

Empty shelves: Run on the food bank

From the Editors in the [January 29, 2008](#) issue

Rosalie Higgins has had a hardscrabble life. She didn't make it into the air force and she couldn't complete nursing school. The jobs she was able to get with the computer skills that she picked up in trade school paid no better than \$6.50 an hour. At age 66, she lives on her Social Security check of \$623 a month, which is less than the rent for a one-bedroom apartment. Since she picks up trash around the apartment building, her landlord is willing to knock \$50 off her bill. She gets her food from a food pantry, where she also volunteers.

Higgins, recently profiled along with other poor people by the *Chicago Tribune*, is one of about 35.5 million Americans who are what the Department of Agriculture terms "food insecure." These people depend on food banks and food pantries, and often don't know where their next meal is coming from. About 11 million Americans actually go hungry.

The food insecurities of people like Higgins have been exacerbated by shortages that the food banks themselves are experiencing. For example, the *New York Times* reported that in 2007 the New Hampshire Food Bank saw the demand for food go up 40 percent even as supplies went down 30 percent.

Less food is being donated to food banks partly because of the economics of agriculture. As the price of corn goes up, food banks can't buy as much food with government funds. At the same time, grocery chains are donating less food because they have imposed tighter controls on inventory, so fewer packages are damaged. Grocery chains have also found they can make extra bucks by selling inferior or damaged products to low-cost retailers.

Mark Winne, former director of the Hartford Food System in Connecticut, says that the effectiveness of the food bank system is one of the great success stories in the charitable activity of recent decades. But he worries that the system is being stretched to the breaking point. The crisis raises the question of whether some of the energy invested in the food banks should be redirected toward national policies that ensure a minimal standard of living for working and retired people.

Until that happens, people like Rosalie Higgins will depend on their local food pantries and on people who donate time and money to food pantries and soup kitchens. They will rely on the many people who believe, with philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev, that “bread for myself is a material concern, but bread for my neighbor is a spiritual concern.”