

Rural Studies Program



Food Insecurity in Oregon and the U.S.: Uneven Recovery in the Midst of Overall Improvement (2014-2016)

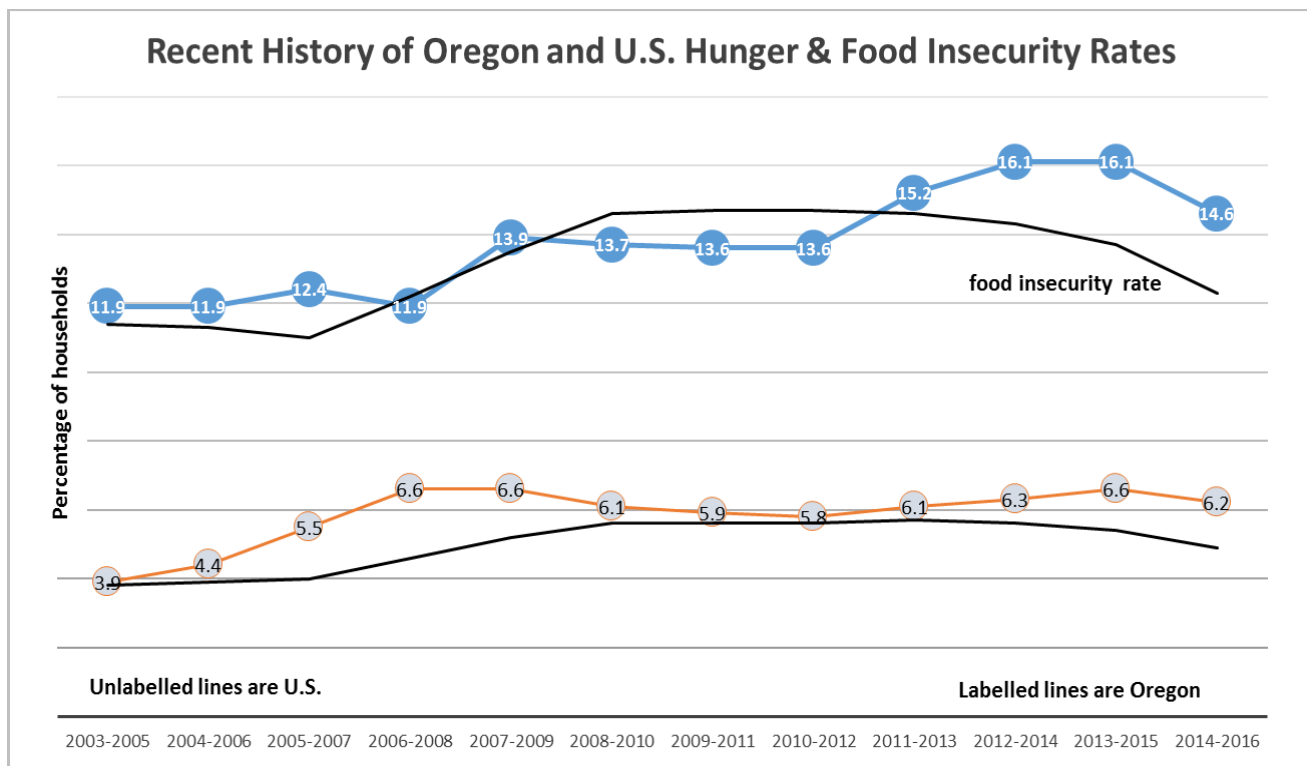
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October 2017

Oregon recently experienced its largest single-year decline in food insecurity^a in the past 20 years. In last year's national report, the USDA identified Oregon as the only state which had recently experienced a significant increase in food insecurity. However, the new 2014-2016 analysis shows the Oregon rate descending along with the rate for the whole country. Meanwhile, Oregon's rate of very low food security (an indicator of deep food insecurity, sometimes called 'hunger') also declined from 6.6% to 6.2%.



Because the state rate is calculated as a 3-year average, this new decline must be the result of both the exclusion of the 2013 data and the inclusion of the 2016 data. The strength of the Oregon economic recovery appears to have finally had a positive effect on reducing food insecurity. These positive trends being noted, Oregon continues to have a food insecurity rate that is statistically significantly higher than the rate for the US as a whole, representing about 560,000^b Oregon adults and children in food insecure households. The "very low food security" rate of 6.2% represents around 238,000^b adults and children facing this more severe form

of food insecurity.

Particular Groups Revisited

Renters: In previous reports we highlighted the role of rental housing costs and under- or un-employment. While unemployment has declined, rents have not. The food insecurity rate for renters did decline by 3 percentage points in comparison to the previous year's report, while the very low food security rate for renters remained about the same at 13.1%. In spite of this improvement, Oregon renters still have higher rates of food insecurity and hunger than renters in the rest of the country.

	2014-2016	
	Oregon	Rest of the U.S.
Renters	13.1%**/29.1%**	9.3%/22.8%
Owners	1.8%/5.9%	2.8%/7.5%

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

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

Single mothers: In Oregon, single mothers have historically had higher food insecurity rates than single mothers in the rest of the country. This continues to be the case with 40% of single mother households food insecure. However, the food insecurity rate for single mother households has declined substantially and steadily in just a couple years, from 48% in 2012-2014, to 44% in 2013-2015, and now to 40%. The reasons for this improvement are not immediately obvious. Women living alone in Oregon continue to be more at risk than similarly situated women in other states, and they show no improvement in the recent survey. Couples with children appear to have experienced a 3 percentage point drop in food insecurity, such that these households are no longer statistically different from the rest of the country.

	Hunger/Food Insecurity Rate (2014-2016)	
	Oregon	Rest of the U.S.
Couples with children	2.4%/13.3%	2.6%/10.4%
Couples without children at home	3.5%/5.9%	2.5%/6.3%
Single mothers	14.2%/40.2%*	11.1%/32.7%
Alone		
- women	10.1*/22.4%**	7.3%/16.1%
- men	7.1%/12.1%	6.9%/14.3%

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

** 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.

Less educated residents: In Oregon, as in the rest of the U.S., food insecurity declines with greater levels of educational achievement. In the most recent data, Oregonians with a high school diploma (who may have attended some college but do not have an Associates degree) are worse off than similarly educated people in the rest of the country, with around a 3 percentage point higher food insecurity rate, and a 2.2 percentage point higher rate of hunger. For Oregonians with an Associates degree, their lower food insecurity rates begin to resemble similarly educated people in the rest of the country. As we have identified before, only a small minority of people heading food insecure households lack their high school diploma (15% in the most recent

data). Thus, while the food insecurity rate decreases 7 percentage points for those who graduate high school, and another 7 percentage points for those completing an Associates degree, the population of food insecure adults who could benefit from advancing to the next academic credential is largest among high school graduates who have not finished their Associates degree. Sixty percent of food insecure households in Oregon have a high school diploma but no further credential (calculations not shown here).

	Hunger/Food Insecurity Rate (2014-2016)	
	Oregon	Rest of the U.S.
Less than high school	9.8%/26.1%	10.7%/27.0%
High school +	8.6%**/19.1**%	6.4%/16.0%
Associates	4.8%/12.5%	5.3%/13.4%
Bachelors +	2.5%/6.6%	1.7%/4.5%

** p < .01 There is less than a one-in-one hundred chance that Oregon rate appears different from the U.S. merely by chance.
 Note: Numbers to the left of slash-marks are “very low food security” (hunger) rates; to the right are the food insecurity rates.

Rural v. urban: In the recent data, food insecurity and hunger appear to be continuing an upward trajectory in rural Oregon and declining in urban Oregon. We reported last year a rise in rural food insecurity and hunger over the previous several years, and this trend continues. (See comparison between 2014-2016 and 2010-2012.) This leaves residents in rural Oregon counties 5 percentage points more likely to experience food insecurity or hunger than rural residents elsewhere in the country, and about 5.5 to 6.5 percentage points more likely than Oregon urban residents to experience either hunger or food insecurity. This rural/urban divide in Oregon tempers the otherwise good news for Oregon statewide. Urban Oregon has seen improvement, and is driving down the overall lower state rate, but rural Oregon is continuing to struggle, with one in five households experiencing food insecurity.^c

	2014-2016		2010-2012	
	Oregon	Rest of the U.S.	Oregon	Rest of the U.S.
Rural	11.2%**/20.7%**	6.6%/15.7%	5.7%/13.7%	6.0%/15.3%
Urban	5.7%/14.0%	4.9%/12.5%	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.
 Note: “Urban” and “rural”, in some federal reports, are sometimes called “Metropolitan” and “Non-metropolitan” respectively.

Summing Up and Possible Implications

In our previous report, we puzzled over the rise of food insecurity in Oregon during the recovery from the Great Recession. The role of rental costs was examined, and argued to be a likely influence on Oregon’s food insecurity rate, especially given the concentration of Oregon residents in urban places with especially high rents. These recent data showing improvement in urban food security, even during a time when rents remain high and increasing, suggests that stronger economic recovery in urban areas is helping to turn the upward trajectory down. However, rural places with also rising rents, fall further behind. Others with additional economic data may be able to comment on why rural Oregon shows this particular problem, especially given that unemployment rates are reported by the State to be lower than they have been in decades.

Meanwhile, although the food insecurity rate for Oregon’s single mothers continued an impressive decline of an additional 4 percentage points, single mothers in Oregon continue to struggle with food insecurity

more than single mothers elsewhere in the U.S.. Whether safety net programs such as SNAP and TANF, or the overall economic recovery, are improving single mothers' situation, is worthy of further investigation.

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) These estimates are based on an Oregon sample of 1,823 households, and on Census reports that Oregon has 1.533 million households, with an average of 2.51 persons per household.
- c) In Oregon, because the sample is representative of the geographical dispersion of the population, about one half of the 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. Hence, with regard to statewide measures of food insecurity, as goes urban, so goes the state.

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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