

Rural Studies Program



Food Insecurity in Oregon: Continuing Hardship for Some (2012-2014)

Mark Edwards

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



June 2016

Back in the late 1990s and again in the mid-2000s (2006-2008), Oregon's hunger rate (also known as the "very low food security" rate^a) was significantly higher than that of the U.S. But this has not been the case in recent years when Oregon's hunger rate remained around 6% while many other states, also hit hard by the Great Recession and the slow recovery, "caught up" with Oregon. The most current 2012-2014 hunger rate in Oregon (6.3%) would indicate that 236,200 people in households struggling at some point during a calendar year to put enough food on the table.^b Meanwhile, nearly 604,000 people in Oregon experienced food insecurity, a condition of worry and/or want that reflects struggles by families to get adequate quantities and quality of food they need. The 2012-2014 Oregon food insecurity rate of 16.1% is higher than in previous years, and is statistically significantly higher than for households around the country.

| | Oregon | U.S. |
|----------------------|---------|-----------|
| "Hunger" rate | 6.3% | 5.6% |
| Food Insecurity rate | 16.1%* | 14.3% |
| | n=1,948 | n=128,957 |

* There is less than a one-in-ten probability that Oregon's higher food insecurity rate appears merely by chance; that is, we can with some assurance accept it as real. The hunger rate closely enough resembles that of the U.S. that it could more easily appear by chance.

Geography

Food insecurity and hunger are slightly higher in rural than urban places around the US, but current apparent differences in Oregon are not statistically significant. For the past several years, Oregon's rural hunger rates tended to be lower than urban ones, but this appears to have reversed with the addition of the 2014 data. Given that other research shows the strong influence of employment and housing costs on food insecurity, it will be useful to have observers of rural and urban areas consider how household basic needs are being impacted differently across places.

| | Hunger/Food Insecurity Rates | |
|-------|------------------------------|------------------|
| | Oregon | Rest of the U.S. |
| Rural | 7.3%/19.7% | 6.5%/15.9 |
| Urban | 6.1%/15.3% | 5.5%/14.0 |

* In this and subsequent tables, the first number in each cell shows the hunger rate and the second numbers shows the food insecurity rate.

Household and Personal Characteristics

In Oregon and the U.S., hunger and food insecurity remained highest among householders with less than a high school education. Since the peak of the Great Recession, the situation then improved considerably for the least educated adults in Oregon, declining from 13.6% to 8.7%; however, it has steadily climbed again for this group, now with 13.2% experiencing hunger and over a third experiencing food insecurity. In all educational categories, the Oregon hunger rate did not statistically differ from that of the entire U.S. (Small differences that appear could be due to sampling error which results from small sample size.) However, in all categories it still appears to tend higher than for the US, a pattern evident in previous year's analyses as well.

| | Hunger/Food Insecurity Rate | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|
| | Oregon | Rest of the U.S. |
| Less than High School Diploma | 13.2%/34.5% | 11.2%/28.3% |
| High School or Some College | 7.9%/19.1% | 7.0%/17.3% |
| Associate Degree | 6.2%/16.2% | 5.6%/14.4% |
| Bachelor Degree + | 2.0%/6.5% | 1.8%/5.1% |

The situation with education level and hunger is important to consider further because of the implications of policies directed at increasing educational attainment in Oregon. Among the hungry households, 62% of adults leading those households had completed high school and/or had some college education, about 11% had an associate degree, and 10% had a bachelor degree or more. (Tables not shown.) Around one fifth (18%) of the hungry households were headed by adults with less than a high school diploma. So, while finishing high school substantially reduces the risk of hunger, at least four out of five adults who were leading hungry households had already finished high school. The largest group of people struggling with hunger were those with high school degrees but who had not completed any additional credentials (associate degree or beyond).

| | Hunger/Food Insecurity Rate | |
|---|-----------------------------|------------------|
| | Oregon | Rest of the U.S. |
| Couples with children | 3.4%/15.5% | 3.2%/12.3% |
| Couples without children at home | 2.6%/6.9% | 2.7%/6.9% |
| Single mothers | 15.7%/48.1%* | 11.9%/35.5% |
| Alone | | |
| - women | 10.6%/21.8% | 7.9%/17.1% |
| - men | 7.7%/14.9% | 7.4%/15.4% |

* p<.05 Indicates that Oregon's rate differs significantly from that of the U.S. as a whole. Note: Single people (mothers, fathers, and those alone) could be widowed, separated or divorced, or never married.

The hunger rate for couples, with or without children at home, is relatively low in Oregon and in the US (around 3%). For women and men living alone it is considerably higher (around 10% or 8%, respectively), with food insecurity among women living alone around 20%. As previous analyses have shown, single mother households in Oregon continue to struggle the most. The hunger rate for Oregon single mothers (15.7%) appears higher than the rate for single mothers elsewhere (yet is not statistically significant). However, the more inclusive "food insecurity rate" is significantly higher (p<.05) with about one-half of single mother households in Oregon experiencing food insecurity, a rate higher than the 35% rate for single mothers all over the country. See footnote "c" below for further discussion.^c

Assets and Income

It is no surprise that homeowners are more likely than renters to avoid hunger. The hunger rate among homeowners in Oregon resembles that of homeowners in the whole U.S.. However, Oregon renters have continued (as in previous years) to experience a higher rate of food insecurity than renters in the rest of the U.S. (31.5% v. 24.9%). This finding corresponds with other research that emphasizes how rental housing costs in Oregon and food insecurity are related.

| | Hunger/Food Insecurity Rate | |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|
| | Oregon | Rest of the U.S. |
| Home Owners | 2.1%/7.0% | 3.1%/8.6% |
| Renters | 13.2%**/31.5%** | 10.4%/24.9% |

** p < .01 Indicates there is less than a one-in-one-hundred chance that Oregon rate appears different from the U.S. merely by chance.

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 showed a hunger rate identical to that of low income families in other parts of the country.

| | Hunger/Food Insecurity Rate | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|
| | Oregon | Rest of the U.S. |
| Below 185% poverty | 13.3%/35.2% | 13.3%/31.9% |
| Above 185% poverty | 3.0%/7.1% | 2.5%/7.1% |

Employment and Unemployment

In Oregon, the hunger rate among those who were unemployed during the December survey was around 20%. Due to small sample size, we cannot demonstrate that this is significantly different from the rest of the U.S. (16%). 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, yet were employed when surveyed in December. The possibility of intermittent unemployment during the year could help account for the higher hunger rate even among those whose total year income was above 185% the poverty line. This is an important area for further research for finding out how tightly connected are employment difficulties and hunger. In December of 2012, 2013, and 2014 (combined) fifty percent of all hungry households were in the labor force, either working or looking for work. The balance (50%) of all hungry households was not in the labor force (analysis not shown). Around half of the households not in the labor force were either headed by retirees or disabled adults.

Summing Up and Possible Implications

This analysis shows that as Oregon has recovered from the Great Recession, single mothers and renters in Oregon have remained more vulnerable to hunger than single mothers and renters in the rest of the U.S.. The rate of food insecurity for single mother households in Oregon has reached 50%, representing approximately 90,000 households or about one-third of all food insecure people in the state^d. While Oregon does not have a

higher rate of single-motherhood, 80% of single mothers are renters, and 95% of food insecure single-mother households are renters. The low-income status of single mothers is implied by this high rental rate. As we have suggested before, affordability of rental housing for all families appears to influence the greater vulnerability of renters in Oregon.

These new data also continue to provide support for efforts to increasing access to community college and four-year college, moving people from the large pool of more vulnerable “high school only” residents into more highly skilled employment. The relatively small number of hungry households led by people without high school degrees suggests that, while hunger is more prevalent among high school dropouts, efforts to raise high school completion rates may have less aggregate impact on hunger than efforts to increase college enrollment among high school graduates.

Finally, Oregon’s rise in food insecurity now positions it significantly higher than for the U.S., a concerning reversal of direction after several years of successive decline after the Great Recession. Greater attention to now-rising inequality, where residents with less formal education left-behind while home owners and more highly educated residents thrive in the recovering economy, deserve additional attention.

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 1,948 households, and on Census reports that Oregon has 1.518 million households, with an average of 2.47 persons per household.
- c) In Oregon, half of single mothers who reported food insecurity during the previous year were employed at the time they were interviewed in December. Twenty-two percent were unemployed and looking for work, and the other 28% were not in the labor force.
- d) Six percent of Oregon households are single-mother households. Based on 1.518 million Oregon households, and 2.47 persons per household, this yields an estimate of 224,000 persons, about one-third of the 600,000 person estimate for all households.

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 15 years, and provides research assistance to the Oregon Food Bank and Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon.

Contact Mark Edwards at medwards@oregonstate.edu