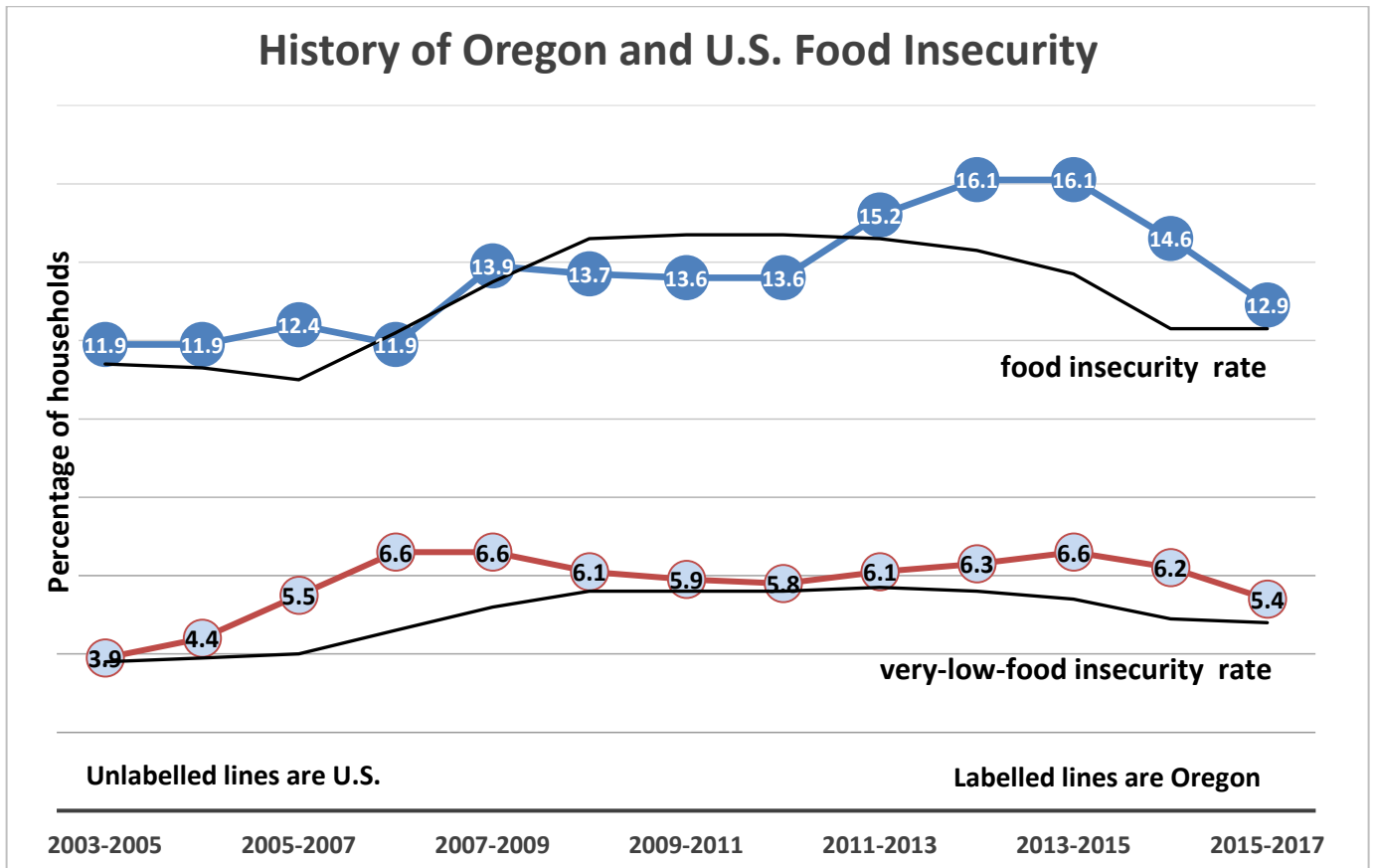


Widespread Declines, Yet Persistent Inequalities: Food Insecurity in Oregon and the U.S. (2015-2017)

Mark Edwards
Oregon State University School of Public Policy
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Oregon continues to show improvement in the household food security^a of its residents. Over the past fifteen years Oregon's food insecurity rate has sometimes been higher or lower than that of the U.S., with highest levels of food insecurity relative to the U.S. in the early years of recovery after the Great Recession. The most recently available measure of Oregon's food insecurity rate (12.9%) closely resembles that of the U.S. as a whole. The very-low-food-security rate (sometimes referred to as "hunger") is no longer significantly higher in Oregon, yet it remains higher than it was fifteen years ago.



Because the state rate is calculated as a 3-year average, the recent steep decline in food insecurity is likely the result of both the exclusion of the 2014 data (with higher food insecurity) and the inclusion of 2017 data with lower food insecurity. The strength of the economy appears to be broadly reducing food insecurity; however, it is important to remember that during other periods of economic boom (late 1990s [not shown] and the years leading up to the 2008 Great Recession), the "hunger" rate was surprisingly high. So, although

economic ups and downs have an impact, they can neither alone nor always account for these trends. The current rate of 12.9% represents about 500,000^b Oregon adults and children in food insecure households. The very-low-food-security rate of 5.4% represents around 209,000^b adults and children facing this more severe form of food insecurity.

Widespread Improvement and Persistent Inequalities

In Oregon and the rest of the U.S., food insecurity and very-low-food-security declined slightly in every category of family and household. The widespread improvement suggests the possible role of declining unemployment and slightly rising wages (since rents and food costs have not declined and safety net programs have not become obviously more generous nor accessible.)

Renters: The food insecurity and very-low-food-security rates have improved for renters in both Oregon and in the U.S.. Renters in Oregon saw a 2.4 percentage point decline in food insecurity, on the heels of a 3 percentage point decline the previous year. It remains true that one in four rental households in Oregon experiences food insecurity, and the rates of food insecurity and of hunger in Oregon are statistically significantly higher than for renters in the rest of the U.S..

	Hunger/Food Insecurity Rate (2015-2017)	
	Oregon	Rest of the U.S.
Renters	12.5%*/26.7%*	8.8%/21.7%
Owners	1.1%/4.7%	2.6%/7.1%

* $p < .05$ There is less than a one-in-twenty chance that the Oregon rate appears different from the U.S. merely by chance.

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

Single mothers: Single mothers in Oregon continue to show improvement in their food security situation, with the rate declining to 34% in the most recent data, an impressive drop of another 6 percentage points since last year, on the heels of two successive years of declines of 4 percentage points per year in each of the previous two years (beginning at 48% in 2012-2014). The reasons for this improvement are not yet clear.

	Hunger/Food Insecurity Rate (2015-2017)	
	Oregon	Rest of the U.S.
Couples with children	1.5%/10.0%	2.2%/9.5%
Couples without children at home	2.5%/5.4%	2.2%/5.7%
Single mothers	13.5%/34.0%	9.8%/31.1%
Alone		
- women	9.2%/20.5%*	7.1%/15.3%
- men	6.3%/11.4%	6.5%/13.7%

* $p < .05$ There is less than a one-in-twenty chance that Oregon rate appears different from the rest of the U.S. merely by chance.

Note: Single people in this table (mothers and those alone) could be widowed, divorced, or never-married.

Single mothers remain the most likely to experience food insecurity (one in three such households), but as a whole they have shown impressive improvement over three successive years. Women living alone in Oregon continue to be more at risk for food insecurity than similarly situated women in other states (20.5% v. 15.3%). Female-headed households, with or without dependents, remain the most vulnerable to food insecurity.

Less educated residents: In Oregon, as in the rest of the U.S., 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 with food security improvements especially among the less educated. Back in 2012-2014, we observed food insecurity and hunger rates for those with high school degrees that were nearly twice what they are now. So, there appears to be significant recent improvement for the least educated. The situation has slightly improved for other education categories. Meanwhile, Oregon increasingly resembles the rest of the U.S. when it comes to food insecurity across educational groups.

	Hunger/Food Insecurity Rate (2015-2017)	
	Oregon	Rest of the U.S.
Less than high school	6.1%/18.1%	10.2%/25.9%
High school	7.7%/17.7%	6.0%/15.2%
Associates	4.1%/11.0%	5.2%/12.8%
Bachelors	2.8%/6.5%	1.6%/4.4%

Rural v. urban: Food insecurity and hunger have been rising in rural areas of Oregon for the past several years, but this appears to have also reversed. It is important to interpret these numbers especially carefully because the sample sizes in rural Oregon are small, and because the Census Bureau has likely changed how it samples households in rural Oregon. However, those caveats being noted, the food insecurity and hunger rate in rural Oregon now resembles that of the rest of rural America (with the observed discrepancies possibly due to random sampling error.) So, we can only say that rural and urban Oregon now resemble the rest of rural and urban America with respect to food insecurity. And surprisingly, rural Oregon rates can no longer be distinguished from urban, in a sort of statistical tie [12.5 v 13.0, 6.9 v. 5.3]. The dramatic drop in food insecurity from our previous report (2014-2016) is difficult to explain and under further investigation. However, while last year we said the overall improvements in Oregon were a positive story of overall good news statewide, tempered by a rural/urban divide, even that divide has almost disappeared.

	Hunger/Food Insecurity Rate (2015-2017)	
	Oregon	Rest of the U.S.
Rural^c	6.9%/12.5%	6.0%/14.5%
Urban^c	5.3%/13.0%	4.6%/11.9%

Non-white 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 two more 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 2013 through 2017, 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.

	Hunger/Food Insecurity Rate (2013-2017)	
	Oregon	Rest of the U.S.
White, non-Hispanic	5.4%/12.2%**	4.2%/9.8%**
Hispanic (any race)	7.2%/28.8%**	6.3%/20.2%**
Black or multiracial including Black	11.4%/28.1%**	9.3%/23.5%**
American Indian (A.I.) or multiracial include A.I.	14.1%/31.0%**	11.0%/24.2%**
Asian/Pacific Islander or multiracial including Asian/Pacific Islander	6.0%/14.4%	2.0%/6.7%

** p < .01 There is less than a one-in-one hundred chance that the difference in the food insecurity rate between those in the group v. those not in the group appears merely by chance.

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 tests for statistical significance (attending to the asterisks) compare each group’s food insecurity rate to that of people not in the group. For example, those who self-identify as Hispanic (whatever their race or multi-ethnicity) have a 28.1% food insecurity rate which is significantly higher than the rate for non-Hispanic respondents. And Black or multi-racial including Black respondents versus those who are not in that category were significantly more likely to experience food insecurity. The same can be said for Native American households versus others. The Asian/non-Asian difference was not significant. The sample sizes are too small in Oregon to determine the statistical significance of the racial/ethnic differences in very-low-food-security.

These racial/ethnic differences in food insecurity are evident in the rest of the U.S. as well, as seen by the asterisks in the right hand column. The repeatedly higher levels of food insecurity for Hispanic, Black, and American Indian households in Oregon, compared to the U.S. are initially intriguing. Again, in part due to small sample sizes, we cannot say that the higher food insecurity rates among Oregon’s Black and American Indian households (5-7 percentage points) are significantly different from food insecurity rates in similar households in the rest of the U.S.. However, the Hispanic food insecurity rate in Oregon is significantly higher than for Hispanic households in the rest of the U.S. (p<.01).

These long-term racial and ethnic inequities within Oregon are unlikely to have changed dramatically in the most recent wave of data (that is, if we had only used 2015-2017 data), unless one can construct a convincing argument that the on-going economic recovery may be especially helping minority residents of Oregon.

Summing Up and Possible Implications

The food insecurity rate in Oregon has continued to decline in recent years, showing rapid and sizeable improvements for single mothers, renters, less educated residents, and rural areas. These groups who for a long time were especially vulnerable in Oregon now are vulnerable at the same rate as similarly situated people in the rest of the U.S.. However, Oregon single mother households continue to have higher food insecurity rates than other households in the state, while Oregon women living alone and renters are more vulnerable to food insecurity in Oregon than similarly situated women and renters in the rest of the U.S.. But becoming less vulnerable in Oregon is not the same thing as overcoming systematic, deeply embedded challenges within Oregon. The overall number of food insecure individuals in Oregon remains around half a million and groups that are currently seeing the most improvement remain the most vulnerable to inevitable economic reversals.

Moreover, because of the unusual demographics of Oregon, where such a small minority of residents are non-White, and/or Hispanic, the overall improvement in Oregon is an improvement largely enjoyed by the non-minority population. The state continues to show deep racial/ethnic inequities in food insecurity, divides that are at least as severe as found in the rest of the U.S..

Extending the current prosperity to a wider array of people and securing them against eventual economic reversals in Oregon remains paramount.

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 an Oregon sample of 1,761 households, and on Census reports that Oregon has 1.545 million households, with an average of 2.51 persons per household.
- c) In this report "Urban" refers to those residing in "Metropolitan" areas and "Rural" refers to those living outside such areas, according to the 2013 Office of Manage and Budget definitions for "Metropolitan" and "Non-metropolitan" areas.

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.

Contact Mark Edwards at medwards@oregonstate.edu