

Rural Studies Program



Hunger in Oregon Since the Great Recession

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During the early stages of the recovery from the Great Recession, from 2010 through 2012, Oregon's very-low-food-security rate (also known as "hunger")^a was not much different from that for the entire US. The rate of food insecurity (the more inclusive category that is less severe) appears to be slightly lower in Oregon, although the difference is not statistically significant. In the late 1990s and again in the mid-2000s (2006-2008), Oregon's hunger rate was significantly higher than that of the U.S., but that is no longer the case. Oregon's hunger rate decreased to 5.8% while the food insecurity category did not change. The hunger rate in Oregon translates to 209,500 households struggling at some point during the calendar year to put enough food on the table.^b

	Oregon	US
"Hunger" rate	5.8%	5.6%
Food Insecurity rate	13.6%	14.7%
	n=2,018	n=132,018

Geography

Oregon's rural and urban hunger rates appear to be about the same right after the recession (5.7% vs. 5.8%). When compared to rural and urban places in the entire US, the Oregon rates do not vary significantly. However, this similarity to the US was a new development. In 2008-2010, Oregon's urban hunger rate was significantly higher than that of urban areas in the whole US. But the percentage in urban Oregon declined from 6.6%, while the rest of urban America saw a slight increase. The data preclude us from more carefully identifying which urban areas have experienced more or less improvement, but among the urban areas included in the Oregon sample are Multnomah County and its adjacent counties, Deschutes County, Lane County, Jackson County, and Marion County. Also, if we look just at the hungry households throughout

	Hunger Rate	
	Oregon	US
Rural	5.7%	6.0%
Urban	5.8%	5.5%

Oregon, around 84% of those households were in urban areas (analysis not shown). So, while the hunger rates resembled one another across places, the vast majority of struggling households were located in Oregon's urban counties.

Household and Personal Characteristics

Hunger rates remained highest among householders with less than a high school education. However, since the peak of the recession, the situation improved considerably for the least educated adults in Oregon. Hunger among those with less than a high school diploma decreased by five percentage points (from 13.6% to 8.7%). In all educational categories, the Oregon hunger rate did not statistically differ from that of the entire US. (Small differences that appear could be due to sampling error.)

	Hunger Rate	
	Oregon	US
Less than High School Diploma	8.7%	10.9%
High School or Some College	7.9%	6.7%
Associates Degree	4.7%	5.6%
Bachelors Degree +	1.9%	1.9%

The situation with education level and hunger is important to examine further. Among the hungry households, 69% had completed high school and/or had some college education, about 8% had an associate's degree, and 10.6% had a bachelor's degree or more. Only 12% of Oregon's hungry households were headed by adults with less than a high school diploma. So, while finishing a high school diploma substantially reduces the risk of hunger, the vast majority of adults who were leading hungry households had already finished high school. The largest group of people struggling with hunger were those with high school degrees but who had not completed any additional credentials (associates or beyond).

	Hunger Rate	
	Oregon	US
Couples with children	2.5%	3.4%
Couples without children at home	2.6%	2.5%
Single mothers	21.4%*	11.6%
Alone		
- women	8.3%	7.8%
- men	6.3%	7.5%

* $p < .05$ Indicates Oregon number differs significantly from that of the U.S. as a whole

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

During the recovery from the recession, the U.S. hunger rate among couples with children was 3.4% and in Oregon the rate was 2.5%. Single mother households in Oregon had a much higher hunger rate than other types of households and single mothers in Oregon continued to have a significantly higher hunger rate than single mothers in the entire U.S.^c

Hispanic households in Oregon had higher hunger rates than non-Hispanic (7.9% v. 5.6%), a difference similar to what is reported by the USDA with nation-wide data. Although sample sizes are very small, the hunger rate among Black adults in Oregon remains around 20%. For more information on national hunger rates for racial and ethnic minority groups, see “Household Food Insecurity in the United States in 2012,” available online from the USDA.

Assets and Income

It is no surprise that homeowners are more likely than renters to avoid hunger. But hunger rates among homeowners in Oregon declined to a level lower than that of homeowners in the whole U.S. This difference is statistically significant. Most concerning however is the observation that Oregon renters experienced a higher rate of hunger than renters in the US as a whole. The difference of 2.8 percentage points is also statistically significant. This finding suggests that there remains an important connection between housing costs and hunger in Oregon.

	Hunger Rate	
	Oregon	US
Home Owners	1.8%*	3.1%
Renters	13.2%*	10.4%
In a home or apartment, but without paying	4.4%	9.5%

* p < .05 Indicates Oregon number differs significantly from that of the U.S. as a whole

When families are asked about their income during the previous year, that income is compared to the U.S. poverty line. Along with those below the poverty line, families who are above the poverty line, but below 185% of the poverty line, are often qualified for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (“food stamps”) and other support. In Oregon, households with annual family income below that 185%-line showed a hunger rate similar to that of low income families in other parts of the country. While households below and above 185% of the poverty line in Oregon experienced slightly different hunger rates than similarly situated people in the rest of the US, these differences were not significant.

	Hunger Rate	
	Oregon	US
Below 185% poverty	12.0%	12.8%
Above 185% poverty	2.9%	2.5%

Employment and Unemployment

In Oregon, the hunger rate among the unemployed is 15.9% and is not significantly different from the rest of the U.S. (15.2%). We do not have easy access to the previous year employment history of December-surveyed households. But other researchers have found that the peak level of unemployment in a state influences that state’s hunger rate. We have not yet examined how experiences of unemployment

throughout the previous year are related to experiences of hunger throughout the previous year. Thus, we do not yet know what fraction of households who experienced hunger in the previous year also experienced unemployment in the previous year, yet were employed when surveyed in December. This is an important area for further research for finding out how tightly connected are employment difficulties and hunger. Fifty-six percent of all hungry households were in the labor force, either working or looking for work. The balance (44%) of all hungry households were not in the labor force (analysis not shown). Most of these households were either headed by retirees or disabled adults.

Summing Up and Possible Implications

This analysis shows that since the Recession, there has been improvement for Oregon couples with children, as well as for urban and less-educated households. But single mothers and renters continued to experience higher rates of hunger than similar households in the U.S. as a whole. A further examination of the data reveal that about one fourth of renter households struggling with hunger were single mothers and virtually all single mother households struggling with hunger were renters. The low income status of single mothers is implied by this high rental rate. But the Oregon “penalty” for renters in general is not the result of high rates of single motherhood. Affordability of rental housing for all low income families appears to influence the greater vulnerability of renters in Oregon.

These findings may serve to guide policy makers, advocates, agencies, and other service providers seeking to assess impacts of earlier efforts to assist low income families and to target assistance to groups of Oregonians who are most vulnerable to hunger. With new data being collected in 2014, we will be able to eventually examine if the \$11 million cuts in federal funding to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) that occurred in November, 2013, as well as the passage of a new farm bill with significant cuts to SNAP, will impact these rates.

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. 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 a further discussion of this measurement, consult the USDA’s Economic Research Service website.
- b) These estimates are based on an Oregon sample of 2,018 overall households, and on Census reports that Oregon has 1.45 million households, with an average of 2.49 persons per household.
- c) In Oregon, 53% of single mothers who reported hunger during the previous year were employed at the time they were interviewed in December. Twelve percent were unemployed and looking for work, and about one-third were not in the labor force. These numbers resemble employment patterns for single mothers in hungry households in the U.S. at large.

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