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## More people on food stamps an ill omen for U.S.

**By John Michelena***last updated: November 18, 2010 09:49:40 PM*

The surge in demand for food stamps is like a silent canary in a coal mine, portending serious trouble ahead.

One in eight Americans, a total of 43 million people, receive free food, which is a 20 percent increase from 2009.

Stanislaus County has 49,803 people in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (food stamps), with another 30,821 who are eligible but nonparticipants, according to the 2010 Stanislaus County Nutrition and Food Insecurity Profile.

The WIC Program, a separate program for women, infants and children, has 20,862 participants. I know these hungry souls exist as I'm right behind them at check-out lines.

All told, 37.1 percent of county adults are in "food insecure" households. One in four children are on food stamps. They receive public assistance in various programs: school breakfasts and lunches, summer nutrition, etc.

This rising tide of poor and hungry is not a good trend. Even the mainstream media like CNBC has reported so, although briefly and casually. Thusfar, the food stamp program has been a safety net for those in need. But can government continue spending without limit, especially with an economy that is suffocating from debt?

The Cato Institute projects the food stamp price tag at almost \$75 billion for 2010; it cost \$56 billion in 2009. This is one government expenditure that is rising rather quickly and will not reverse unless the private sector starts to substantially improve.

Food stamps are funded by debt and by those citizens living above the poverty line. Many of those are employers or employees in small businesses, which are downsizing or closing. Monthly figures for new jobs are lagging far behind what is needed just for population adjustments. Unemployment insurance is having major funding problems. Underemployment is escalating. Many people are too discouraged to search for work.

Commercial real estate seems to be collapsing, which is a barometer for the future of small businesses. Our community and regional banks will probably suffer big losses, since they finance the majority of commercial development projects. Long-term interest rates appear to be going up, causing all borrowing costs to increase.

Food costs are also accelerating, so that cost of feeding the poor will also be increasing per adult and per child in poverty. Food stamps, like many government programs and entitlements, will require higher-spending levels at a time when productive jobs are falling and not being created.

And how can anyone afford a mortgage payment on any house without a good, stable job? Our valley is already suffering from high rates of home foreclosures, poverty and unemployment. More people on food stamps will only add to our debt and tax burdens.

It is comforting that our government can distribute free bread, but it comes at a heavy price. Excessive debt and the disintegration of the middle class have buried many empires.

A large, growing population that cannot feed itself cannot bode well for a nation. Sadly, there are many economic indicators that are even more discouraging than this one.

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