

**Rural Studies Program
Fact Sheet 09-01**



**Understanding Food Insecurity and
“Hunger” in Oregon**

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March 2009

In November of 2008, the USDA announced that Oregon’s rate of “very low food security” had risen to 5.5%. This means that over 79,000 households¹ in Oregon experienced serious difficulty putting enough food on the table for everyone in the house. Because Oregon households, on average, have 2.5 people² in them, this meant that nearly 198,000 people found themselves at some point in the year in a household under this kind of financial strain. This is the group who may have needed some sort of help, whether that be better earnings, access to cheaper food or housing, to public assistance, or any other number of ways you could imagine improving people’s circumstances. This summary describes how food insecurity is measured and how simple analyses of Oregon’s situation helps us see where help could be targeted.

What is “very low food security” (a.k.a. “hunger”)?

Perhaps it is best to start with thinking about what it means to be food secure. If you are sure that you will be able to provide for you and your family the food you need this week and next, and that you will not have to start shrinking portions and skipping meals to get to the end of the month, you are more secure in your food situation than someone who is facing those kinds of concerns. The vast majority of American households are food secure. However, a sizeable minority of American households (about 10%), when surveyed each December, report that in the previous year there were months when they were so low on money for food that they had to start doing things like cutting portions, skipping meals, and serving foods that they knew were less healthy. These people are the “food insecure.” Among them are households with “very low food security,” the ones who were making not just a few, but many difficult decisions about stretching their food until the end of the month. In the U.S., about 4% of households are in this worst situation. That number is a bit higher in Oregon (5.5%). Food insecurity researchers used to, and still sometimes do, refer to this group as being “hungry” (although they do not measure the uncomfortable sensation of hunger).

Who are the people with “very low food security”?

Researchers have found that very low food security (i.e., hunger) is highest among single mother households (10%) and poor families (15%), as well as renters, unemployed workers, and households with adults who are Hispanic and African American. Oregon’s “hunger” rates among these groups have historically been slightly higher for these groups, compared to the rest of the US. But the most recent data shows Oregon resembling the US pattern very closely. It is interesting to note that households led by single adults, with or without children, have high “hunger” rates (around 8-9%) and that these rates are lowest among married people, with and without children (around 3%).

Why did the hunger rate in Oregon fall until recently?

Historically, Oregon has had high rates of “hunger”, even though compared to the rest of the country, it has a smaller racial/ethnic minority population, average levels of poverty, and single-parenthood rates that resemble other states. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Oregon had curiously high rates of “hunger” among groups that normally seem insulated from it in other states, such as families with full time year round employment and 2-parent families. Surprisingly, Oregon’s “hunger” rate fell dramatically in the first part of the 2000s, during an economic recession and a modest economic recovery. The result was that hunger rates here began to resemble the national rate in 2005. Researchers never fully explained why the numbers were very high in the late 1990s (over 6% in some years). However, the rapid rise of enrollment in the food stamp program in the 2000s, while “hunger” fell, suggests that early in the 2000s, income shortages among Oregon families, especially among those with employed adults, were to blame. As much as they may not have wanted to use government assistance, families likely benefited from the supplemental income provided by federal food assistance. As of 2009, about one in six Oregon households receives federally funded food stamps. However, with around 85% of its eligible households signed up for food stamps, that source of support may be inadequate to address the current economic challenges faced by many Oregonians.

What has happened most recently to Oregon rates of “hunger”?

The USDA’s report in 2008 indicated that Oregon’s hunger rate in the 2005-2007 period had rapidly reversed and begun to climb again toward being one of highest in the nation. The data from 2008 will not be released until November 2009. But there is every reason to believe that the situation through 2008 continued to get worse. In previous surveys of Oregonians, households that are unemployed during the month we interview them usually show “hunger” rates of around 10%. And technical analyses of data from all states show that Oregon’s peak unemployment rate, along with its high fraction of renters spending over half their income on rent, contributes to its high “hunger” rate. As unemployment increases in Oregon, the “hunger” rate is also like to rise.

What are the characteristics of households with very low food security?

Usually we report the rates of very low food security for different groups, and then compare. However, it also makes sense to examine what are the characteristics of Oregonians who are found to be “hungry” and contrast them with those who are food secure. This helps us think about the characteristics of households who need assistance.

Households with Very Low Food Security

9% have college degrees
90% are employed
12% are married with children
9.4% are single parents
24% are homeowners
73% are poor or near poor

Food Secure Households

31% have college degrees
96% are employed
22% are married with children
4.8% are single parents
72% are homeowners
24% are poor or near poor

The households that are “hungry” are not very different from the “food secure” households in terms of their participation in the labor force. There are some differences between the two groups related to their marriage rates or whether or not they have children. Finally, there are dramatic difference in terms of their incomes, housing situations, and levels of education.

Footnotes: (1) Based on Census Bureau estimate of 1,447,000 households in Oregon.
(2) Based on Census estimate of 2.49 persons per Oregon household