

Nutrition

Obesity & Hunger

public policy backgrounder no. 1

Oregonians face dual challenges: obesity and hunger

The co-existence of hunger and obesity continues to garner media, research, and advocacy attention. Oregon State University Extension Service examined the

research to provide an overview of this seeming paradox—how can a person be hungry *and* obese?

Obesity is a public health epidemic in Oregon

- About 66 percent of U.S. adults are overweight or obese.¹ Obesity affects all races, ethnicities, ages, and socioeconomic groups; however, rates of overweight are higher among some low-income populations.
- In Oregon, six out of ten adults are overweight or obese.²
- Many youth in Oregon are not at a healthy weight. More than 24 percent of eighth and eleventh graders are overweight or at risk for being overweight.³
- Environmental factors, socioeconomic status, poor food habits, and physical inactivity all contribute to obesity. Easy access to inexpensive, high-calorie foods, and decreased opportunities to exercise, have worsened the obesity epidemic.⁴

Hunger rate in Oregon

is higher than the national average

- About 3.8 percent of Oregon households were hungry between 2002 and 2004, compared with a national average of 3.6 percent.⁵
- Almost 12 percent of households are “food insecure” and do not always have enough money to buy food.⁵
- Two in five children in Oregon live in households with incomes below 200 percent of poverty level; one child in five lives at or below poverty level.⁶
- Declining incomes for the poorest one-fifth of families over the past 20 years, and the high cost of living (housing, energy, and health care), are primary reasons that Oregon’s hunger rate is still above the national average.⁷

Why do obesity and hunger co-exist?

Compared with their higher-income counterparts, limited-income families may have fewer opportunities to purchase healthy, high-quality food and to engage in physical activity.^{8,9} Poor nutrition and lack of exercise, in turn, contribute to obesity.

Overweight also may result from periodic episodes of food insecurity. For many people, food stamps and money for food run out before the end of the month. Among respondents to the 2004 Oregon Hunger Factors Assessment, **95 percent** ran out of food stamps at least 1 week before the end of the month.¹⁰ When money and food stamps become available again, some may overeat low-cost, high-calorie foods that have limited nutrient density. This could result in gradual weight gain over time, especially for mothers with dependents in the household.¹¹

Although it is unclear whether low-income youth have higher rates of overweight, there is evidence that participation in Food Assistance Programs may reduce

risk of overweight.¹² At the same time, children living in areas where fruits and vegetables are relatively expensive, and thus less available, gain significantly more weight than those living where fruits and vegetables are cheaper and more available.¹³

Definitions

Food insecurity—Occurs whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food, or the ability to acquire food in socially acceptable ways, is limited or uncertain.

Hunger—The uneasy or painful sensation caused by involuntary lack of food, which over time may result in malnutrition.

Nutrient density—Providing substantial amounts of vitamins and minerals and relatively fewer calories.

What needs to be done?

Co-existence of hunger and obesity is a complex issue requiring intervention at the household, community, and policy level. Although more studies are needed, we need to take action now to reverse this trend.

- **Implement the Statewide Public Health Nutrition and Physical Activity Plans¹⁴ to improve health among all Oregonians.**
- **Ensure that low-income families and children have access to nutritious, affordable, and safe foods.** Many programs are already in place to address these issues. For instance, the Senior and WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs make healthy foods more accessible to this population. Others, like the Oregon Nutrition Education Program, help people make the best use of available foods.
- **Protect funds for emergency and supplemental food programs.** These programs provide a nutrition safety net for low-income families and children.
- **Address the root causes of hunger by ensuring that policies and programs allow low-income families to be economically stable.** Living-wage jobs, tax reforms that benefit poverty-wage workers, and less expensive housing and health care options can increase the percentage of resources available for food.

These suggestions are a starting point to help address obesity and food insecurity. More research is needed to better understand obesity among food-insecure populations.

Websites of interest

Food Research and Action Center
<http://www.frac.org/>

Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force
<http://www.oregonhunger.org/>

Center on Hunger and Poverty
<http://www.centeronhunger.org/hunger/meas.html>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/obesity/>

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Revised by Anne Hoisington, M.S., R.D., Oregon State University Extension Service; and Melinda Manore, Ph.D, R.D., FACSM, Chair, Department of Nutrition and Food Management, Oregon State University. Original publication authored by Betty Izumi, M.P.H., R.D., and Ellen Schuster, M.S., R.D., both formerly of OSU Extension Service, and by Melinda Manore.

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