

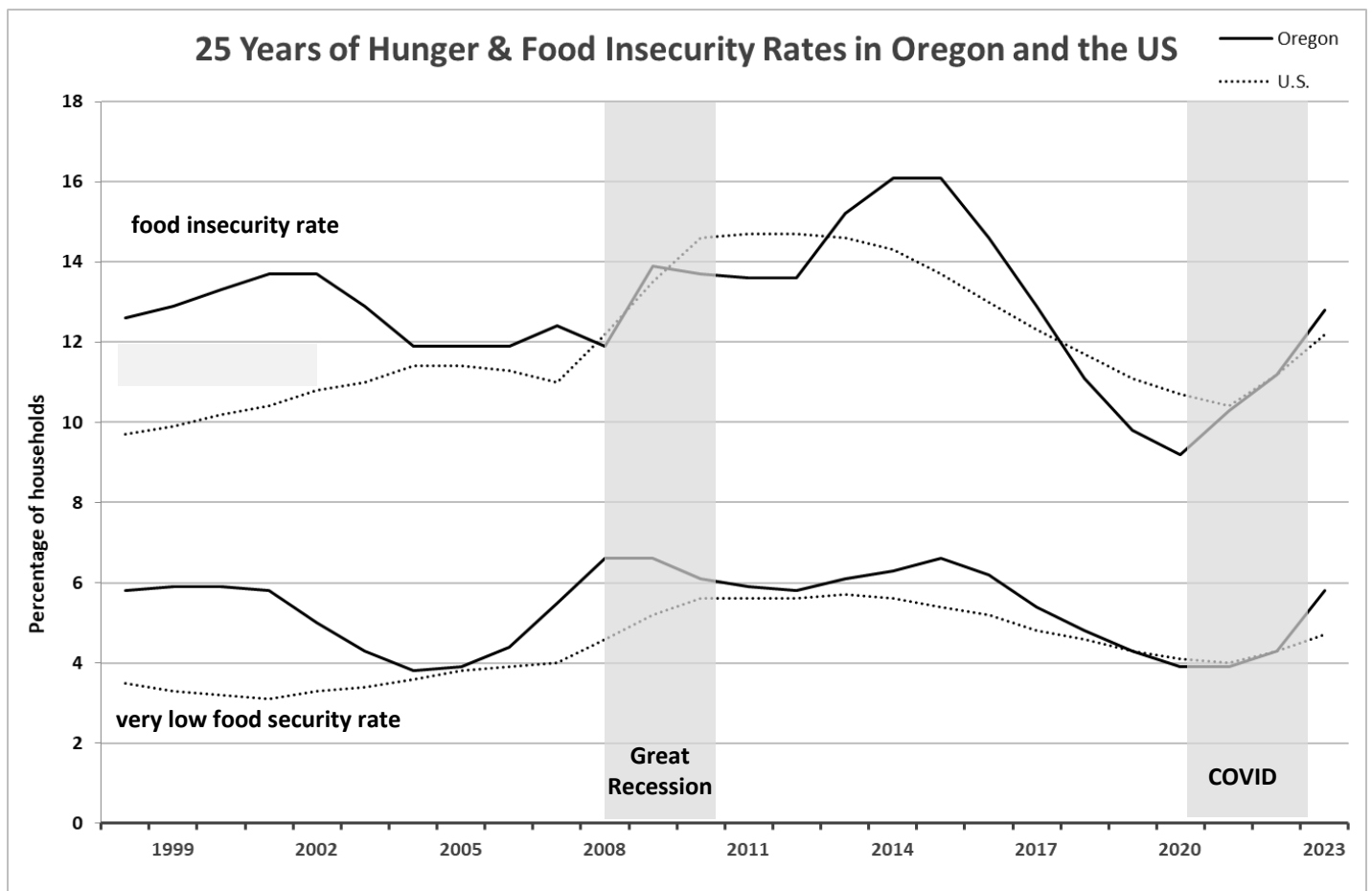
# Pandemic Increases in Oregon's Food Insecurity (2021-2023)

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The food insecurity rate in Oregon continued climbing in recent years (2021-2023) to 12.8%. During that period 221,000 households (about 530,000 individuals) experienced food insecurity each year.<sup>a</sup> The increase since our 2020-2022 report is notable, with roughly 30,000 additional households, or about 65,000 more people, per year experiencing food insecurity. The effects of the pandemic and the related economic challenges facing households are dramatic.

The U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) systematically gathered food insecurity data, before, during, and after the pandemic. To provide accurate state-level statistics, we combine 2021, 2022, and 2023 data, ensuring sufficient sample size to evaluate food insecurity across various demographic groups. These data reveal an increasing vulnerability among some segments of the population.

The figure below shows long term trends in food insecurity and in “very low food security” (a subset of those who are food insecure).<sup>b</sup> Oregon's rates have often been higher than rates for the US, but Oregon improved substantially from historically high rates in the slow recovery after the Great Recession, to historic lows just before the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, the rate increased during the COVID pandemic and just beyond. (The pandemic is widely believed to have lasted in the U.S. from Spring 2020 to Spring 2023.)



Examining group differences in vulnerability to food insecurity over time reveals inequalities and similarities, and may guide programming decisions and policy interventions. Below we show these changes over the past decade for a variety of groups.

*Housing:* Housing status continues to significantly influence food insecurity. During the 2021-2023 period, almost one fourth of renters experienced food insecurity, while homeowners showed a rate of 6.9%. Although renters generally face higher poverty levels than homeowners, a persistent gap of at least 15 percentage-points remains, and this is only modestly explained by different income levels for renters versus owners. Temporary pandemic protections, like eviction moratoriums, likely helped renters avoid even more severe food insecurity outcomes, but the data show a reversal in the pre-pandemic decline in vulnerability for renters. Data collected in the next two years will better illustrate how the elimination of pandemic-era protections may be further increasing current renters’ vulnerability to food insecurity in Oregon. It remains to be seen if the State of Oregon’s legislative emphasis on housing security (e.g., increased housing supply, rental supports, etc.) may contribute to improved food security.

	<b>Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon<sup>c</sup></b>		
	<b>2015-2017</b>	<b>2018-2020</b>	<b>2021-2023</b>
<b>Renters</b>	26.7%	19.2%	22.7%
<b>Owners</b>	4.7%	3.0%	6.9%

*Education and Income:* Educational attainment also strongly correlates with food insecurity, with less-educated Oregonians significantly more vulnerable. In 2021-2023, nearly 30% of adults without a high school diploma were food insecure, a rate about twice that of high school graduates with or without an associate’s degree. University graduates show much lower rates. Notably, food insecurity grew dramatically for those without a high school diploma during the pandemic, a finding consistent with reports of service workers and other low-education occupations being highly impacted by work closures during the pandemic. Going forward, policy decisions about educational system investments, ranging from high school completion to training for higher-paid occupations that do not require university degrees to investment in higher education affordability can have “downstream” effects on food insecurity.

	<b>Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon</b>		
	<b>2015-2017</b>	<b>2018-2020</b>	<b>2021-2023</b>
<b>Less than high school</b>	18.1%	18.9%	29.8%
<b>High school</b>	17.7%	11.7%	15.9%
<b>Associate’s</b>	11.0%	11.9%	17.3%
<b>Bachelor’s</b>	6.5%	4.2%	6.5%

*Rural v. urban:* The gap between urban and rural food insecurity levels grew dramatically during the pandemic. Rates doubled from 10.6% (2018-2020) to 20.7% (2021-2023), while urban rates saw a modest increase. Both the size of the increase, and the resulting rural-urban disparity, are compelling but not yet

	<b>Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon</b>		
	<b>2015-2017</b>	<b>2018-2020</b>	<b>2021-2023</b>
<b>Rural<sup>d</sup></b>	12.5%	10.6%	20.7%
<b>Urban<sup>d</sup></b>	13.0%	9.0%	12.0%

easily understood. Rural communities may have been more significantly harmed by work stoppages, may have had less access to public and private resources (e.g., food pantries, SNAP enrollment, etc.) or residents may have been less willing to use charitable resources. Furthermore, during this period rural counties in Oregon faced additional crises such as wildfires that displaced many residents. Ongoing research at OSU is exploring these possibilities. In the meantime, attention to rural/urban differences in vulnerabilities, program access, and willingness to access programs are necessary when state and local organizations seek to assist all of Oregon.

*Household Composition:* Household composition reveals unique patterns of food insecurity, with single-mother households experiencing a consistently higher rate of food insecurity when compared to other family structures. The rate for single mothers slightly decreased during the pandemic while the rate for couples with children at home saw an increase to 10.4% after having declined to a very low percentage in the years just prior. The consistent presence of 10% to 28% food insecurity rate among households with children suggests that state efforts to address other costs for families (childcare, housing, tax credits) likely would help reduce food insecurity.

	Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon		
	2015-2017	2018-2020	2021-2023
<b>Couples with children at home</b>	10.0%	3.8%	10.4%
<b>Couples without children at home</b>	5.4%	2.3%	5.3%
<b>Single mothers</b>	34.0%	30.4%	28.3%
<b>Alone</b>			
- women	20.5%	13.6%	15.2%
- men	11.4%	11.5%	17.0%

*Age:* Age continues to play a significant role in food insecurity, with younger and middle-aged adults experiencing higher rates than older adults (65+). However, the rates for all groups grew similarly during the pandemic by a few percentage points. During the pandemic, various organizations ranging from Meals On Wheels to Oregon Department of Human Services and Department of Education pivoted toward new ways of delivering services, some uniquely accounting for the needs of seniors, others accounting for the needs of families with children in school meals programs. These safety net efforts undoubtedly prevented food insecurity from becoming worse than it did. Many social scientists, including us here at OSU, incorrectly predicted far greater spikes in food insecurity among all groups during the pandemic.

	Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon		
	2015-2017	2018-2020	2021-2023
<b>18-45</b>	16.2%	12.6%	14.6%
<b>46-64</b>	14.0%	8.7%	14.6%
<b>65+</b>	7.1%	4.7%	8.7%

*Racial and ethnic minority groups in Oregon:* Racial and ethnic minority groups in Oregon continue to face higher levels of food insecurity compared to White non-Hispanic residents. As observed in previous years, the food insecurity rate for Hispanic, Black and American Indian households is consistently nearly twice

that of White, non-Hispanic households.<sup>e</sup> Effective policy addressing Oregon food insecurity must take into account these equity concerns observed in the disproportionate presence of food insecurity among most communities of color.

<b>Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon (2019-2023)<sup>f</sup></b>	
<b>Hispanic (any race)</b>	17.8%
<b>Black or multiracial including Black</b>	20.0%
<b>American Indian (A.I.) or multiracial including A.I.</b>	19.6%
<b>Asian or multiracial including Asian</b>	7.4%
<b>White, non-Hispanic</b>	10.4%

In sum, the most recent available data for Oregon highlight the need for policy solutions that address the multifaceted drivers and correlates of food insecurity. These findings underscore the importance of examining unique upstream influences and downstream uneven vulnerabilities among specific groups, including renters, rural communities, low-educated individuals, single-mother households, and communities of color. As food insecurity rates rise, particularly among these vulnerable populations, an inclusive, far-reaching approach is essential to ensure the food security of all Oregonians.

### Endnotes

- a) These estimates are based on Census data indicating that in 2022 Oregon had 1.73 million households, with an average of 2.4 persons per household.
- b) 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. 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.
- c) All percentage calculations are weighted to account for the sample’s representativeness of the known characteristics of the population.
- d) 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.
- e) 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.)
- f) Because sample sizes for racial and ethnic minority populations in Oregon are quite small, we assemble five, rather than three, years of available data to produce trustworthy estimates.

## About the authors

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