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زبانهای اروپایی

From Moritz Wichmann  
25.10.2020

## Poverty in the USA

**Famine in the rich country - The corona pandemic has plunged millions of Americans into poverty.**

The Calvary Baptist Church in East Orange is bustling with people. As early as 9 a.m., the line of cars in front of the Essex County church is several hundred meters. Two blocks in front of the building, cars with LED displays and orange rubber cylinders are being funneled into the church parking lot. What draws people here is not the prospect of comfort or peace of mind. It's about food. "People come here who have never needed help," says Joseph DiVincenzo as he waves one car after another into the parking lot.

DiVincenzo is the chief administrative officer of Essex County and has had a coronavirus infection himself. With four dozen employees in the district administration, he guides those in need in a sophisticated system for distributing food parcels. The aspirants have to wait in their cars in the right lane, in the church parking lot they drive up in two rows, signs announce two simple instructions: "Open the trunk, leave the window up." The district employees with colorful masks then carry one of the 16 kilogram cardboard boxes with groceries to the trunk and close it again, the car continues and leaves the parking lot on the other side. Distribution has been going on for 25 weeks, and there is no end in sight for the time being. "We will continue as long as there is a need," says DiVincenzo, "At least by the end of the year or by March."

### On dry land

#### Max and Moritz

Max Böhnelt and Moritz Wichmann analyze the US election campaign every week in a chat with Oliver Kern. This time it's Max's turn. The US correspondent for "nd" and several radio stations in Germany, Austria and Switzerland has lived in New York since 1998.

Each of the food boxes contains 40 meals, 1000 boxes will be handed out that day, after an hour and a half they are all gone. This is paid for with funds from the Corona emergency aid decided by the US Congress in March, the Cares Act. But this source of money is slowly drying up. For months, the Republicans in the US Senate have been blocking the adoption of further aid in the corona crisis and only want to provide minimal aid.

Washington is a long way from the Calvary Baptist Church; it is about concrete problems. Drive-thru grocery distribution - some people also come by on foot - meets all the requirements of social distancing. Also important: no questions are asked. Accepting help from others, including from the welfare state, is a shame, especially in the USA.

Moritz Wichmann

Hyacinth passed by on foot. The teacher was actually already retired. However, since her pension was insufficient, she worked as an assistant teacher until recently. However, she was not allowed to give distance learning as an assistant in the corona pandemic - she lost her job. Now she is getting a little social assistance and some unemployment benefits. But that too is "little," says the black woman, and besides, not sure. Because in a few weeks your entitlement to unemployment benefits will expire. In many states in the USA, this support is only available for 26 weeks. The Cares Act allowed states to extend this for 13 weeks. What happens after that? "I really don't know," she says as she waits for a lift with her grocery package. Hyacinth is not alone. More than 350,000 Corona unemployed in the USA had already exhausted their 13-week extension in mid-October. The program expires at the end of December, and then 13 million corona unemployed could be left completely without unemployment benefits from their states or the federal government, if the period of benefit is not extended or new aid is decided in the US Congress.

No one is currently immune from falling into poverty. "Each of us could be in this situation," says DiVincenzo. His county is "very diverse," it includes urban and rather black and poor Newark and East Orange with the poor wooden houses in narrow rows, from which the paint is peeling, to affluent suburbs, more inhabited by white Americans, with mansion-like houses and stately ones Driveways. "The poor as well as the more affluent are affected by the crisis," he says. In fact, some of the cars pulled up outside the church don't look poor. According to survey data on the corona crisis in the USA, however - unlike the financial crisis in 2008 - this time it is less white workers and more Latinos, blacks and women who are losing their jobs.

"People in the area who work in retail are particularly affected, many small businesses have to close," says DiVincenzo's colleague Cinda Williams as she waves cars to the collection point. Usually she advises people looking for work for the district. Now she helps out with the box allocation.

Even before the corona crisis, there was a lot of social hardship in the USA. 34 million people lived below the poverty line. In the last few months, according to calculations by researchers at Columbia University, another eight million people have been added - for the most part since the federal extra corona crisis unemployment benefit expired in late July.



»The poor as well as the more affluent are affected by the crisis. Any of us could be in this situation. »Joseph DiVincenzo, Essex County Chief Executive Officer

Photo: Moritz Wichmann

You don't just need groceries. There is even a lack of money for the funerals of deceased relatives, Williams said. And with the approaching winter, switching off electricity and heating due to unpaid bills and the procurement of warm clothing will become a problem. In

addition, "people have to decide whether to pay the rent or spend money on food," she says. Those who fail to pay the rent quickly end up on the street - or in the nearby Isaiah House, a homeless shelter with a grocery table. "When the \$ 600 extra unemployment benefit ceased to exist at the end of July, a lot more people suddenly reported who could no longer pay their rents," says employee Julia Hismeh.

No hope from Biden

Isaiah House has been offering a blackboard for 25 years. In the corona crisis, however, the need is twice as high. "In the first two months of the pandemic, we sometimes had 600 people waiting for food and queues around the block," says Tafel boss Latoya Anderson.

As with the Calvary Baptist Church, no further questions are asked of the needy. Anderson does not want to scare them off with requirements like those prescribed by other institutions. For many marginalized people, these are hardly achievable, for example showing a social security number or a birth certificate. What Anderson distributes should "only be additional help, people are also entitled to food stamps," she emphasizes with reference to the corresponding state program.

In addition to food tables and social institutions such as Isaiah House, groups have also sprung up all over the country that offer mutual help. Both citizens who are active in Facebook groups and left-wing activists like Jeff are involved in it. He is a member of the Democratic Socialists of America group in northern New Jersey. With other volunteers, the DSA activists offered food aid in a Newark neighborhood with high homelessness before the pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic, this was discontinued to protect against infection, now those in need are supplied by delivery, around 200 times so far.

Jeff has no hopes for the presidential elections in early November. "The hardship in the country will not change just because we may soon have another president," he says, referring to a possible election victory for Joe Biden of the Democratic Party. With the increasing number of corona infections, we will soon be back where we were in April with new restrictions or even a new lockdown. But this time we are better prepared, can distribute more deliveries and have raised more money. "

- [October 24, 2020](#)