

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

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Prior to the coronavirus pandemic and resulting recession, the Current Population Survey collected the December 2019 food security data for the U.S. and all states. These data were released for public access in September 2020. Thus the data describe the food security situation in Oregon prior to the 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 2017-2019 data, and then compare these to the previous year's sample (2016-2018) and to 2013-2015. I do this to document the steady decline in food insecurity which began in around 2014, and then suddenly reversed with the COVID pandemic.

The food insecurity^a rate in Oregon for 2015-2017 was 9.8%. This represented 160,700 households, or around 403,400 individuals^b. This number more than doubled 5 months later after the economic crisis related to the COVID pandemic (see [OPAL 2020](#)).

In short, Oregon's improvements in food security in the period from 2013-2015 to 2017-2019 were widespread, continuing to fall in almost every demographic category not only between those two periods, but even during the short time frame of one year (2016-2018 to 2017-2019). For example, renters continued to show improvement, with food insecurity sliding another 2 percentage points from the previous year. Similarly, single mothers and married couples with children improved by another 2.5 to 3 percentage points, and people with high school diplomas (without higher education) saw a 2.5 percentage improvement. Rural^c food insecurity had fallen 3 percentage points as well. All of these improvements are expressed in the 9.8% food insecurity rate in 2017-2019, the lowest food insecurity rate ever measured during the past 25 years that data were collected by the USDA. Detailed tables appear below.

Housing: The food insecurity and very-low-food-security rates 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 security while rents (and home prices) grew suggests that increased incomes overcame some of those rising prices. It

	Hunger/Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon		
	2013-2015	2016-2018	2017-2019
Renters	13.6%/32.1%	10.8%/23.1%	9.9%/21.0%
Owners	2.1%/6.6%	1.1%/3.8%	.9%/2.8%

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

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. 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.. This pattern has changed dramatically with food security improvements especially among the least educated. Back in 2013-2015, we observed food insecurity and hunger rates for those without high school degrees that were twice what they are now. So, there appears to be significant recent improvement for the least educated. The short-term increase in food insecurity in the most recent data for those with their Associates degree is surprising and there is not yet an obvious likely explanation.

	Hunger/Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon		
	2013-2015	2016-2018	2017-2019
Less than high school	12.8%/31.5%	7.3%/15.8%	9.0%/15.1%
High school	8.6%/20.1%	6.3%/15.5%	5.2%/13.0%
Associates	6.1%/14.9%	2.5%/9.9%	3.9%/12.0%
Bachelors	2.3%/6.9%	3.4%/5.8%	2.9%/5.0%

Household Composition: All categories of households in Oregon have experienced improved food security in recent years. Couples with children and single mothers each had declines in food security of around 12 percentage points. Sizeable improvements of a couple percentages points in just one year are evident too.

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 (31.5%), followed by women living alone (15.3%). The persistence of higher food insecurity among female-headed households suggests again the need to understand which root causes are making adult women more likely to be food insecure.

	Hunger/Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon		
	2013-2015	2016-2018	2017-2019
Couples with children	3.1%/16.6%	.8%/6.0%	0.0%/3.5%
Couples without children at home	3.0%/6.5%	1.3%/4.4%	.2%/3.0%
Single mothers	15.4%/44.1%	11.9%/34.7%	15.4%/31.5%
Alone			
- women	11.0%/21.7%	9.2%/16.6%	9.0%/15.3%
- men	8.3%/14.5%	5.6%/11.3%	5.1%/11.5%

Rural v. urban: Food insecurity in rural Oregon appears to have cut in half in the past several recent years, falling by around 9 percentage points. 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 last year 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.

Hunger/Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon			
	2013-2015	2016-2018	2017-2019
Rural^c	8.4%/19.9%	8.2%/13.2%	8.1%/10.5%
Urban^c	6.3%/15.5%	4.5%/10.9%	4.0%/9.7%

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 2015 through 2019, 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 (2015-2019)	
White, non-Hispanic	4.1%/9.6%
Hispanic (any race)	8.3%/21.0%
Black or multiracial including Black	11.2%/18.2%
American Indian (A.I.) or multiracial include A.I.	13.1%/24.0%
Asian/Pacific Islander or multiracial including Asian/Pacific Islander	3.7%/10.6%

During this five-year period, it is clear that racial and ethnic minority residents in Oregon have had substantially higher food insecurity and hunger rates than White, non-Hispanic residents. 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 minority communities in Oregon face greater vulnerabilities to food insecurity. The food insecurity rates for Hispanic, Black, and American Indian headed households are all significantly higher ($p < .01$) 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. These results closely resemble our findings in previous years.

Age: Improvements in food security in Oregon have occurred among households with younger and middle aged adults. These are the same categories of households most vulnerable to food insecurity several years ago and who remain so. The largest most recent improvements, as well as the largest overall improvements since 2013-2015, took place among middle-aged (46-64) persons.

Food insecurity rates for seniors may be somewhat underestimated due to hesitancy of older respondents to acknowledge various indicators of food insecurity. However, even at the national level, measured food insecurity declines steadily after age 55 well into later years.

Hunger/Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon			
Age	2013-2015	2016-2018	2017-2019
65+	2.4%/6.4%	2.5%/5.9%	2.4%/5.5%
46-64	9.2%/19.6%	4.4%/11.9%	3.9%/9.0%
18-45	7.2%/19.8%	6.7%/14.2%	6.1%/13.6%

These updated tables show the pervasiveness of the decline in food insecurity in Oregon prior to the COVID pandemic. Steady declines over four years were persisting through 2019, with notable declines often of a couple percentage points between the period ending in 2018 and the period ending in 2019. While the pandemic surge in food insecurity would have been stark even if food insecurity in Oregon had not been declining, on the heels of steady progress toward food security, the cruel reversal of the COVID food insecurity crisis is all the more bitter.

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 1.64 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.

References:

OPAL 2020. Estimating the Number of Food Insecure Oregonians. https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/sites/liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/files/opal/estimatingfoodinsecurity_osu_2020-05-20.pdf

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

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