

Rural Studies Program



Food Insecurity in Oregon: Considering the Role of Housing (2013-2015)

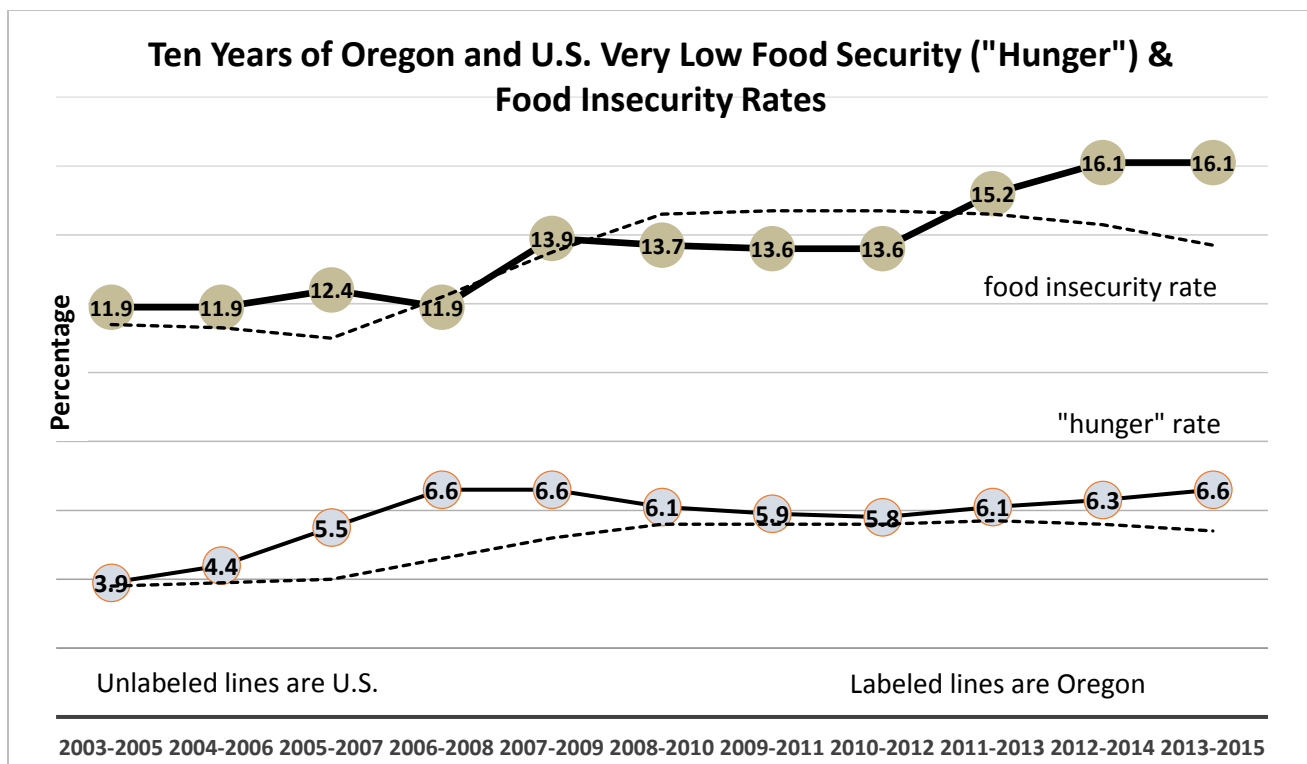
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The newest USDA Food Security Report highlighted Oregon as the only state which had a statistically significant increase in food insecurity between 2010-2012 and 2013-2015. (They use 3-year averages to provide more stable estimates.) While the U.S. food insecurity rate as a whole declined from 14.7% to 13.7% during that period, Oregon's increased from 13.6% to 16.1%. This statistically significant jump for Oregon had already been observed a year ago but the increase received little press. The unexpected rise in Oregon beginning around 2013, while other states were improving after the Great Recession, suggests that Oregon households have been facing some unique challenges while the rest of the country has been experiencing a general improvement. (The rate of very low food security in Oregon increased a bit less during the past 5 years, from 5.8% to 6.6%.) How can we account for uniquely rising food insecurity rates in Oregon during a national economic recovery?



A very likely influence on food insecurity among Oregon’s low income households is housing cost burden for renters. Prior research identifies the central role of housing costs in sapping household budgets and increasing food insecurity. The rapid rise of rental costs in the Portland Metro area, and in other places in Oregon that are included in the USDA survey, could be a driving force in the jump in food insecurity. When we compare recent food insecurity rates among renters in Oregon versus the rest of the U.S., Oregon had a food insecurity rate 8.2 percentage points higher than among renters in the rest of the U.S. This increased rate of food insecurity among Oregon renters is a new development, 6 percentage points higher than what was measured in 2010-2012. “Hunger” rates nudged upwards among Oregon renters while slipping downwards among renters in the rest of the U.S. So there is some initial evidence that paying rent could be a particular problem for Oregonians.

| | 2013-2015 | | 2010-2012 | |
|----------------|-----------------|------------------|-------------|------------------|
| | Oregon | Rest of the U.S. | Oregon | Rest of the U.S. |
| Renters | 13.6%**/32.1%** | 9.9%/23.9% | 13.2%/26.3% | 10.4%/26.9% |
| Owners | 2.1%/6.6% | 3.0%/8.1% | 1.8%/6.9% | 3.2%/9.0% |

** p < .01 There is less than a one-in-one hundred chance that Oregon rate appears different from the U.S. merely by chance.

Note: Numbers to the left of slash-marks are “very low food security” (hunger) rates; to the right are the food insecurity rates.

Location

There are at least two ways that the geography of housing markets may impact the Oregon food insecurity rate relative to that of the U.S.. It could be that (a) food insecurity increased more in Oregon’s urban or rural places, compared to such places in the rest of the U.S., or (b) a larger fraction of Oregonians may live in urban v. rural places (compared to other states), leaving a greater proportion of Oregonians vulnerable to the high rents of urban places.

Because rental prices have been rising particularly in urban areas, we start by comparing early and later rural and urban food insecurity rates, anticipating that urban food insecurity may have increased more than rural.

| | 2013-2015 | | 2010-2012 | |
|--------------|--------------|------------------|------------|------------------|
| | Oregon | Rest of the U.S. | Oregon | Rest of the U.S. |
| Rural | 8.4%/19.9%* | 6.4%/15.8% | 5.7%/13.7% | 6.0%/15.3% |
| Urban | 6.3%/15.5%** | 5.2%/13.2% | 5.8%/14.6% | 5.5%/14.5% |

** p < .01 There is less than a one-in-one hundred chance that Oregon rate appears different from the U.S. merely by chance.

* p < .05 There is less than a one-in-twenty chance that Oregon rate appears different from the U.S. merely by chance.

Note: “Urban” and “rural”, in some federal reports, are sometimes called “Metropolitan” and “Non-metropolitan” respectively.

Instead we find Oregon’s rural food insecurity rose somewhat more than urban food insecurity between the two time periods. Whereas the rural rate was 13.7% in the earlier period, it grew by 6 percentage points to 19.9% (the growth itself was statistically significant [p<.05]), while it remained about the same in the rest of rural America. Oregon’s urban food insecurity increased by about 1 percentage point to 15.5%, not far off the state rate of 16.1%, while urban food insecurity declined in the rest of the U.S. So, Oregon’s increase in food insecurity is partially due to larger increases in rural places, but also sustained by relatively high urban food insecurity rates in Oregon.

Because Oregon has a uniquely high fraction of its population in the Portland Metro area (about 1/3 of the entire state population in one housing market), it is worth examining how the survey participants are concentrated in larger or smaller areas. In Oregon, about one half of the 1,855 survey participants reside in

the Portland metro area. Another one fourth of the survey respondents live in the Salem and Eugene areas, and another 10% in Bend, Roseburg, and Medford. So, the rise in urban food insecurity may be amplified by the concentration of the state's population in urban housing markets, mostly in the Portland area, but the smaller but significantly struggling rural areas contribute to the state's increase as well.

Household Characteristics

In the previous year's research (2012-2014), OSU reported especially high rates of food insecurity among Oregon's single mothers. Rather than compare to older statistics, we here simply examine how things may have changed with the newest data available (compared to the previous year). Recall that this analysis drops out the 2012 data, and now includes the 2015 data in the 3-year moving average. The food insecurity rate for single mothers decreased a few percentage points to 44.1% (from 48.1% in the previous year's report). It also dropped for single mothers in the rest of the U.S.. Otherwise, in Oregon there were no notable household changes, but the hunger and food security rates for the rest of the U.S. all nudged downward in every category of household. In Oregon the story remains that food insecurity is highest in households with children, especially single mother households^b, but with Oregon parents and children also showing slightly higher rates than the Oregon average (16.6% v. 16.1%), and significantly higher than for families with children in the rest of the U.S.. Women living alone in Oregon have higher food insecurity and higher hunger rates than similarly situated women in the rest of the U.S., a topic worthy of analysis in future reports.

| | Hunger/Food Insecurity Rate (2013-2015) | |
|---|---|------------------|
| | Oregon | Rest of the U.S. |
| Couples with children | 3.1%/16.6%** | 2.9%/11.2% |
| Couples without children at home | 3.0%/6.5% | 2.6%/6.6% |
| Single mothers | 15.4%/44.1%** | 11.1%/33.8% |
| Alone | | |
| - women | 11.0%**/21.7%** | 7.5%/16.6% |
| - men | 8.3%/14.5% | 7.2%/14.9% |

** p < .01 There is less than a one-in-one hundred chance that Oregon rate appears different from the U.S. merely by chance.

Note: Single people (mothers, fathers, and those alone) could be widowed, divorced, or never-married.

Education

In the past year, adding in the 2015 data, the prevalence of food insecurity remains highest among the least educated in Oregon, slightly higher than in the rest of the U.S., but not statistically significantly higher. One in three households headed by someone without a high school diploma are food insecure, followed by one-in-five households with a high school diploma and perhaps some additional schooling. (See previous year's report for more detail.) The situation with education level and food insecurity is important to consider further because of the implications of policies directed at increasing educational attainment in Oregon. We update and repeat here some observations made in the previous report. Among the hungry households, around 60% of adults leading those households had completed high school and/or had some college education, about 10% had an associate degree, and 12% had a bachelor degree or more. (Tables not shown.) Around one fifth (17%) of the hungry households were headed by adults with less than a high school diploma. So, while finishing high school substantially reduces the risk of hunger, at least four out of five adults who were leading hungry households had already finished high school. The largest group of people

struggling with hunger and food insecurity were those with high school degrees but who had not completed any additional credentials (associate degree or beyond).

Summing Up and Possible Implications

This analysis finds evidence consistent with the possibility that as Oregon has been recovering from the Great Recession, housing burden for renters has been challenging urban and rural households. In spite of declining unemployment and increasing wages, the food insecurity rate for Oregon renters has risen substantially in the past several years, while it has declined in the rest of the country. Meanwhile, although the food insecurity rate for Oregon's single mothers declined by a few percentage points, single mothers in Oregon continue to struggle with food insecurity more than single mothers elsewhere in the U.S.. Moreover, of the food insecure single mothers, 90% are renters, raising the possibility that reductions in housing cost burden would especially help single mothers. As we have suggested before, affordability of rental housing for all families appears to influence the greater vulnerability of renters in Oregon.

These new data also continue to provide support for efforts to increase access to community colleges and four-year colleges, moving people from the large pool of more vulnerable "high school only" residents into more highly skilled employment. The relatively small number of hungry households led by people without high school degrees suggests that, while hunger is more prevalent among high school dropouts, efforts to raise high school completion rates may have less aggregate impact on hunger than efforts to increase college enrollment among high school graduates.

Finally, as we argued earlier this year (2012-2014 report), Oregon's rise in food insecurity over the past few years now positions it significantly higher than for the U.S., a concerning reversal of direction after several years of stability after the Great Recession. Greater attention to now-rising inequality, where residents with less formal education are left behind while home owners and more highly educated residents thrive in the recovering economy, deserve additional attention.

Endnotes

- a) Respondents are asked a battery of questions about their previous year's experiences feeding themselves and their families. If they provide 3 or more indications of difficulties, they are categorized as food insecure. For households without children, if they provide 8 or more indications, they are further categorized as having very-low-food-security, a concept referred to by many as "hunger". For households with children, they are asked additional questions and then 10 affirmative answers indicate that those households have very-low-food-security. For a further discussion of this measurement, consult the USDA's Economic Research Service website.
- b) Six percent of Oregon households are single-mother households. Based on 1.518 million Oregon households, and 2.47 persons per household, this yields an estimate of 224,000 persons in single-mother households.

About the author

Mark Edwards is a Professor of Sociology in Oregon State University's School of Public Policy. He has been writing about hunger and food insecurity in the western U.S. for the past 15 years, and provides research assistance to the Oregon Food Bank and Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon.

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