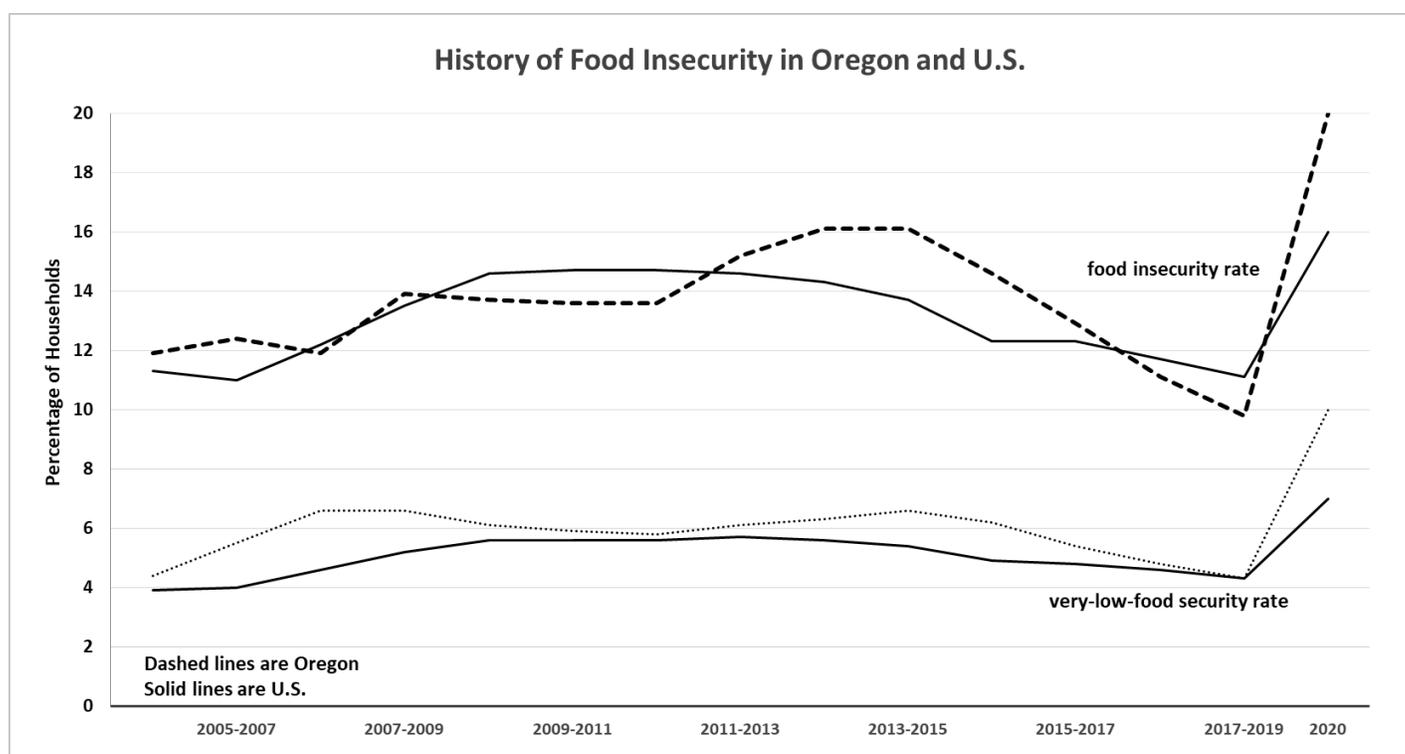


# Oregon's Food Insecurity in the Time of COVID

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Through December 2019, Oregon had been experiencing steadily declining food insecurity<sup>a</sup> rates, finally dropping below the US average again after remaining stubbornly high through the recovery from the Great Recession. Indeed, Oregon's steady decline in food insecurity from around 2014 represented the greatest improvement by any one state over that five-year period (USDA 2020). But the COVID economic crisis since Spring 2020 reversed all of that progress and has brought the state to levels of food insecurity not seen before.



To date there is no authoritative, timely, and definitive count of how many households in Oregon have experienced food insecurity since the beginning of the pandemic. In part this is because data about food insecurity are usually collected and made public slowly. However careful efforts to estimate the number suggest that by May of 2020 almost 1 million Oregonians were experiencing food insecurity (OPAL 2020a). That represented a food insecurity rate of around 20%, a figure slightly below the Oregon rate estimated by national experts (Feeding America 2020). [Because "very low food security"<sup>a</sup> often is around half of the food insecurity rate, we include here a conservative estimated rate of 10% for these Oregon households experiencing especially difficult circumstances.]

Since our estimate in May, another 286,000 people have applied for unemployment. That sum is around

175,000 more people than would have applied for unemployment pre-COVID (~4,000/week for the past 28 weeks). Households experiencing unemployment, under current pandemic conditions, can reasonably be assumed to have a food insecurity rate of 30% (see OPAL 2020a). This would mean that since May another 62,500 households (~157,000 individuals living in those households) have experienced food insecurity. Because the food insecurity rate measures the number of households who have experienced this difficulty over the course of the year, this count should be added to the 900,000 highlighted in May even if some people who were food insecure then may now have returned to work and to food security. However, this estimate does not take into account the many who were never unemployed, but were under-employed with hours cut due to the recession. Thus, the number of households that have at some time in the past 9 months experienced food insecurity has likely grown by at least 100,000 since we first made our estimates at the beginning of the pandemic-induced recession. The estimate of 1,000,000 computes to a food insecurity rate in the range of around 25% for 2020, approximately the same number estimated by Feeding America (2000) using other assessment techniques. In short, the food insecurity rate in Oregon has more than doubled in a year, with almost at least 1 million, hence one in four, Oregonians experiencing food insecurity this year.

While the experience of food insecurity is found widely throughout Oregon, it is not evenly distributed throughout social groups. For example, the food insecurity rate among Black, Indigenous, and other people of color in Oregon has been two to three times higher than for white Oregonians (e.g., 20-30% v 11% in the past five years). Recent job losses in those occupations where minority workers are employed have certainly led to a disproportionate impact of food insecurity among minority-led households likely increasing the food insecurity rate well above 30% for these groups.

### **In the Absence of COVID**

Prior to the pandemic, the Current Population Survey had collected its usual December food insecurity data in 2019, and then released these to the public in September of 2020. These data show that in the period leading up to the pandemic, Oregon's improvements in food security were widespread, continuing to fall in almost every demographic category. 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 point improvement. Rural food insecurity had fallen 3 percentage points as well. (Detailed tables are available at OPAL 2020b). All of these improvements led to the 9.8% food insecurity rate by 2017-2019, the lowest food insecurity rate for Oregon ever measured during the past 25 years that data were collected by the USDA.

### **It Could Have Been Worse**

The improvements in food security prior to COVID may reflect under-appreciated strengths in the food security safety net of Oregon. This preparation for crisis mirrors what happened 12 years ago when Oregon's food security safety net provided by state and private agencies (e.g., Department of Human Services, Oregon Food Bank, etc.) was positioned well to respond to spikes in unemployment during the Great Recession, dampening the rise of food insecurity at that time while other states saw large increases in food insecurity. Subsequently, while some of the dramatic decline in Oregon's food insecurity prior to 2020 was undoubtedly the result of rising minimum wage and declining unemployment throughout much of the state, it was also a

time marked by sustained high rates of participation in federal nutrition programs such as SNAP (“food stamps”) and free/reduced price school meals. That is, efforts by the Department of Human Services, other state agencies, and many non-profit advocacy groups had strengthened the state’s safety net so that they were able to quickly enroll newly eligible families, advocate with the federal government for innovative approaches such as the Pandemic EBT program, and collaborate with school districts to distribute school lunches to children who could not come to school. Meanwhile, the privately organized emergency food system delivered unprecedented volumes of food to pantry visitors. Given how slowly many unemployed residents were able to access unemployment insurance, and given the additional stresses added to that safety net with the fires of late summer 2020, the nimbleness, efficiency, and creativity of the food-safety net is noteworthy.

#### **Endnote:**

a) Food insecurity is the combination of worries about and behaviors associated with a household not having sufficient food for everyone in the household. 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. Thus, those with very-low-food-security are a subset of those with food insecurity. For a further discussion of this measurement, consult the USDA’s Economic Research Service website.

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