

Rural Studies Program



Who Is Vulnerable to Hunger in Oregon?

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In 2006-2008, the very low food security (“hunger”) rate in Oregon was 2 percentage points higher than in the rest of the country. This difference is statistically significant (i.e., cannot easily be accounted for merely by chance or because these estimates are based on a sample). The rate of “food insecurity” (the more inclusive category that is less severe) was not very different in Oregon, when compared to the rest of the U.S. Small differences of 2 percentage points may seem inconsequential, but if Oregon’s hunger rate had been at the national average, it would have had 70,000 fewer people in 30,000 fewer households experiencing hunger. However, with its current rate of hunger, there are over 95,000 households, with around 235,000 individuals in them, who have at some point in the past year struggled to provide enough food for everyone in the house.^a

	Oregon	US
“Hunger” rate	6.6%*	4.6%
Food Insecurity rate	13.1%	12.3%
	n=1,733	n=122,574

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

It is important to recognize that the second category (food insecurity) includes the households who have “very low food security” (a.k.a. “hunger”). About one-half of the food insecure households in Oregon experienced hunger (6.6/13.1). This pattern differs from the rest of the country where around one-third of food insecure households experienced “very low food security”. At the very least this observation suggests that Oregon’s food insecure households are, on average, worse off than the food insecure households in the rest of the country.

Geography

Oregon’s rural hunger rate appears to be lower than its urban rate, although the data do not allow us to conclude that there is a real difference. (Small sample sizes in rural areas mean we are less confident of the exact number). However, this is a different pattern from what is observed in the rest of the country. The estimate for Oregon’s rural hunger rate resembles that of the rest of the US, but its urban rate is significantly higher (7.0 versus 4.6). That is, we cannot easily attribute the urban Oregon v. US difference to chance. The data preclude us from more carefully identifying which urban areas experience greatest distress, but among the urban areas included in the sample are Multnomah County and its adjacent counties, Deschutes 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, 80% of those households are in urban areas. (Analysis not shown.) Does this mean that rural places are better off? Not necessarily, but it does show that Oregon's very high state rate of hunger is mostly driven by its very high hunger rate in urban areas.

	Hunger Rate	
	Oregon	US
Rural	5.1%	4.8%
Urban	7.0%*	4.6%
	n=1,733	n=122,574

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

Household Characteristics

In 2006-2008, a householder^b with less than a high school diploma was significantly more likely than a similarly educated person in the rest of the US to be the head of a home that experienced "hunger". The same can be said about householders who have completed their high school diploma but without finishing at least a AA degree.

	Hunger Rate	
	Oregon	US
< High School	14.8%*	9%
High School or Some College	7.9%*	5.3%
Associates Degree	5.1%	4.8%
Bachelors Degree +	2.4%	1.5%
	n=1,733	n=122,574

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

As in the rest of the country, the higher one's education in Oregon, the less vulnerable to hunger. However, the "penalty" for not finishing high school is more extreme in Oregon, where the hunger rate jumps almost 7 percentage points among the high school dropouts (comparing high graduates to non-graduates), but the rate only jumps 3.7 percentage points in the rest of the country.

Does this mean that focusing attention on high school completion is the answer? That's not clear, especially when we consider this: Among the hungry households only 20% (1 in 5) lack their high school diploma and a full 60% have either just their high school degrees or a little bit of college. Another 20% of the hungry households have their AA or higher. So, while finishing a high school diploma will reduce the risk of hunger substantially for a household, 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 married couples with children is low (2.8%), it is significantly higher for such families in Oregon (6.1%). 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.

Sample sizes are too small to establish statistical significance. However, single women not living with relatives in Oregon are more vulnerable to hunger than similarly situated single women elsewhere. Are these younger or older women? The average age for the women was around 8 years older than for the men (statistics not shown here.) This finding suggests that one especially vulnerable group in Oregon is older single women not living with relatives. Meanwhile, married couples without children are the group least likely to experience hunger.

	Hunger Rate	
	Oregon	US
Married with children	6.1%*	2.8%
Couples without children at home	2.6%	1.9%
Single mothers	14.8%	11.5%
Single fathers	4.9%	5.9%
Alone		
- women	11.3%*	6.1%
- men	5.4%	5.8%
	n=1,733	n=122,574

* $p < .10$ 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 55% of the households are individuals living without relatives and another 20% are married couples with children. Although the hunger rate for single mother households is higher, Oregon's hungry households are actually less likely to be single-mothers (10%) than hungry households in the rest of the country (17.5%). The concentration of the problem in Oregon appears to be among the individuals living alone.

The data allow us to also measure the hunger rate among children using the detailed information collected by the USDA. Oregon children (under the ages of 18) have a hunger rate of 1.6% (as compared to .9% in the rest of the country). How can children have a much lower hunger rate than the households they inhabit (e.g., 6.1% for married-with-children households and 14.8% for single mother households)? The answer is probably in the selfless acts of parents and the way we measure hunger. A household can experience very low food security but insulate the children from the experience by making sure the children have enough to eat, either at home or via school feeding programs. Hence a household could have very low food security overall (based on what the parents experience) while the child receives adequate levels of food.

Hispanic households in Oregon have higher hunger rates than non-Hispanic (14.8% v. 6.1%). 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 (8.7 percentage point gap in Oregon versus 2.8 in the rest of the U.S.). This also reveals that about a half percentage point of Oregon's overall hunger rate is due to the more common experience of hunger in Hispanic households. (Compare the 6.1% rate seen here for non-Hispanic households and the overall state rate of 6.6% for all households.) Most of the Hispanic households experiencing hunger are families and not single adults.

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. However, Oregon householders that rent are far more likely than renters elsewhere to be heading hungry households. Also, among householders who are occupying houses either for free, or in exchange for work, or other kinds of arrangements, there appears to be greater levels of hunger among Oregonians.

	Hunger Rate	
	Oregon	US
Home Owners	2.7%	2.4%
Renters	14.8%*	9.5%
Occupied, w/o pay	11.5%	7.8%
	n=1,733	n=122,574

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

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 significantly more likely to experience hunger than are low income families in other parts of the country. When we identify specific states around the country, we find no other state which has a higher hunger rate among the poor and working poor. Even high cost-of-living states like New York and California do not show these very high hunger rates among low income families.

	Hunger Rate	
	Oregon	US
Below 185% poverty	16%*	11.2%
Above 185% poverty	2.5%	1.9%
	n=1,733	n=122,574

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

So why would low income Oregonians be worse off if they live in a state that has a modest cost of living? One likely way to make sense of this is to consider the role of assets that could help low income families weather temporary hard times. Oregonians have fewer assets than people in most other states. A recent survey of states found that Oregon was one of the worst 5 states for its fraction of households with enough assets to exist for 3 months at the poverty level in the absence of any income and for its percentage of households with zero or negative net worth. Meanwhile, the housing cost burden for renters in Oregon was reported to be 34th in the country, with 45% of its renters spending more than a third of their monthly income on rent and utilities. (<http://scorecard.cfed.org/>)

Employment and Unemployment

In Oregon, 17% of the households that are officially recognized as unemployed in the December survey report that they experienced hunger in the previous year. And about 20% 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. This report does not examine how experiences of unemployment throughout the previous year are related to experiences of hunger throughout the previous year. For example, we do not 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 40% of all hungry households are not in the labor force at all, not trying to find a job. (Data not shown in tables.) Most of these are older person households (over age 65). If we narrow the focus down to consider the working age adults in hungry Oregon households, focusing on those who are not in the labor force, it is interesting to observe that virtually all of them are over 40 years old, and most are between the ages of 40 and 65. Thus, hunger in Oregon households does not appear to be primarily a case of young people unwilling or unable to work, remaining outside of the labor force. There is more evidence that middle aged adults out of the workforce and not looking for work contribute to the overall hunger rate.

Summing Up

These simple analyses show that hunger in Oregon in 2006-2008 is concentrated among individuals living alone and among women more than men. Even married couple households with children have a higher incidence of hunger in Oregon than similar households in other states. Hunger is also especially high in Oregon's low income households, many of whom are renters and many who are unemployed. Nonetheless, the majority of hungry households do work. Householders without their high school diploma are especially vulnerable in Oregon. Latino-headed households are also more vulnerable in Oregon compared to other states.

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 and who comprise sometimes larger, sometimes smaller fractions of the population.

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These analyses are based on recently released December 2006, 2007, and 2008 Food Security Supplement data released through the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Current Population Survey.

Endnotes:

- a) These estimates are based on an Oregon sample of 1,733 overall households, and on Census reports that Oregon has 1.45 million households, with an average of 2.49 persons per household.
- b) 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".