

# Oregon's Food Insecurity Rates At The Arrival of COVID (2018-2020)

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The food insecurity<sup>a</sup> rate in Oregon for 2018-2020 was 9.1%. This represented 146,500 households, or around 368,000 individuals<sup>b</sup>.

In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, the Current Population Survey collected December 2020 food security data for the U.S. and all states. These data were released for public access in September 2021. 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 2018-2020 data, and then compare these to previous samples (2012-2014 and 2015-2017). This approach initially seems less than ideal because of the anticipated “game-changer” of the pandemic. However, the USDA reports that food insecurity in the nation did not rise during the first year of the COVID pandemic, a finding that has been astonishing to many. We will not here attempt to further explain that surprising outcome other than to reiterate what we and others have already said about how the massive federal, state, and community investments in the social safety net appear to have prevented the food insecurity rate from rising during a period of high unemployment (OPAL 2021).

When comparing previous periods (2012-2014 and 2015-2017), the data reveal Oregon's improvements in food security in the period leading up to the pandemic. These improvements were widespread, with food insecurity continuing to fall in almost every demographic category. For example, renters continued to show improvement, with food insecurity sliding more than 7 percentage points from the previous period. Similarly, single mothers and married couples with children improved by another 4 percentage points, and people with high school diplomas (without higher education) also saw a 6 percentage point improvement. Rural<sup>c</sup> food insecurity fell 2 percentage points as well. All of these improvements are expressed in the overall 9.1% food insecurity rate in 2018-2020, Oregon's lowest food insecurity rate measured since the USDA began reporting it 25 years ago.

*Housing:* The food insecurity and very-low-food-security rates for renters steadily and dramatically improved over the period under consideration. This improvement is noteworthy given the rapidly rising rents in many parts of Oregon, as well as the rental housing shortages in many rural places. This improvement in food

	Hunger/Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon		
	2012-2014	2015-2017	2018-2020
Renters	13.2%/31.5%	12.5%/26.7%	8.2%/19.2%
Owners	2.1%/7.0%	1.1%/4.7%	1.3%/3.0%

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

security while rents (and home prices) grew suggests that increased incomes overcame some of those rising prices. Pandemic-response policies that aimed to protect renters from eviction, as well as stimulus checks, may also have played a role in the decreased food insecurity rates among renters. It is not clear how these food insecurity rates may vary in different rental markets around the state.

*Education:* Food insecurity declines with greater levels of educational achievement, with rates among college educated Oregonians about one-fourth that of residents without high school diplomas. In the past, Oregon’s less educated households were significantly more likely to suffer from food insecurity or hunger when compared to similarly educated households in the rest of the U.S.. While rates of food insecurity among the least educated (those without a high school diploma) remained steady since 2015-2017, after an earlier substantial drop, rates of very low food security almost doubled recently. This increase of 5 percentage points in very low food security among those without a high school degree is notable and will be important to monitor as more data become available further into the pandemic. Those with high school diplomas and no additional degrees showed a substantial drop in food insecurity in the most recent period (6 percentage points). Food insecurity rates for households with Associates degrees did not change in the most recent period after an earlier substantial decline. Meanwhile, the highest educated members of the sample have seen steady rates of very low food security while the food insecurity rate for them has slightly declined. Taken altogether these data show long term general improvement throughout differently educated households, but with the least educated currently remaining most vulnerable.

	<b>Hunger/Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon</b>		
	<b>2012-2014</b>	<b>2015-2017</b>	<b>2018-2020</b>
<b>Less than high school</b>	13.2%/34.5%	6.1%/18.1%	11.0%/18.9%
<b>High school</b>	7.9%/19.1%	7.7%/17.7%	4.7%/11.7%
<b>Associates</b>	6.2%/16.2%	4.1%/11.0%	3.3%/11.9%
<b>Bachelors</b>	2.0%/6.5%	2.8%/6.5%	2.4%/4.2%

*Household Composition:* All types of families in Oregon have experienced improved food security in recent years. Couples with children and single mothers each had declines in food insecurity between 12 and 18 percentage points since the 2012-2014 period. Since the last time period, couples with children and women living alone have seen food insecurity rates decline by around 6 percentage points.

	<b>Hunger/Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon</b>		
	<b>2012-2014</b>	<b>2015-2017</b>	<b>2018-2020</b>
<b>Couples with children</b>	3.4%/15.5%	1.5%/10.0%	0.5%/3.8%
<b>Couples without children at home</b>	2.6%/6.9%	2.5%/5.4%	0.5%/2.3%
<b>Single mothers</b>	15.7%/48.1%	13.5%/34.0%	12.9%/30.4%
<b>Alone</b>			
- women	10.6%/21.8%	9.2%/20.5%	7.7%/13.6%
- men	7.7%/14.9%	6.3%/11.4%	5.4%/11.5%

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 (30.4%), followed by women living alone (13.6%). The persistence of higher food insecurity among all these female-headed households suggests again the need to understand which root causes are making adult women in Oregon more likely to be food insecure.

*Rural v. urban:* Food insecurity in rural Oregon appears to have been cut in half in the past decades, falling by around 9 percentage points since 2012. For most of the last decade, rural Oregon’s food insecurity rates were both higher than the rest of rural America and higher than urban Oregon. The gap between rural and urban Oregon has reduced in recent years, and as of the last few years, rural Oregon’s food insecurity rate resembled that of the rest of rural America. We must be especially cautious interpreting rural and urban distinctions for two reasons. First, the data for rural Oregon are few and during the past several years, the Census Bureau has changed how it samples households in rural Oregon. Second, 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.

	<b>Hunger/Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon</b>		
	<b>2012-2014</b>	<b>2015-2017</b>	<b>2018-2020</b>
<b>Rural<sup>c</sup></b>	7.3%/19.7%	6.9%/12.5%	6.4%/10.6%
<b>Urban<sup>c</sup></b>	6.1%/15.3%	5.3%/13.0%	3.7%/9.0%

*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 2016 through 2020, 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.

<b>Hunger/Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon (2016-2020)</b>	
<b>Hispanic (any race)</b>	9.2%/19.1%
<b>Black or multiracial including Black</b>	11.2%/18.1%
<b>American Indian (A.I.) or multiracial include A.I.</b>	12.1%/24.1%
<b>Hawaiian/Pacific Islander or multiracial including Hawaiian/Pacific Islander</b>	9.7%/25.9%
<b>Asian or multiracial including Asian</b>	2.0%/7.6%
<b>White, non-Hispanic</b>	4.0%/9.7%

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. 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, American Indian, and Hawaiian/Pacific Islander headed households<sup>d</sup> are all significantly higher ( $p < .05$ ) than the rate for White, non-Hispanic households. The Asian/non-Asian households' food insecurity rate was not significantly different from 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. 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.

<b>Hunger/Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon</b>	
<b>Age</b>	<b>2018-2020</b>
<b>18-45</b>	4.8%/12.6%
<b>46-64</b>	4.3%/8.7%
<b>65+</b>	2.3%/4.7%

Taken together, these updated tables show the pervasiveness of the decline in food insecurity in Oregon prior to the COVID pandemic. Declines over eight years were persisting through 2020, with notable declines often of a couple percentage points between the period ending in 2019 (see OPAL 2020) and the period ending in 2020. The absence of a spike in food insecurity in 2020 comes as welcome news in the face of our, and other researchers', predictions that food insecurity would reach unprecedented levels. When data from December 2021 are available, it will be possible to see how the later phases of the pandemic may have impacted food insecurity in Oregon households.

**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 2019 Oregon had 1.61 million households, with an average of 2.51 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 "household head" merely for ease of communication.

## References:

OPAL. 2020. Oregon's Food Insecurity Rates by Demographic Groups (2017-2019).

<https://tinyurl.com/FoodInsecurityResearch>

OPAL. 2021. Surprising Stability in Oregon and U.S. Food Insecurity During the COVID Pandemic.

<https://tinyurl.com/FoodInsecurityResearch>

## About the authors

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 20 years, and provides research assistance to the Oregon Food Bank, Oregon Hunger Taskforce, Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon, and others focused on addressing food insecurity in the United States.

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