

Rural Studies Program Fact Sheet 07-01



Changes in Hunger and Food Insecurity in Oregon

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The table provides the most current information on changes in food insecurity and hunger in Oregon's population during this decade. The 1999-2001 numbers come from the November 2003 report released by Oregon State University and the newer numbers come from our analysis of the most recent available data (2003-2005).

Oregon Food Insecurity and Hunger Rates for Households, Across Categories, 1999-2001 and 2003-2005 (%)

	1999-2001	2003-2005	1999-2001	2003-2005
	Food Insecurity ¹		Hunger	
Oregon Rate	13.4	11.9	5.2	3.9
National Rate	10.4	11.4	3.1	3.8
Unemployed	24.7	25.9	11.1	9.0
Employed ²	14.0	10.9	5.5	3.5
Full-year, full-time employed reference person ³	14.0	11.0	5.5	3.3
Dual earner families	7.2	7.9	2.5	1.9
Metro residence	14.3	11.4	5.2	4.0
Non-metro residence ⁴	11.2	13.6	5.2	3.6
Two parent, w/ kids	19.1	14.1	7.3	2.9
Single mothers	25.0	37.9	9.4	12.3
Home owners	7.3	7.6	3.0	2.1
Renters	25.9	21.5	9.6	7.4
Hispanic ⁵		25.8		8.6
Non-Hispanic		11.1		3.6

1. The USDA measures food insecurity in terms of reported reductions in reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet, but with little or no indication of reduced food intake. Hunger (or "very low food insecurity") is a potentially more serious situation that also includes multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.

2. "Employed" are households without an unemployed adult; unemployed households have at least one unemployed adult.

3. Reference person is the person in whose name is held the title, mortgage, or lease on a house; this person answers questions for the rest of the household members. For dual owners/renters, it can be either person.

4. Non-metro is commonly referred to as 'rural', however, we use the more precise USDA language here.

5. Computations for Hispanic/Non-Hispanic reference persons were not completed in the 1999-2001 report.

Discussion of Table

Since our report on Oregon's high hunger rate at the beginning of this decade (see <http://ruralstudies.oregonstate.edu/>), the hunger rate and food insecurity rate have declined significantly. Last year's report on data collected in 2002-2004 revealed drops in hunger and food insecurity in nearly all of the categories indicated in this present report. We speculated last year that this drop was likely encouraged, or even caused, by dramatically increased enrollment in the food stamp program, with Oregon showing the largest percentage increase in enrollment of all the 50 states. Given that Oregon's hunger rate fell significantly during a time of economic recession and that it declined while the rest of the country's hunger rate increased, we continue to believe that Oregon's unique food stamp and food bank response to the problem has made a noteworthy impact.

This report updates last year's summary, now using the 2003-2005 data, the most current that is available from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This analysis replicates the official USDA statistics but further breaks down hunger and food insecurity rates by various socio-demographic groups that are often targeted (or sometimes ignored) by state agencies and emergency food services. We caution against making any comparisons between last year's and this year's numbers because differences from last year to this are so minimal that they all fall within a statistical margin of error, and hence may simply represent random error in sampling. This stability in the numbers is not surprising because in the moving average we retain two thirds of the data (2003 and 2004) from last year's analysis. To those two years we have now added the newest data, collected in December 2005, and released to us and the public in December 2006.

The Oregon hunger rate in 2003-2005 was 3.9%. This represents about 52,000 households in Oregon that during a given year found themselves cutting sizes of meals, going without meals, and/or eating less than they knew was good for them. (Information on measuring hunger and food insecurity is readily available from the USDA Economic Research Service website.) Only around 9,500 of these households were single-mother households, even though single-mother households have a hunger rate three times higher than other households. Hence, hunger remains concentrated among some groups (as seen in the table), but it is also widely distributed. We also highlight that food insecurity and hunger among Hispanic residents in Oregon remains at least twice as high as that of non-Hispanic residents. (The number of other race and ethnic minority groups in the sample is too small to produce any meaningful hunger or food insecurity rate.) Finally, food insecurity in rural locations remains higher than it was around 2000 while hunger rates have dropped. The reasons for this are not clear, but based on these most current findings, approximately 12,000 rural households in Oregon experience hunger each year and 45,000 experience food insecurity.

Since our last report, the USDA has, at the suggestion of the National Academy of Sciences, replaced the word 'hunger' with the phrase 'very low food security'. The rationale for this change is that questions asked of survey respondents do not specifically ask about nutritional intake or physical sensations of hunger, but rather about decisions adults have made about how they feed themselves and their families. Thus, the experiences described in previous hunger reports remain the same, but the language is now officially changed in USDA reports. For the sake of clarity, we retain the word 'hunger' in this report but acknowledge the scientific basis for the suggested change in language.

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