

Rural Studies Program



Hunger in Oregon During A Slow Recovery (2011-2013)

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As Oregon slowly recovered from the Great Recession (2011-2013), Oregon's very-low-food-security rate (also known as "hunger")^a resembled that of the entire U.S. The same is true for the food insecurity rate (the more inclusive category that is less severe). 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 that was no longer the case by 2011-2013. During and soon after the recession, Oregon's hunger rate stayed fairly stable while the rest of the country saw rapid increases, unhappily "catching up" with Oregon. The 2011-2013 hunger rate in Oregon translates to 220,250 people in households struggling at some point during a calendar year to put enough food on the table.^b

	Oregon	U.S.
"Hunger" rate	6.1%	5.7%
Food Insecurity rate	15.2%	14.6%
	n=1,973	n=129,433

Geography

Oregon's rural hunger rate appeared to be slightly lower than the urban rate during the recovery from the recession (5.8% vs. 6.2%), but this difference is not statistically significant. However, this apparent difference mimics several earlier reports about Oregon, suggesting that we should keep a close eye on why Oregon's urban hunger rate has repeatedly tended higher over the past 5 years, not only in comparison to the Oregon rural rate, but also in comparison to the urban rate around the rest of the U.S. The data preclude us from more carefully identifying which urban areas in Oregon have experienced more or less change, but among the urban areas included in the Oregon sample are Multnomah County and its adjacent counties, plus

	Hunger Rate	
	Oregon	U.S.
Rural	5.8%	5.9%
Urban	6.2%	5.5%

Deschutes, Lane, Jackson, and Marion counties. Also, if we look just at the hungry households throughout Oregon, around 84% of those households were in urban areas (analysis not shown). So, while the hunger rates resemble one another across places, the vast majority of struggling households are located in Oregon's urban counties.

Household and Personal Characteristics

In Oregon and the U.S., hunger remained highest among householders with less than a high school education. Since the peak of the Great Recession, the situation had improved considerably for the least educated adults in Oregon, declining from 13.6% to 8.7%; however, it began to climb again for this group by 2011-2013. 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.)

	Hunger Rate	
	Oregon	U.S.
Less than High School Diploma	10.3%	11.2%
High School or Some College	8.0%	6.9%
Associate Degree	4.4%	5.7%
Bachelor Degree +	2.4%	1.9%

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, 67% of adults had completed high school and/or had some college education, about 8% had an associate degree, and 12.3% had a bachelor degree or more. Only 12% of Oregon’s hungry households were headed by adults with less than a high school diploma. So, while finishing high school substantially reduces the risk of hunger, the vast majority of 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).

During the recovery from the recession, the U.S. hunger rate among couples with children was 3.4% and in Oregon the rate was 2.9%. Single mother households in Oregon had a much higher hunger rate than other

	Hunger Rate	
	Oregon	U.S.
Couples with children	2.9%	3.4%
Couples without children at home	2.4%	2.5%
Single mothers	20.9%*	11.5%
Alone		
- women	9.9%	8.1%
- men	7.1%	7.6%

* p < .05 Indicates Oregon number 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.

types of households and single mothers in Oregon continued to have a significantly higher hunger rate than single mothers in the entire U.S.^c Householders (in Oregon and around the US) who are alone, with no other adults nor children present, are more vulnerable to hunger than those with adult partners in the home.

Assets and Income

It is no surprise that homeowners are more likely than renters to avoid hunger. But the hunger rate among homeowners in Oregon was lower than that of homeowners in the whole U.S. This difference is statistically significant. Most concerning, however, is the observation that Oregon renters continued (as in previous years) to experience a higher rate of hunger than renters in the rest of the U.S. The difference of 3.1 percentage points is also statistically significant. This finding suggests that there may be an important connection between rental housing costs and hunger in Oregon.

	Hunger Rate	
	Oregon	U.S.
Home Owners	1.8%*	3.2%
Renters	13.6%*	10.5%

* p < .05 Indicates Oregon number differs significantly from that of the U.S. as a whole

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 Rate	
	Oregon	U.S.
Below 185% poverty	12.8%	12.8%
Above 185% poverty	3.0%	2.5%

Employment and Unemployment

In Oregon, the hunger rate among those who were unemployed during the December survey is 20%. Due to small sample size, we cannot demonstrate that this is significantly different from the rest of the U.S. (16.4%). 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 2011, 2012, and 2013 (combined) fifty-five percent of all hungry households were in the labor force, either working or looking for work. The balance (45%) of all hungry households were not in the labor force (analysis not shown). Most of these households not in the labor force were either headed by retirees or disabled adults.

Summing Up and Possible Implications

This analysis shows that during the slow recovery from the Great Recession, single mothers and renters in Oregon remained more vulnerable to hunger than single mothers and renters in the US as a whole. As in our earlier reports, we note that about one fourth of renter households struggling with hunger were single mothers and virtually all single mother households struggling with hunger were renters. The low income status of single mothers is implied by this high rental rate. But the Oregon “penalty” for renters in general is not the result of high rates of single motherhood. Affordability of rental housing for all families appears to influence the greater vulnerability of renters in Oregon.

Policy makers, advocates, agencies, and other service providers seeking to reduce hunger in the state should consider the potential reduction in hunger that could come from increasing access to community college. 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 community college enrollment among high school graduates.

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 1,973 households, and on Census reports that Oregon has 1.45 million households, with an average of 2.49 persons per household.
- c) In Oregon, 53% of single mothers who reported hunger during the previous year were employed at the time they were interviewed in December. Twelve percent were unemployed and looking for work, and about one-third were not in the labor force. These numbers resemble employment patterns for single mothers in hungry households in the U.S. at large.

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.

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