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Understanding Food Insecurity and “Hunger” in Oregon

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In November of 2009, the USDA announced that Oregon’s rate of “very low food security” had risen to 6.6%, making Oregon one of the five most “hungry” states in the country. This means that over 95,000 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 around 235,000 people found themselves at some point in the year in a household facing 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 housing or 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 help 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 12%), when surveyed each December, report that in the previous year there were months when they had so little money for food that they worried over how they would feed their families and they began 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 4.6% of households are in this worst situation. That number is higher in Oregon (6.6%). 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 (15%) and poor and near-poor families (16%), as well as renters, unemployed workers, and households with adults who are Hispanic and African American. Oregon’s hunger rates among these groups remain higher compared to the rest of the US. The most recent data show that 55% of the households that experience hunger are single-person households, where people live without relatives.

Why did the hunger rate in Oregon fall until recently?

Ten years ago, Oregon had a high rate of hunger (around 6%), even though compared to the rest of the country, it has a smaller racial/ethnic minority population, average levels of poverty, and single-parent household rates that resemble other states. During that time Oregon had a surprisingly high rate 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. Unexpectedly, Oregon's hunger rate quickly declined in the first part of the 2000s, during an economic recession and a modest economic recovery. The result was that the hunger rate here began to resemble the national rate by 2005. Researchers never fully explained why the numbers were very high in the late 1990s; 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 largely 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 assistance ("food stamps"). However, with around 85% of its eligible households signed up for the program, that source of support may be inadequate to address the current economic challenges faced by many Oregonians.

What has happened most recently to the Oregon rate of hunger?

The USDA's report in 2009 confirmed earlier reports that Oregon's hunger rate in the 2006-2008 period had rapidly reversed and begun to climb again toward being one of highest in the nation. The data from 2009 will not be released until November 2010. But there is every reason to believe that the situation through 2009 remained very serious. In previous surveys of Oregonians, households that were unemployed during the month we interviewed them usually showed 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, contribute to its high hunger rate. Oregon's employment instability appears to contribute to its hunger rate.

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 the characteristics of Oregonians who are found to have very low food security 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

- 60% are in the labor force
- 20% are unemployed
- 20% are married with children
- 9.4% are single parents
- 24% are homeowners
- 71% are poor or near poor
- 11% have 4-year college degrees

Food Secure Households

- 66% are in the labor force
- 5.5% are unemployed
- 22% are married with children
- 4.8% are single parents
- 72% are homeowners
- 24% are poor or near poor
- 33% have 4-year college degrees

The households that are hungry are not very different from the food secure households in terms of their participation in the labor force, but they are struggling to find work. There are minimal differences between the two groups with regard to marriage and children. Finally, there are dramatic differences in terms of their housing, incomes, 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