

Oregon's Pandemic Food Insecurity Rates (2019-2021)

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The food insecurity rate in Oregon for 2019-2021 was 10.3%, an increase of 1 percentage point from the previous estimate which was a historic low of 9.1%^a. This recent higher rate means that about 170,000 households, or around 420,000 people, were food insecure over the course of a year during that period^b.

As they do every year, the Current Population Survey continued collecting food security data for all states in December 2021 in the midst of the COVID pandemic. Because sample sizes for individual states are fairly small (around 700 households per year in Oregon), it is customary to append three adjacent years for evaluating data for different demographic groups within states. Thus, the tables seen below include the merging of 2019-2021 data. We then compare two previous samples (2013-2015 and 2016-2018). While this approach prevents researchers from identifying more detailed annual changes, we can more confidently identify continuity and change in patterns over time having sufficiently large samples to describe Oregon's successes and on-going challenges for different demographic groups. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that year-over-year changes from 2019 to 2021, while less precise, may provide some indications of more substantial increases in food insecurity during the COVID pandemic. Oregon's year-specific food insecurity rate went from 8.8 % in 2019 to 9.8% in 2020 to 12.2% in 2021. (These estimates all have margins of error of around 2.5%, so it is judicious to only see these estimates as clues to likely changes.) A clearer picture of pandemic impacts on food insecurity in Oregon will be more fully explored after the 2022 data is collected in December.

Many researchers, including us here at OSU, had anticipated that food insecurity would increase dramatically early during the pandemic, but the increases were modest. National rates of food insecurity also remained fairly stable. The consensus now among researchers is that the impressive public investment in safety net programs helped prevent food insecurity among families and individuals who were unemployed or vulnerable to foreclosure or eviction early in the pandemic.

When comparing different groups of Oregonians during previous periods (2013-2015 and 2016-2018), the most recent data show some improvement in Oregonians' food security in the years leading into and during the first part of the COVID pandemic. But some groups show modest reversals in the overall improved trajectory. For example, while renters, individuals with high school diplomas, and single mothers continued to show on-going downward trends in food insecurity rates, those without high school degrees and those with community college training but no bachelor's degree show increasing food insecurity rates. Other groups showed a reversal of improving trends as we describe below.

Housing: The food insecurity and very-low-food-security rates for renters continued to decline, but with improvements in recent years less evident than earlier in the last decade. As noted in last year's report, this improvement is noteworthy given the rapidly rising rents in many parts of Oregon over the past decade, as well as the rental housing shortages in many rural places. Analysis of late-term pandemic data in the 2022 data collection, when eviction moratoriums ended and rents continued to rise, will reveal whether or not

food insecurity is currently on the rise among those struggling with increased rents. It is not clear how these if food insecurity rates may vary in different rental markets around the state.

	Hunger/Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon		
	2013-2015	2016-2018	2019-2021
Renters	13.6%/32.1%	10.8%/23.1%	8.2%/20.6%
Owners	2.1%/6.6%	1.1%/3.8%	1.4%/4.4%

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

While some of the food insecurity rate difference between renters and owners can be explained by higher poverty rates among renters, the vulnerability of renters, whether poor or not, remains around 10 percentage points higher than owners.

Education and Income: Food insecurity declines with greater levels of educational achievement, with rates among college educated Oregonians about one-sixth that of residents without high school diplomas. After significant improvements for less educated Oregonians in the middle of the last decade, their rates of food insecurity increased by 9 percentage points since 2016-2018. This same reversal is apparent in the rates of very low food security for this group. Those with high school diplomas and those with bachelor’s degrees showed minimal (statistically insignificant) declines in food insecurity in the most recent period. Food insecurity rates for households with Associates degrees increased by 5.5 percentage points in the most recent period, returning to 2013-2015 levels. Taken altogether, these data show reversals or flattening of the downward trajectory for Oregonians with different levels of education.

	Hunger/Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon		
	2013-2015	2016-2018	2019-2021
Less than high school	12.8%/31.5%	7.3%/15.8%	12.1%/24.8%
High school	8.6%/20.1%	6.3%/15.5%	4.7%/13.4%
Associates	6.1%/14.9%	2.5%/9.9%	5.9%/14.5%
Bachelors	2.3%/6.9%	3.4%/5.8%	1.3%/3.6%

Meanwhile, among the working poor (households with earnings under 185% of the federal poverty line), the food insecurity rate is 31%, a full 6 times higher than the rate for those with incomes above 185% the poverty line. Given that this number is higher than the most vulnerable education category (those without high school diplomas), it is clear that other influences (e.g., rent, cost of living, unemployment, etc.) beyond only educational attainment increase households’ vulnerability to food insecurity.

Rural v. urban: The downward trajectory in food insecurity in rural Oregon appears to have also reversed, although the presence of very low food security among the food insecure continued to fall. The trajectory is

	Hunger/Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon		
	2013-2015	2016-2018	2019-2021
Rural^c	8.4%/19.9%	8.2%/13.2%	4.1%/15.4%
Urban^c	6.3%/15.5%	4.5%/10.9%	3.9%/9.8%

less clear for urban Oregon. The gap between rural and urban Oregon food insecurity rates remains around

5 percentage points. It is important to remember rural households are categorized by the designation of their county as a rural or urban county, but within counties that are designated “urban” there are unofficially “rural” communities that by all indications are small and distant from city centers.

Household Composition: In the first part of the last decade, all types of families in Oregon experienced improved or stable food security. This improvement was less pronounced more recently. Food insecurity among households that are couples with children are now at a historic low, and the evidence of very low food insecurity is undetectable with these data.

Widespread improvements have not significantly changed the relative rates of food insecurity between categories of households. For example, single mother households still show the highest rate of food insecurity (27.5%), followed by people living alone (around 15%).

	Hunger/Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon		
	2013-2015	2016-2018	2019-2021
Couples with children	3.1%/16.6%	.8%/6.0%	0.0%/5.1%
Couples without children at home	3.0%/6.5%	1.3%/4.4%	1.0%/2.6%
Single mothers	15.4%/44.1%	11.9%/34.7%	15.0%/27.5%
Alone			
- women	11.0%/21.7%	9.2%/16.6%	6.0%/14.9%
- men	8.3%/14.5%	5.6%/11.3%	6.6%/15.1%

Racial and ethnic minority groups in Oregon: Because the population of Oregon is not as ethnically and racially diverse as much of the U.S., sample sizes for such groups in these survey data are fairly small. Thus, it is important to aggregate additional years of data to have large enough samples to better assess food insecurity among different racial and ethnic groups. Unfortunately, that means we need to combine data from 2017 through 2021, thus using somewhat dated information. Nonetheless, such a computation can identify social inequities that would otherwise be overlooked. With such data, we can examine the Oregon situation over the previous five years of available data.

Hunger/Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon (2017-2021)^{d,e}	
Hispanic (any race)	9.5%/19.0%
Black or multiracial including Black	11.8%/24.9%
American Indian (A.I.) or multiracial include A.I.	13.0%/21.7%
Asian or multiracial including Asian	2.1%/7.2%
White, non-Hispanic	3.8%/10.6%

During this five-year period, it is clear that most communities of color in Oregon have had substantially higher food insecurity and hunger rates than the White, non-Hispanic population. Asian households show a lower food insecurity, similar in magnitude to that of White households. While reasonable people may disagree over how best to divide and distinguish groups or how to categorize multi-racial, multi-ethnic

individuals and households, the strong impression from this imperfect set of categories is that racial and ethnic minority residents in Oregon face greater vulnerabilities to food insecurity. The food insecurity rates for Hispanic, Black, and American Indian headed households are all significantly higher ($p < .05$), about double that of White, non-Hispanic households. The same patterns appear for cross-group comparisons of very low food security with minority group rates about 2 to 3 times as high.

Age: Data limitations in earlier years keep us from making comparisons of food insecurity rates across time for different age groups, thus we only show the age distribution of food insecurity for the most recent years. However, patterns seen here appear similar to nation patterns, where food insecurity among older residents (65+) is lower than for younger cohorts. Food insecurity rates for seniors may be somewhat underestimated due to hesitancy of older respondents to acknowledge various indicators of food insecurity.

Hunger/Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon	
Age	2019-2021
18-45	4.5%/13.5%
46-64	4.2%/9.2%
65+	2.7%/6.9%

In this year’s report, we also include new analyses to examine the role of employment for understanding the distribution of food insecurity in Oregon. Because the various categories are quite small, we only include food insecurity rates rather than also including the estimates of very low food security.

Employment status: Unemployed Oregonians have household food insecurity rates at least four times as high as those who are employed. But spikes in unemployment do not explain the slight increase in Oregon’s food insecurity. It is important to recognize that these data are collected in December, so unemployed persons included here were unemployed in either December of 2019 (before the pandemic hit when Oregon’s unemployment rate was 3.4%), or in December 2020, in the midst of the pandemic yet after significant increases were made in unemployment insurance (and unemployment had fallen to 6.6%), or in December of 2021 (when unemployment in Oregon was around 4.2%). Those not in the labor force due to disability also showed especially high food insecurity rate, similar to the unemployed.

Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon	
Employment Status	2019-2021
Employed	8.9%
Unemployed	42.1%
Not in Labor Force - Retired	5.2%
Not in Labor Force - Disabled	40.3%

Occupation: Among those respondents who were employed, food insecurity rates differ across occupational categories. The patterns are consistent with those seen above in educational differences, but they are not completely explained by education. Predictably, rates are lower for those in professional and managerial occupations, while higher in white collar jobs that do not often require higher education. However, blue collar workers, broadly defined, show a food insecurity rate lower than for many white collar workers. The food insecurity rate is highest among service occupations, while somewhat less in sales and office support jobs. Our analysis does not here distinguish between full- and part-time work which may account in part for some of the differences between occupational groups.

Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon	
Occupation Category	2019-2021
Professional/Managerial	4.6%
Sales and Related Occupations	15.5%
Office and Administrative Support	13.8%
Service Occupations	22.7%
Blue Collar Jobs*	10.2%

*Farming, fishing, forestry, construction, extraction, maintenance, repair, production, transportation

Taken together, these updated tables show that the long and pervasive decline in food insecurity in Oregon prior to the COVID pandemic generally flattened and began to turn toward an upward trajectory. Some groups continued to show some improvement, but others began to be more vulnerable. As we argued last year, “The absence of a spike in food insecurity in 2020 [came] as welcome news in the face of . . . predictions that food insecurity would reach unprecedented levels.” But there is now evidence that the long decline in Oregon’s food insecurity has slowed and likely reversed. Among the employed, for many their work does not shield them from food insecurity, especially service workers. Inequities persist across racial and ethnic categories, between renters and homeowners, between those with and without disabilities that keep them from working, and between households with varying levels of education.

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 Census data indicating that in 2020 Oregon had 1.64 million households, with an average of 2.49 persons per household.
- c) In this report “Urban” refers to those residing in “Metropolitan” counties and “Rural” refers to those living outside such counties, according to the 2013 Office of Manage and Budget definitions for “Metropolitan” and “Non-metropolitan” counties.
- d) When a household is contacted, surveyors ask for the adult with the most recent birthday, and refer to this person as the “reference person”. We use the more common language of “head of household” in place of “reference” person, but make no claim that any such person actually heads the household, only that they are one of the adults who speaks for the household. We use the reference person’s self-selected race and/or ethnicity to distinguish households of various racial and ethnic composition. The categories used here are not completely mutually exclusive since, for example, a Black-Hispanic person may appear in either category of Black or Hispanic. (The label “Hispanic” is used by the U.S. Census Bureau when surveying respondents.)
- e) In earlier reports, we provided food insecurity rates for Hawaiian/Pacific Islander residents of Oregon. Problems with recent data preclude us from including these at this time, but subsequent analyses will be made public. Nationally, food insecurity numbers for this population are around 15%.

About the authors

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