

## Rural Studies Program



### Hunger in Oregon During the Great Recession

Mark Edwards, Mallory Fallin, and Breandan Jennings

School of Public Policy and the Rural Studies Program  
Oregon State University



January 2012

In 2008-2010, the very-low-food-security (also known as “hunger”)<sup>a</sup> rate in Oregon was not much different from that for the whole US. The difference between Oregon and the US is no longer statistically significant. The rate of “food insecurity” (the more inclusive category that is less severe) appears lower in Oregon, but this difference is not statistically significant either. In the late 1990s and again in the mid 2000s (2006-2008), Oregon’s hunger rate was significantly higher than that of the U.S., but during the years of the Great Recession, the situation appears to have worsened throughout the country (with national rates rising) and improved slightly in Oregon. With a very-low-food-security rate of 6.1%, the annual number of Oregonians who live in households struggling to put enough food on the table is around 220,000.<sup>b</sup>

	Oregon	US
“Hunger” rate	6.1%	5.6%
Food Insecurity rate	13.7%	14.6%
	n=1,977	n=133,845

### Geography

Oregon’s rural hunger rate appears to be lower than its urban rate, by a full 2 percentage points. The data do not allow us to conclude confidently that there is a real difference because small sample sizes in rural areas mean we are less confident of the exact number. But this observation is at least suggestive that the pattern in Oregon may differ from the rest of the US. In fact, when comparing Oregon’s urban hunger rate with that of the US, the difference in urban hunger rates is significantly higher (6.6 versus 5.3 percent). The data preclude us from more carefully identifying which urban areas experience greatest distress, but among the urban areas included in the Oregon sample are Multnomah County and its adjacent counties, Deschutes

	Hunger Rate	
	Oregon	US
Rural	4.5%	5.6%
Urban	6.6%*	5.3%
	n=1,977	n=133,845

\*  $p < .10$  Indicates Oregon number differs significantly from that of the rest of the U.S.

County, Lane County, Jackson County, and Marion County. What is important to recognize from these data is that Oregon’s urban areas appear to be hit harder than urban areas in the rest of the country. Also, if we look just at the hungry households throughout Oregon, around 80% of those households are in urban areas. (Analysis not shown.) Does this mean that Oregon’s rural places are much better off? Not necessarily, but it does show that Oregon’s state rate of hunger is pushed upward (compared to other states) by its high hunger rate in urban areas.

### Household Characteristics

In 2008-2010, a householder<sup>c</sup> with less than a high school diploma in Oregon was significantly more likely than a similarly educated person in the rest of the US to be vulnerable to hunger (13.6 vs. 10.4 percent). As in the rest of the country, the higher one’s education in Oregon, the less vulnerable one is to hunger. However, the “penalty” for not finishing high school is more extreme in Oregon, where the hunger rate jumps 6.4 percentage points among the high school dropouts (comparing high-school-only graduates to non-graduates), but the rate only jumps 4 percentage points in the rest of the country.

	Hunger Rate	
	Oregon	US
<b>Less than High School Diploma</b>	13.6%*	10.4%
<b>High School or Some College</b>	7.2%	6.4%
<b>Associates Degree</b>	6.2%	5.1%
<b>Bachelors Degree +</b>	1.9%	1.9%
	n=1,977	n=133,845

\* p < .10 Indicates Oregon number differs significantly from that of the rest of the U.S.

Does this mean that focusing attention on high school completion is the answer? Perhaps not, especially when we consider this: among the hungry households a full 60% have a high school degree or a little bit of college, with another 20% having an Associate’s degree or higher. Only 1 in 5 lacks their high school diploma. So, while finishing a high school diploma will reduce the risk of hunger substantially for an adult, the vast majority of adults (80%) who were leading hungry households have already finished high school. The 60% of hungry households who have only their high school degrees and perhaps some years of college are the largest group that appears to need help.

While the hunger rate among most American couples with children is low (3.9%), it is significantly higher for such families in Oregon (6.4%). This finding is not new, dating back to at least 2000 when we began analyzing Oregon data. Single mother households in Oregon have a higher hunger rate than other types of households, but we cannot demonstrate that they are more vulnerable than single mothers elsewhere because sample sizes are too small to establish statistical significance. Single women and men not living with relatives in Oregon appear to be more vulnerable to hunger than those with partners, but less vulnerable than single mothers. (The number of single fathers in the sample was too small to make a reliable computation of the

hunger rate.) Meanwhile, couples without children are the group least likely to experience hunger in Oregon.

	Hunger Rate	
	Oregon	US
<b>Couples with children</b>	6.4%*	3.9%
<b>Couples without children at home</b>	2.2%	2.4%
<b>Single mothers</b>	14.7%	12.4%
<b>Alone</b>		
- women	8.7%	7.6%
- men	6.0%	7.1%

\*  $p < .10$  Indicates Oregon number differs significantly from that of the rest of the U.S.

Note: Single people (mothers, fathers, and those alone) could be widowed, separated or divorced, or never married.

If we consider just the households with hunger, we find that about 1/3 of the households are individuals living alone (no adult nor child relatives), 1/3 are married couples with children and 1/3 are single mothers and single fathers (with children at home). While researchers have long examined the impact of single parenthood on material outcomes such as hunger, and have recently taken note of the increased economic challenges faced by couples with children, the connection between being hungry and being alone is something not well examined yet by researchers.

Hispanic households in Oregon have higher hunger rates than non-Hispanic (12.7% v. 5.6%). We do not know what fraction of the Hispanic households are immigrant families and individuals. This ethnic gap in hunger in Oregon (non Hispanic compared to Hispanic) appears greater than in the rest of the country (7.1 percentage point gap in Oregon versus 3.9 in the rest of the U.S.). Most of the Hispanic households experiencing hunger are families and not single adults.

Sample sizes for Black adults heading Oregon households are very small (only 38 in the sample) so estimates based on such a small sample are unreliable. However, their measured hunger rate is 24% in Oregon, while national reports indicate rates of 9.1% for Black adults. There is an obvious need for more comprehensive data to better understand the situation for Black adults in Oregon.

### Assets and Income

It is no surprise that homeowners are less likely than renters to avoid hunger. Homeowners in Oregon resemble homeowners elsewhere in terms of the hunger rate. Oregon householders that rent appear 2 percentage points more likely than renters elsewhere to be heading hungry households. This observation is suggestive of particular housing/hunger problems in Oregon but the observed difference is not statistically significant.

	Hunger Rate	
	Oregon	US
<b>Home Owners</b>	3.1%	3.1%
<b>Renters</b>	12.9%	10.8%
<b>In a home or apartment, but without paying</b>	6.1%	9.0%
	n=1,977	n=133,845

When families are asked about their income during the previous year, that income is compared to the U.S. poverty line. Along with those below the poverty line, families who are above the poverty line, but below 185% of the poverty line, are often qualified for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (“food stamps”) and other support. In Oregon, households with annual family income below that 185%-line are not much more likely to experience hunger than are low income families in other parts of the country.

	Hunger Rate	
	Oregon	US
<b>Below 185% poverty</b>	12.6%	12.6%
<b>Above 185% poverty</b>	3.3%	2.4%
	n=1,977	n=133,845

### Employment and Unemployment

In Oregon, 14% of the households that are officially recognized as unemployed in the December survey report that they experienced hunger in the previous year. And about 16% of the householders who had experienced hunger in the previous year were currently unemployed when surveyed in December. We do not have easy access to the previous year employment history of December-surveyed households. But other researchers have found that the peak level of unemployment in a state influences that state’s hunger rate. We have not yet examined how experiences of unemployment throughout the previous year are related to experiences of hunger throughout the previous year. Thus, we do not yet know what fraction of households who experienced hunger in the previous year also experienced unemployment in the previous year, but were employed when surveyed in December. This is an important area for further research for finding out how tightly connected are employment difficulties and hunger. About 35% of all hungry households are not in the labor force at all, not trying to find a job. (Data not shown.) Most of these are older person households (over age 65).

### Summing Up and Possible Implications

These simple analyses show that urban residents, high school dropouts, and couples with children in Oregon are more vulnerable to hunger than similar groups in the rest of the US. These findings are consistent with other reports that show the effects of the Great Recession on segments of the economy that previously employed less educated families in urban areas (construction, manufacturing, etc.). Evidence is suggestive but not as clear that renters and single mothers in Oregon are also more vulnerable than in the rest of the

US. Among hungry households, we also find a surprisingly large number of high school graduates, suggesting that while the hunger “penalty” for not completing high school is worse in Oregon, one policy priority for reducing overall hunger rates might be post-high-school training. Being alone does not appear to increase the odds of hunger very dramatically, and yet one-third of the hungry households are comprised of adults living alone – reminding us that efforts to reduce hunger in Oregon need to take seriously possible impacts of social isolation.

Hispanic households (mostly families) are more vulnerable than non-Hispanic households, and households headed by Black adults appear to be much more vulnerable than non-Black households. However, data remain limited about communities of color in Oregon, a much needed area for further research effort and investment.

Finally, although unemployment increases the chances of a household experiencing hunger, the majority of hungry households do work.

These findings may serve to guide policy makers, advocates, agencies, and other service providers seeking to target assistance to groups of Oregonians who are most vulnerable to hunger.

---

**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. 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 a further discussion of this measurement, consult the USDA’s Economic Research Service website.
- b) These estimates are based on an Oregon sample of 1,977 overall households, and on Census reports that Oregon has 1.45 million households, with an average of 2.49 persons per household.
- c) When a household is contacted, the adult who answers the questions about the household is known as the “reference person” and in this report is called the “householder”.

**About the authors:**

Mark Edwards is an Associate Professor of Sociology in Oregon State University’s School of Public Policy.

Mallory Fallin is an undergraduate Sociology major at Oregon State University, graduating in June 2012.

Breandan Jennings is a Sociology research methods instructor at Oregon State University.

Contact Mark Edwards at [medwards@oregonstate.edu](mailto:medwards@oregonstate.edu)