

International

COVID sends hunger rising in America; kids bear the brunt

Increasing number of children are going hungry in US

COCKEYSVILLE: Before the pandemic closed her middle school and US immigration agents deported her father to El Salvador, Kimberly Orellana did not fear going hungry. But with her mother now alone and cleaning houses for pay that isn't enough to reliably feed Orellana and her two younger sisters, the 14-year-old is left to trek to a nearby school for a handout of groceries organized by a non-profit.

"Everyone in our family eats. Sometimes we need a little bit of groceries to keep our fridge full," Orellana said as she ran the errand north of Baltimore on a cold and rainy morning during a break from classes, which are now held online. Increasing numbers of children are going hungry in the United States as it weathers the world's worst coronavirus outbreak, which has killed around 280,000 people and caused a once-in-a-generation economic crisis.

Nearly 12 percent of adults said they lived in a household where there was not enough to eat "sometimes" or "often" last month, according to the Commerce Department. Ten percent of mothers reported their children under the age of five went hungry to some degree in October and November, a Brookings Institution survey found. Non-profit Feeding America estimates over 50 million people will be considered food insecure this year, including about one in four children, reversing gains made in recent years that had brought hunger among children to its lowest level in at least two decades.

"We feel pretty confident in saying food insecurity right now is the highest on record in the modern era," Lauren Bauer, an economic studies fellow at Brookings said. The numbers are jarring for a coun-

try that has the world's largest economy and is a major donor of food aid worldwide. They have propelled a political tussle over President-elect Joe Biden's choice for agriculture secretary, who will be tasked with fighting hunger. "Food and agriculture is about 20 percent of the US economy and 100 percent of people are eaters," said Chloe Waterman, a program manager for advocacy group Friends of the Earth.

'Quite disastrous'

The pandemic's March arrival and the business shutdowns that followed brought soaring unemployment and a sharp contraction in economic growth. President Donald Trump's downplaying of the virus and US states' uneven response set the stage for the ongoing surge in cases and deaths. Schools also shut down, making it complicated for poorer children to get free meals provided there, and Bauer said runs on grocery stores created a shortage of basic goods that put low-income parents further behind. "The pressure on families to pay for some of those things that the public provides was quite disastrous," she said. Congress responded by allowing states to give families whose children would normally get school meals benefit cards equal to their value, while many school districts also continued providing food that students could eat at home.

But there are holes in this safety net, Bauer said, particularly for parents who can't get to where schools are distributing their meals, perhaps because they have jobs as essential workers. There is also a gap for parents with children too young to attend school - the age at which poor nutrition can



COCKEYSVILLE, Maryland: Volunteers from the Baltimore Hunger Project pass out food to people in need outside Padonia International Elementary school on Dec 4, 2020. — AFP

have life-long consequences. And the government's main program to provide needy families with food, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), doesn't pay enough to live off of, shifting the burden of surging unemployment onto charities, Waterman said.

The effects have been felt by the non-profit Baltimore Hunger Project, which provides weekend

groceries in and around the city for families whose children rely on school meals. The bag of eggs, bread and other essentials Orellana picked up for her mother and herself, who are undocumented, and her two sisters who were born in the US at a distribution in the Cockeysville suburb will last them about two weeks. "It's really hard sometimes, but you just got to keep going," she said. — AFP

Three generations, one roof: US trend amplified in COVID

POTOMAC: After separating from her husband in 2007, Katie Marcoux and her two young daughters moved in with her parents for financial reasons. She expected to stay a year at most. Thirteen years later, Marcoux now remarried-still lives in the house, along with her parents and one of her daughters. Such arrangements are increasingly common in the US, where one in five people now live in a "multi-generational" household, according to Pew Research Center.

The phenomenon has been on the rise since the 1980s, when immigrant families arriving from Asia and Latin America tended to reside in households that ran the gamut in the age of residents. There was another rise starting around 2009 when the Great Recession brought the number of adults living in their childhood homes back to levels last seen in the 1950s. Now, with the upheaval of Covid-19, many are turning to the playbook again.

New directions

When she moved in, Marcoux, now 49, was working part-time for the school system and "not in a very good financial position," she recalled.

But living with her parents allowed Marcoux to maintain a part-time work schedule while raising her daughters, who were adjusting to new schools and their parents' divorce. She was assisted by mother Judy Kristensen. "When the girls were little, we were able to help Katie out by driving them places and stuff so she could work," Kristensen, 78, said.

Meanwhile, Marcoux was able to progress professionally and now works full time. "One of the things that it has afforded me big time is a financial freedom that I was able to recover," said Marcoux. Eric Marcoux, husband to Katie, felt "very at home" with his in-laws, "so I sold my house and moved in," recalled the 47-year-old former cartographer, who brought his dog, Jazzman. Still, Marcoux, his



POTOMAC, Maryland: Eric Marcoux poses with his wife Katie, her mother Judy Christensen, her father Dano Christensen and daughter Eva Kolb in front of their house on Dec 3, 2020. — AFP

wife and two stepdaughters, then teenagers, were forced to share one bathroom, an arrangement that "wasn't ideal," he said.

The situation improved immeasurably after a home improvement project added a second master bedroom and another bathroom. Dana Scanlon, a real estate agent in the Washington region, said more young parents are

taking a similar approach during the pandemic. "We have seen many couples with young children move in with their parents, into the large homes they grew up in-something they never imagined they would do," Scanlon said. "This allows them the opportunity to have in-house babysitters or 'Zoom school supervisors' while they work from their laptops." — AFP

Battered in first wave, Spanish town emerges scarred but safer

TOMELLOSO: Standing outside the hospital morgue, Lourdes Visus Cedrian shivered as she remembered the endless procession of hearses pulling up to collect the dead COVID-19 patients she'd been nursing just hours before. When the pandemic erupted, Visus, 56, was working as an auxiliary nurse in Tomelloso, a Spanish town in the arid plains of La Mancha which was blighted by death when the virus took hold.

"In the early days, I would come to this little corner to smoke, or cry when I needed to," said Visus. "But I had to stop. You'd see a hearse taking a body and then another, they were constantly carrying bodies out... it was just too painful." Although Spain was struggling with one of Europe's most deadly outbreaks, Tomelloso was particularly hard-hit, losing almost one percent of its 36,000 residents. During the second wave, it has been a completely different story, with the figures significantly lower, although memories of the earlier nightmare remain all too fresh.

"Around 300 people were buried in the local cemetery" in the first wave, Mayor Inmaculada Jimenez told AFP. "Every day, they were burying 10, 11 or 12 people, it was incredibly hard." Before the crisis, Tomelloso was known for its vineyards and popular with tourists following in the footsteps of Don Quixote, the delusional would-be knight in Miguel de Cervantes' 1605 novel. But the virus changed all that, with one damning headline branding it the "Wuhan of La Mancha" after the Chinese city where COVID-19 first emerged.

Few were the families who weren't touched by death or sickness, with Angeles Rodriguez, 50, losing her mother Josefa at the end of March after a week in hospital. She was 82. Things initially seemed to go well, although Rodriguez couldn't visit and struggled to get information from overwhelmed hospital staff. Then very suddenly it ended. "They called us at 3:00 am, and by 1:15 pm, we were at the cemetery," said Rodriguez. Not being able to say goodbye was devastating, and it was months before she could overcome her sorrow and anger to speak about it. "When it's like that, so sudden, it's like she was run over." — AFP



CARACAS: A man gets his fingerprints registered before voting at a polling station in a school yesterday during Venezuela's legislative elections. — AFP

Maduro eyes victory as Venezuelans vote

CARACAS: Polls opened yesterday in legislative elections set to tighten Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro's grip on power and weaken his US-backed rival, Juan Guaido, who is leading a boycott of the polls he calls a fraud. Victory will give Maduro's ruling Socialist Party control of an expanded 227-seat National Assembly-the only institution not in its hands.

The election, contested by about 14,000 candidates from more than 100 parties, comes with the country in a deep political and economic crisis-suffocated by runaway inflation, paralyzed in endless queues for petrol, lacking water and gas supplies, and afflicted by sudden power cuts. Since November 2019, inflation has reached 4,000 percent. "The time has come to vote for peace, for the country, for the future!" Maduro said in a message to supporters on the Telegram messaging application, shortly before voting began at 6.30 am local time. The vote comes five years after the opposition won control of the National Assembly by a landslide.

Weary population

Maduro, a former bus driver who became president on the death of his mentor Hugo Chavez in 2013, was re-elected in 2018 in fraud-tainted polls, a victory which much of the international community branded illegitimate. The United States, the European Union and many Latin American countries have long blamed Venezuela's crippling economic crisis on Maduro's repression and misrule.

Instead, they backed Guaido when the National Assembly speaker proclaimed himself interim president in January of last year. Initial enthusiasm has waned, however, with critics seeing Guaido's plebiscite ploy as a desperate gamble. Guaido, 37, called for a boycott on grounds that "free and fair" conditions for holding elections do not exist. He labeled yesterday's poll "a fraud."

"Maduro's objective isn't even to gain legitimacy," he told AFP in an interview this week, adding that the goal was instead to simply wipe out all semblance of democracy. Guaido and his allies plan a week-long plebiscite from Monday seeking public support to prolong the mandate of the current National Assembly until "free, verifiable and transparent" elections can be held. However, the results will not be binding, as Maduro exercises control of the country's institutions, including the Supreme Court and the powerful military. — AFP

UK vaccine rollout set to begin with queen in line for job

LONDON: Britain's Queen Elizabeth II will receive the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine within weeks, reports yesterday said, as the biggest immunization program in UK history begins next week. The monarch, 94, and her 99-year-old husband Prince Philip are in line to get the job early in the rollout, which gets underway tomorrow, due to their age and will not receive preferential treatment, several newspapers reported. Britain's most senior royals will "let it be known" they have been given the inoculations "as a powerful counter to the anti-vaccination movement," the Sunday Times said.

The Mail yesterday added they hope "to encourage more people to take up the vital job". The queen has spent much of the pandemic in self-isolation in Windsor because of her age, and will this year forego her traditional family Christmas at her Sandringham estate in eastern England with other royals. A Buckingham Palace spokeswoman declined to comment on the vaccination reports, noting "medical decisions are taken personally". Britain on Wednesday became the first country in the world to approve the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, and health officials have already drawn up criteria based on age and vulnerability to decide who will receive it first.

'Rise to the challenge'

Britain has pre-ordered 40 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine in total, and is set to receive an initial batch of 800,000 to kick-start the rollout. Elderly care home residents and their carers will be the very first in line, followed by those aged 80 and over and frontline health and care staff. Other elderly people and the clinically extremely vulnerable will be next, with the rest of the population then prioritized by age. The first doses were transported to the UK this week from a Pfizer plant in Belgium and will begin to arrive at dozens of "hospital hubs" nationwide by Monday. Among those first to be inoculated will be the eldest patients already attending hospital as an outpatient, those being discharged home and others invited in.

The effort faces significant obstacles because this vaccine must be stored at -70 degrees Celsius (-94 degrees Fahrenheit). However, it can be kept for up to five days at 2-8 degrees Celsius. "Despite the huge complexities, hospitals will kickstart the first phase of the largest-scale vaccination campaign in our country's history from tomorrow," Stephen Powis, national medical director of the state-run National Health Service (NHS), said. "Hardworking staff will once again rise to the challenge to protect the most vulnerable people from this awful disease," he added, noting the NHS had "a strong record" in vaccine delivery.

UK regulators were forced to defend their world-first approval, insisting it met all safety standards, after US and European officials queried the rapid process. The Sunday Mirror reported a string of high-profile figures in Britain had committed publicly to getting the vaccine in a bid to boost take-up. They include Monty Python star Michael Palin, 77, 69-year-old Bob Geldof and rocker Ronnie Wood, 73, the tabloid said. "I will absolutely and immediately take it as soon as humanly possible," Geldof said. — AFP