beef to pork and chicken could feed an additional 357 million people, and a shift to nonmeat diets that include eggs and milk could feed an additional 815 million people.

The researchers emphasized that they are not making diet prescriptions or recommendations, just pointing out opportunities for gains in food production. They noted that humans can completely meet protein needs with plant-based diets, but that crop systems would need to shift (e.g., toward more production of protein-rich legumes) to meet human dietary needs.

"The good news is that we already produce enough calories to feed a few billion more people," Cassidy says. "As our planet gets more crowded or we experience disasters like droughts and pests, we can find ways of using existing croplands more efficiently."

In addition to her role as Global Landscapes Initiative graduate research assistant with the Institute on the Environment, Cassidy is a graduate student in the Natural Resources Science and Management program in the University of Minnesota's College of Food, Agriculture and Natural Resource Sciences.