

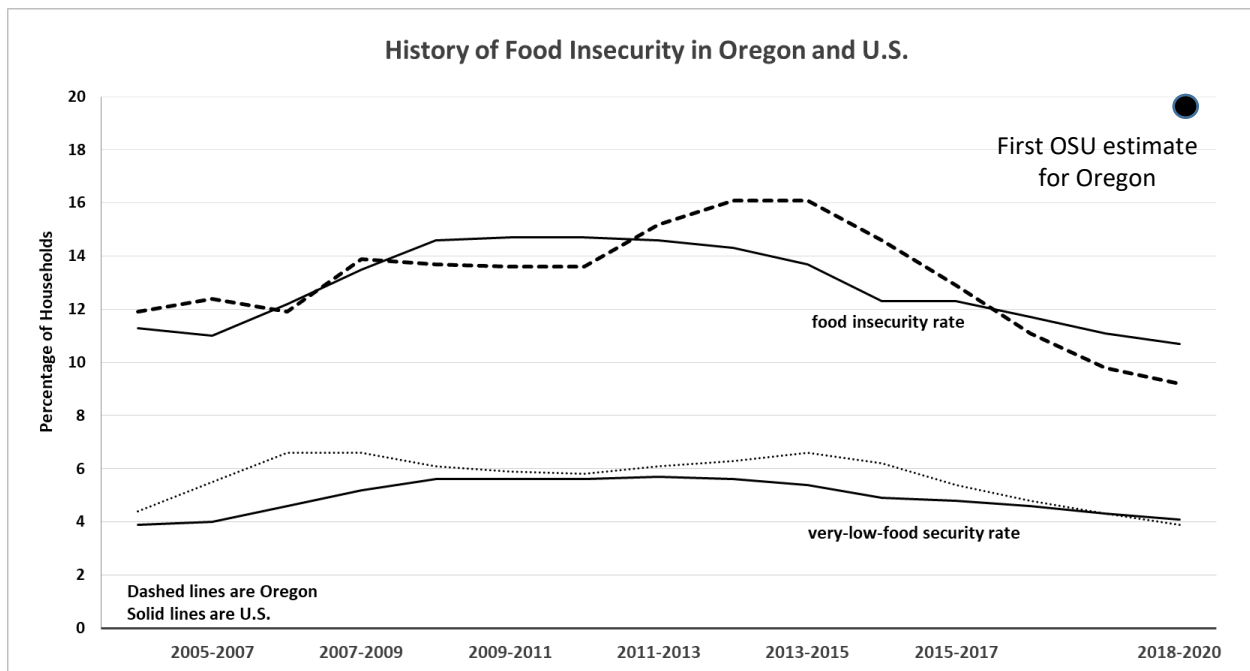


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Surprising Stability in Oregon and U.S. Food Insecurity During the COVID Pandemic
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In Spring of 2020, the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic led to closure of many places of employment, causing unprecedented job losses and large increases in unemployment claims. During this same period, hundreds of thousands of Oregonians lined up at food pantries and enrolled in SNAP, the federal government’s major food security program. In the absence of timely data, researchers based our real-time estimates of food insecurity on models that relied on who would be made vulnerable by unemployment and other indicators of economic hardship. Gundersen et.al. (2020) predicted in October 2020 an increase of 17 million Americans being food insecure. We here at Oregon State University predicted a doubling of food insecurity in the state, jumping from around 450,000 to at least 900,000 (Edwards 2020). These predictions identified the number who were newly vulnerable to food insecurity, given the economic conditions. And these estimates were consistent with the observed numbers of food pantry visitors and SNAP applicants. However, these estimates could not yet take into account the



impact of (a) federal relief checks and investments in more generous unemployment insurance, (b) the federal food security safety net (SNAP) and the temporary flexibility provided to states to make this readily available to low income households, (c) the emergency food system (e.g., Oregon Food Bank, Feeding America, local pantries), and (d) the informal system of community support as neighbors helped one another.

The new [USDA report](#) (September 8, 2021) indicates that the U.S. food insecurity rate (and the rate of those with the even more severe condition of very low food security) did not increase during the pandemic. This lack of change in the national rate is nothing less than astonishing given the self-evident economic struggles of millions of Americans, many of whom had to apply for safety net programs and visit food pantries for the first time in their lives. A first interpretation, still to be more fully analyzed, is that the rapid federal economic response of increased SNAP availability and other federal economic relief, increased services and volumes of food delivered by the emergency food system, community cooperation, and individual family adaptations prevented the food insecurity rate from rising.

State rates of food insecurity are more difficult to calculate because the official data collection method provides relatively small samples for each state. As a result, state rates are calculated using three years of data, thus as the figure indicates, the new report only indicates the rate for Oregon, as with other states, from combined data collected in 2018, 2019, and 2020. Thus, Oregon's rate for 2018-2020 does not effectively measure the impact of the pandemic, combining pre-pandemic data with data collected during the pandemic. Nonetheless, given our early estimates of the rapid and dramatic increase in the number of people vulnerable to food insecurity, we would still have anticipated a significant upturn in the trend lines in the most recent period. Instead, Oregon continued to remain significantly less food insecure than the U.S. as a whole, showing a continuation of steady decline over the past decade. The strength of the Oregon emergency food system and the speed with which the Oregon Department of Human Services distributed SNAP benefits to new recipients undoubtedly contributed to reducing food insecurity, but the extent to which this can fully account for the surprising absence of an upturn remains a topic of investigation.

Early responses by other organizations to this new USDA report, such as those mentioned by the Food Research & Action Center, correctly point out that even with the effects of the pandemic cushioned broadly by federal, state, and local response, there remain important racial and ethnic inequities in food insecurity. Food insecurity remains higher also in families with children (growing slightly during the pandemic), and is higher than the national average in rural places. Moreover, the new USDA report also points out that former workers who indicated that their employer closed or lost business due to the pandemic were significantly more likely to be food insecure (16%), while those who were fortunate enough to be able to telework from home had a food insecurity rate of only 2%.

References

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