

**Securing the Vulnerable:  
Documenting Food Security Status Among Single Mothers  
of Oregon (2001-2015)**

by

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Veronica Gonzalez, Author

### Abstract

Recent reports using data from the 2013-2015 Current Population Surveys reveal that while the overall food insecurity rate in Oregon is 16.1%, single mothers in Oregon experience food insecurity rates as high as 44.1%. This study will portray how household assets and capital relate to food insecurity for single mothers in Oregon versus the rest of the U.S., using Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FFS) from 2001 to 2015. This study also depicts how organizations in Oregon collaborate and strategize to fill gaps in food security. Food insecurity affects certain groups of the population disproportionately, targeting vulnerable households which lack access to livelihood assets and capital and are influenced by transforming structures and processes, according to the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, developed by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). This analysis found that insecure single mothers in Oregon struggle with increasingly high renting rates and possible issues with higher education completion and nutrition assistance program participation. However, the Oregon Hunger Task Force's continued collaboration and development of targeted strategies leads to a greater understanding of vulnerability, with future hopes of reducing insecurity for single mothers.

## Introduction

Food insecurity issues have come to the forefront of policy discussions in the United States with increased attention in the last several decades to the intersection of socioeconomic inequality and vulnerability. While the majority of Americans are able to secure access to adequate food sources year-round, some households continue to struggle with access to and affordability of basic food items (Coleman-Jensen, Rabbit, Gregory & Singh, 2016). The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food security as “the access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life” (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2016). According to recent statistics on the food security status of households in the United States from December 2015, 87.3 percent of U.S. households were food secure, while 12.7 percent were food insecure. While this food security percentage has increased in recent years, the United States continues to have 15.8 million households that suffer from food insecurity; food insecure households display difficulty in providing enough food for all household members due to lack of certain resources (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2016).

Food insecurity rates for certain populations in specific states are higher than the national rate due to an array of characteristics that converge to hinder food access and affordability. In Oregon, the focus state of this study, recent food insecurity analyses of the 2013-2015 Current Population Survey reveal that the state has reached food insecurity rates as high as 16.1 percent<sup>1</sup>. Further parsing of the data, it is revealed that single mothers in Oregon experience food insecurity at rates of 44.1 percent, while single mothers in the rest of the United States experience rates of 33.8 percent (Edwards, 2016b). There has been much speculation as to what unique combination of factors leads to insecurity for this group, including discussion of income gaps, housing prices, childcare costs, and access to food programs (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2016; OCCP, 2016; Candel, 2014).

According to Candel (2014), food security is a “wicked problem” which requires strategic governance and collaboration. Involving several policy arenas, the eradication of food insecurity will require a holistic approach with the coordination of many actors and institutions (Candel, 2014). Few studies have investigated how single mothers have experienced food

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<sup>1</sup> Note that in a recent 2016 analysis from a 2014-2016 sample, the food insecurity rate in Oregon was 14.6 percent (Coleman-Jensen, Rabbitt, Gregory & Singh, 2017).

security over time and how organizations have changed and focused food aid intervention strategies. The core purpose of this study is to illustrate the food security story of single mothers in Oregon and depict the collaboration of private and public sector organizations to secure aid for this vulnerable group, over the span of 15 years. Specifically, this study will empirically portray how household assets and capital relate to the food security situation of single mothers in Oregon from 2001-2015. In addition, this study uses interviews to investigate how public and private food insecurity-interested organizations in Oregon collaborate to fill gaps in food security and address challenges that arise in serving this population. The mixed-method project will inform food security organizations within Oregon as to the circumstances perpetuating steep food insecurity rates for single mothers over the last fifteen years, with the goal of developing policy strategies for greater security.

This research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do household assets for single mothers correlate with household food security in Oregon compared to the rest of the United States, and how have these assets predicted various levels of household food security for this population over time?
2. How do public/private food security partners in Oregon collaborate to fill gaps in household food security? Have policies, institutions, and processes influenced the vulnerability context for single mothers over time? What strategies has the Task Force utilized when addressing single mother food insecurity?

## Literature Review

### A Framework for Assessing Vulnerability and Food Security Status

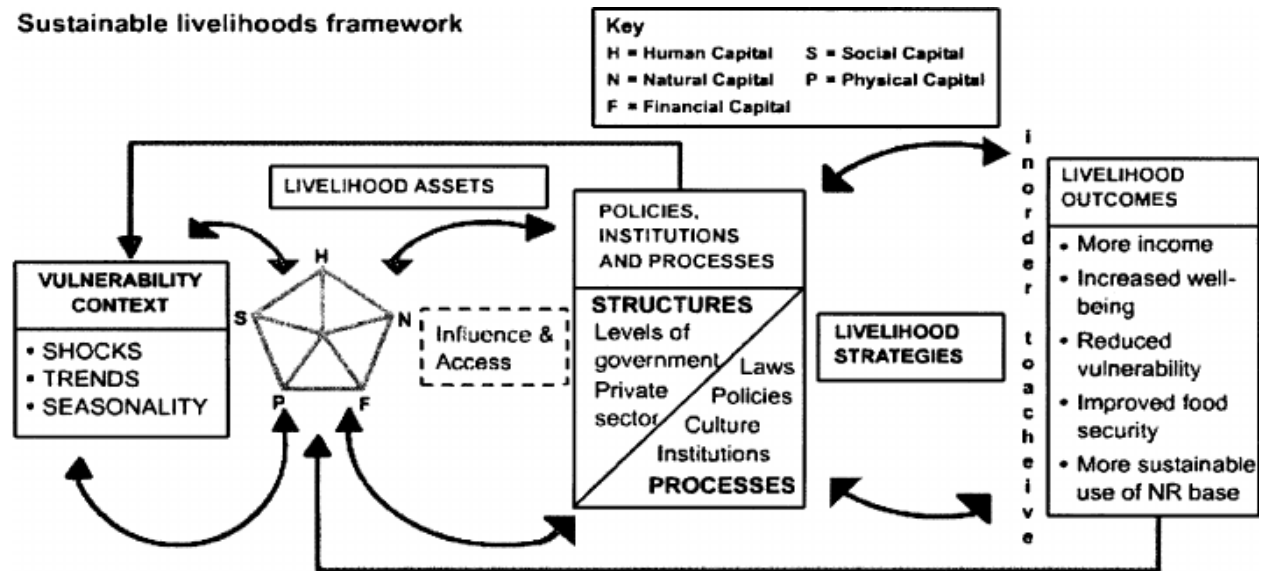
Food insecurity is considered a “wicked problem” due to its complex nature, involving multiple variables at the individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and public policy levels. In order to make greater sense of food insecurity, international groups such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations have utilized livelihood frameworks for profiling the food insecurity and hunger statuses of vulnerable groups. According to Ypeij (2009), livelihood strategies “developed as a reaction to structural approaches” and “[reject] the

notion of poor people as passive victims who are at the mercy of existing political and economic constraints and whose actions are fully predetermined by structural forces” (60). These frameworks provide valuable insight into the assets held by households and the mediating factors and activities which lead to the outcome of a household’s food security status.

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework was formulated by the UK’s Department for International Development (1999) and assesses how assets secure, or do not secure, livelihood outcomes for vulnerable populations within a context. For the purposes of this research, this framework will be adapted to provide understanding of the attainment of food security. The framework focuses on structures and processes, allowing for modeling of social, economic, and political environments. The goal of the framework is to devise methods to alleviate poverty for vulnerable groups by empowering groups to maximize assets and accessibility to systems. To date, this livelihoods framework has not been applied to the issue of food insecurity in the United States. Thus, the utilization of this framework will inform public knowledge of and policy towards how single mothers in Oregon are experiencing food insecurity.

Like many livelihood frameworks, the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework is not one-directional, with various representations of interconnections among variables (Ellis, 2000). In Figure 1, beginning from left to right, the vulnerability context refers to shocks or trends that can have potentially harmful effects on a household (Department for International Development, 1999).

Figure 1. Sustainable Livelihoods Framework



Vulnerability can change gradually or quickly and has the ability to alter livelihood outcomes. The greater environment in which one lives could see trends and shocks that influence how a household thrives and strategizes to produce livelihood outcomes. For example, a vulnerability context could involve an economic recession, which has the ability to shock a household depending on the various assets and structures a household has. Livelihood assets consist of five different types of capital that can be possessed by individuals in a household. The types of capital include natural, physical, human, financial, and social. Households have different amounts of each type of capital. Capital has the ability to influence and be influenced by the vulnerability context as well as by the structures and processes within a system. Human capital refers to the value of one’s skill set, such as education level and work experience. Physical capital includes tangible assets that assist in attaining livelihood outcomes, such as a vehicle for transportation. Financial capital refers to income level and other financial resources that are secured by the household. Social capital is the social resources utilized by households in pursuit of livelihoods, including memberships in organizations, family relationships, and workplace coworkers. For the purpose of this paper, which does not have a specific rural focus, natural capital will not be discussed.

Households have various levels of influence and access to policies, institutions, and processes that shape the vulnerability context and livelihoods assets of the household. For

example, public and private sector structures can provide aid to specific vulnerable groups to increase assets among these groups or better resilience to the environmental context. Processes, such as the current culture and established institutions, determine which laws and policies are developed and for whom. A household copes with its resulting status with livelihood strategies that may or may not lead to the livelihood outcome of food security. According to Dercon (2001), vulnerability is multidimensional and determined by the options available to households and individuals to make a living, the risks they face and their ability to handle those risks.

### Food Insecurity in the United States

While most American households have a secure source of adequate food, many Americans continue to be vulnerable to food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2016). Contrary to popular belief, food insecurity in the U.S. is not a consequence of food shortage, but rather it is a result of food inaccessibility and unaffordability resulting largely from socioeconomic and demographic factors (The Portland Food Project, 2013; Gunderson, Kreiger & Pepper, 2011). Understanding the household characteristics that lead to food insecurity is key for the alleviation of this issue for certain populations. Particularly, disadvantaged minority groups are faced with the weight of food security complications. According to the USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS), which releases annual reports depicting food insecurity conditions in the United States, households headed by low-income persons, African Americans, Hispanics, and single persons are the most vulnerable. Households which have children are also likely to be more food insecure than those without children, and women are more likely to be food insecure than men (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2016). Certain households such as female-headed households—especially single mother households—have a combination of these characteristics that can lead to food insecurity. Estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey 2015 show that 11.4 percent of American family groups were headed by single mothers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), and 30.3 percent of those single mother households were food insecure, making this family group the most vulnerable type of household in United States (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2016).

Despite this disparity for certain demographic groups, the United States has seen an overall decreasing rate of food insecurity in recent years. Using a national survey supplement to capture household food insecurity rates, the ERS has several classifications for reporting food



insecure conditions. A household can be classified as food secure or food insecure. Food insecure households are further classified as having *low food security*, previously referred to as "food insecurity without hunger", or *very low food security*, previously referred to as "food insecurity with hunger". Having *low food security* means a household has reported indications of food acquisition problems and reduced diet quality but few to no indications of reduced food intake. Very low food security means a household has reported eating and intake pattern disruptions because of insufficient money or other resources. The most recent report (2016) claims that while food insecurity rates continue to remain above 2007 pre-recessionary levels, there are recent decreasing trends in the overall food insecurity rate, continuing a downward trend from 2015, when looking at *very low food security* rates (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2017). While the food insecurity rate for the United States was 14.0 percent in 2014, it declined to 12.7 percent in 2015. Most recently in 2016, this figure has essentially remained the same at 12.3 percent. Further, the percentage of households suffering from very low food security decreased from 5.6 percent in 2014 to 5.0 percent in 2015, and most recently remained unchanged at 4.9 in 2016. These declines were statistically significant from 2014 to 2015 (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2016).

### Food Insecurity in Oregon

While food insecurity in the United States has declined overall, certain states continue to struggle to secure the food needs of their populations (OCPP, 2016). According to the ERS and the Oregon Center for Public Policy's (OCPP), Oregon was the only state that saw food insecurity increase by a statistically significant percentage from 2010-12 to 2013-2015. From recession recovery years in 2010-2012 to 2013-2015, food insecurity in Oregon saw an increase of 18.4 percent<sup>2</sup> (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2016; OCPP, 2016). In fact, the Oregon Center for Public Policy reported that Oregon had the highest spike in insecurity that was statistically significant from 2010-2012 to 2013-2015. Many states saw declines in food insecurity in the same years. Interestingly, Washington state, which is typically compared with Oregon as its

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<sup>2</sup> In the most recent "Household Food Security in the United States in 2016" report, using 2014-2016 estimates, Oregon's food insecurity is estimated at 14.6%. This was not statistically different from the previous year's 2013-2015 estimate of 16.1%.

Pacific Northwest neighbor, experienced an 11.6 percent decline in food insecurity in the same time frame (Lehman, 2016).

There has been speculation as to why the food insecurity rates are higher than average in Oregon, while state unemployment rates have decreased and wages have increased in the same time frame (Edwards, 2016a). As with many states in the United States, Oregon is currently experiencing a “housing affordability crisis,” and many Oregonians are therefore cash-strapped to secure other basic necessities (OCPP, 2016). According to Fletcher et al. (2009) and the OCPP, many families skimp on food when housing costs rise. The OCPP also blames unaffordable childcare, as child care in Oregon is among the least affordable in the country. Many working mothers drop out of the workforce when they cannot afford the rising cost of care (OCPP, 2016). Edwards (2016b) attributes high insecurity rates to not only housing availability and rental costs, but also to low levels of college attainment and the declining economic payoff of having only a high school diploma. There has also been discussion of health care costs and how alterations in Oregon’s health legislation may have influenced insecurity for vulnerable populations over time; in the early-to-mid 2000s, large budgets cuts were made to Medicaid in the state, throwing 93,000 off the program. With the rebuilding of Oregon’s Medicaid program from 2008-2012, many more working families, children, pregnant women, single adults, and seniors have been eligible for care, and this could have overlapped with changes in food insecurity rates. However, it is apparent that a specific culmination of factors makes certain populations vulnerable to food insecurity in Oregon.

#### Vulnerability of Single Mothers and the Link to Food Security

As is apparent in the livelihoods framework, certain household types are more vulnerable than others to food insecurity. It has been demonstrated that female-headed households are among the most vulnerable types of households not only in the United States, but also abroad. According to Christopher, England, Smeeding, and Phillips (2002), in almost all Western countries, single mother households are at least five times as likely to be in poverty when compared to married non parents. This is due to many factors, including educational level, the presence of children, gender inequality, housing inequality, and types of work available. For example, lone Canadian mothers experience lower educational statuses than other Canadian women, with half of lone mothers not completing high school (McIntyre, Gianville, Officer,

Anderson, Raine & Dayle, 2002). Single women are more likely to have custody of their children compared to single men; therefore, single mothers typically must pay for childcare and possibly leave the labor force or reduce hour availability for other caregiving responsibilities. This single parenthood reduces a mother's earnings and further worsens an underpaying gender equality gap. Stevens (2009) found that young mothers have more unstable housing conditions and move frequently during the year. Berger, Heintze, Naidich & Meyers (2008) finds that single mother renters spent approximately 43 percent of their income on rent. Unfortunately, women also have higher rates of part-time work, which drives a higher gender-poverty ratio. If the economy plummets, a single mother's hours may decrease, her earnings may drop, and her income begins to "cycle with the economy" (Kalil & Ryan, 2010). Many single mothers have little choice but to enroll in government transfer programs, especially when subsidized childcare and other forms of employment supports for mothers are lacking (Christopher et al., 2002). However some studies show that many women feel uncomfortable with or are unable to communicate with external assistance agencies due to stigma or language barriers (Stevens, 2009).

Because of weak support networks, single mother households struggle to maintain comfortable livelihoods. Ypeij (2009) conducted interviews with single Dutch mothers on their budget management to further understand their livelihood strategies. It was found that many mothers were more concerned with paying fixed expenses—rent, electricity, telephone, etc.—than with their daily grocery list to avoid "ever increasing problems" such as fines or evictions (p. 61). Many single mothers engaged in "thriftiness", in which they buy from the cheapest shops to get the best bargains and offers on food. Several interview respondents skipped or reduced their meal sizes or replaced regular meals with cheap and less nutritious ones, with one mother reporting she often ate only bread with peanut butter at the end of the month when funds were slim (Ypeij, 2009). While it has been demonstrated that poverty does not always lead to food insecurity, it is important to acknowledge which commodities are being sacrificed for the securement of food (Gunderson, et al., 2011; Stevens, 2009). Coping strategies may indeed lower a household's probability of food insecurity, but these consequences could have other unintended effects on well-being. Single mothers throughout the United States continue to struggle to maintain livelihood, especially in Oregon.

### Single Mothers in Oregon

According to annual Oregon food insecurity and hunger reports, single mothers continue to hold the highest percentage of food insecurity (44.1 percent) and very low food security (15.4 percent) compared to other household groups. Edwards (2016b) finds that although the food insecurity rate for Oregon's single mothers declined by a few percentage points from 2012-2014 to 2013-2015, this group continues to struggle with more food insecurity than other single mothers elsewhere in the United States. Edwards (2016a) uses indicators from the 2012-2014 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplements (CPS-FSS), conducted annually by the U.S. Census Bureau for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, to analyze the assets and capital of single mothers. Of food insecure single mothers in 2012-2014, 90 percent are renters in Oregon. In a report of 2013-2015 estimates, 80 percent of all single mothers were renters and 95 percent of renting single mothers were food insecure (Edwards, 2016b). No research has examined changes in the profile of single mothers in Oregon over time. The element of time could provide crucial information as to when single mothers faced greater vulnerability with fewer resources for assistance, such as during or shortly after the Great Recession. Looking at changes, or lack of changes, in food insecurity for this population over time also provides insight into how policies and structures have or have not altered the vulnerability context for this population.

### Food Security Governance in Oregon

The wicked problem of food insecurity and hunger for single mothers in Oregon can be managed in the context of collaborative governance among food security organizations (Candel, 2014). Currently in the United States, there are several federal nutrition and food assistance programs that have benefits for single mothers, including SNAP, WIC, and School Meals. However, in Oregon, there appears to be a decreasing trend in total enrollment in multiple programs over the last several years. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), previously known as the Food Stamp Program, provides low income households with benefits to purchase food at grocery stores and other qualifying locations. Oregon SNAP enrollment fell from 802,190 monthly persons on average to 734,864 (a decline of 8.4%) from 2014 to 2016 (USDA, 2015; USDA 2017). WIC, or the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, provides vouchers for low income families who recently had a baby, are pregnant, are breastfeeding, or have children up to five years of age, to purchase healthier foods.

Similarly to SNAP, the number of Oregon WIC participants dropped from 161,335 annually to 145,599 (down 9.8%) in the same 2014 to 2016 time frame (OHA, 2015; OHA, 2017). It is unclear whether decreases in participation means more households are staving off food insecurity, or if there are certain barriers preventing participation. It is also possible that single mothers got new jobs in the better economy. School Meals Programs, while not directly benefiting single mothers, enable children to get free or reduced priced breakfasts and lunches at school and during summer programs. Many non-profit charitable organizations, including food banks, also exist in order to provide emergency food assistance for food insecure families. The Oregon Food Bank, a statewide network of 21 regional food banks, is one example of an organization which provides an estimated 270,000 people a month with food from pantries (Oregon Food Bank, 2016). While these programs have valuable short-term remedies for food insecurity and hunger, coordination among resources is vital for recognizing root causes of inequality and reaching a food security solution for single mothers in Oregon. The state's efforts to enroll low income families in these federal programs is related to its early efforts to address food insecurity.

In 1989, to combat the pressing issue of food security statewide, the Oregon Legislative Assembly declared "All persons have the right to be free from hunger" and "freedom from hunger means all persons have food security" (Policy on Hunger, 2017, ORS 458.530) or "Policy on hunger"). With this statute, the Legislature declared that the purpose of this policy is to "provide a guide for the establishment, implementation and operation of activities and programs designed to alleviate or eradicate hunger in this state [Oregon]" (Policy on Hunger, 2017, ORS 458.530) This statute, in addition to ORS 458.545 (Task Force Powers and Duties, 2017), initiated the Hunger Relief Task Force -- later renamed Oregon Hunger Task Force. The Task Force serves as an advocate for vulnerable food insecure populations in the state.

Meeting monthly, the Task Force's goal is to study programs and budgets, conduct research, encourage expansion of activities and programs, and "recommend ways of filling gaps in services" (Task Force Powers and Duties, 2017, ORS 458.545). The Task Force is delegated the task of preparing annual reports about the status of hunger in Oregon and efforts that are in progress, and to make recommendations for furthering progress. The Task Force's recent report, the "2017-2018 Plan to End Hunger" contains two goals: 1) Address the root causes of hunger so more Oregonians can purchase the food they need; 2) Increase access to food through nutrition

support programs (Oregon Hunger Task Force, 2017b). The now 28-seat Task Force consists of state legislators, state agency representatives, and non-profit and community leaders, exhibiting the collaboration needed to eliminate the “wicked” food insecurity problem in Oregon (Oregon Hunger Task Force, 2017a). Task Force members are representatives of major organizations including Oregon Department of Human Services Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Oregon Health Authority Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Oregon Food Bank, Oregon State University, Oregon Faith Roundtable Against Hunger, Farmers Ending Hunger, and many more.

**Research Question #1: “How do household assets for single mothers predict household food security in Oregon compared to the rest of the United States, and how have these assets predicted various levels of household food security for this population over time?”**

### Methodology

The purpose of the quantitative portion of this study is to assess how household assets correlate with household food security for single mothers in Oregon by depicting trends in statewide food security data. Using the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework as a guide, I built a profile of single mothers over time to see how assets and capital have altered for this group over time, with particular attention to the vulnerability context of the recent economic Recession. The current analyses build off of previous research performed by the Oregon Center for Public Policy (OCP) as well as Oregon food insecurity research by Edwards (2016a; 2016b). Research from OCP analyzes food insecurity since the beginning of the recovery from the Great Recession, while research from Edwards has produced disaggregated Oregon food insecurity statistics for various household variables.

### Data

The data used in this analysis were taken from the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS), conducted annually by the U.S. Census Bureau for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Current Population Survey (CPS) currently includes about 60,000 households and has been recognized as representative at state and national levels (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2016). Administered mostly via telephone, the CPS-FSS surveys a

“reference person” for the household--an adult respondent--regarding household food expenditures, participation in food assistance programs, and experiences and behaviors indicating food security status (ERS, 2017).

Food security status is calculated from an array of 18 questions about meeting basic food needs (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2016). This set of questions is referred to as the Core Food Security Module (CFSM) (Gundersen et al., 2011). The succession of questions asks whether a condition or behavior occurred during the past 12 months and specifies whether this is due to lack of financial resources or lack of access. Example questions include, “In the last 12 months, did you or other adults in the household ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn’t enough money for food? (Yes/No)” and “In the last 12 months, were you ever hungry, but didn’t eat, because there wasn’t enough money for food? (Yes/No)”<sup>3</sup> (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2016). The number of food insecure conditions and behaviors reported signifies the food security status of the household.

Households in the supplement are classified as *food secure* if they report two food insecure conditions or less. Respondents are classified as *food insecure* if they report three or more food insecure conditions. Food insecure households are further classified as having *low food security*, if food intake of a household member was reduced and eating patterns disrupted because of insufficient money or other resources, or *very low food security*, if six or more food-insecure conditions were met. Households with children age 0-17 have *very low food security* if they report eight or more food insecure conditions (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2016).

## Methods

In initial analytical stages, data from the yearly survey assessments were aggregated in triplets of three years in order to achieve samples of a sufficient size to estimate food insecurity rates for single mothers in Oregon at various points in time. Five time periods from 2001-2003 through 2013-2015 were created. Each Oregon sample consisted of over 2,000 participants and about 100 single mothers. A single mother household is defined as an unmarried, female-headed household with children in the household.

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<sup>3</sup> For a complete list of the U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module, please see Economic Research Service’s (ERS) survey here: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/media/8271/hh2012.pdf>

In order to tease apart these food insecurity statistics to view rates among specific household types in Oregon, households were tabulated by variables associated with food insecurity over time with the appropriate household weights. This study focuses on differences between single mother households in Oregon versus single mother households in the rest of the United States to isolate factors that are perpetuating food insecurity in Oregon. These groups were used in order to have two completely different grouping samples, so immediate two-sample T-tests using proportions could be performed.

### Results and Discussion

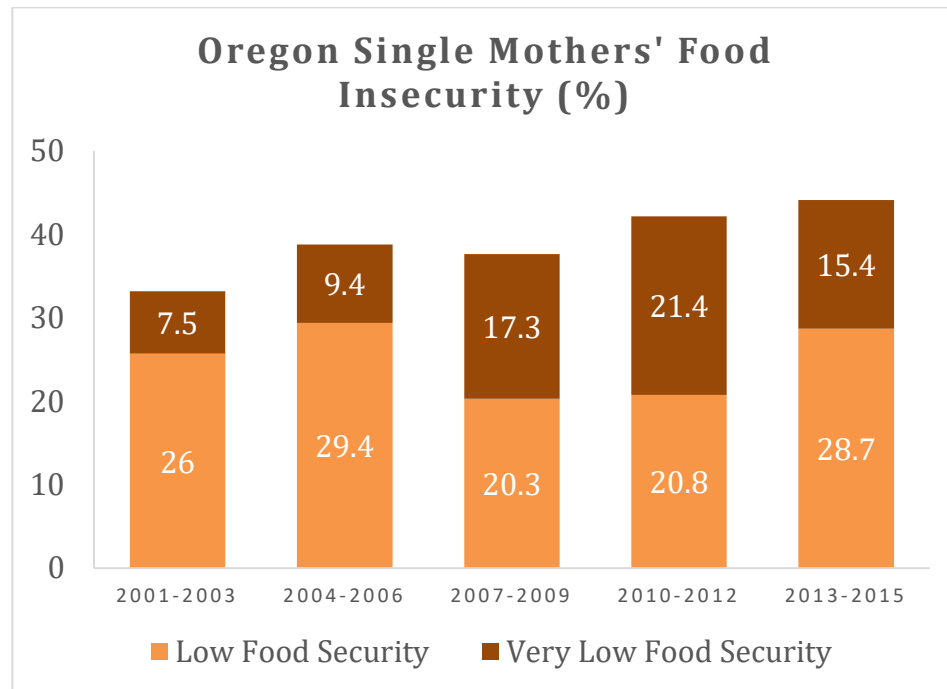
Statewide, comparing data from the post-recovery period to the most recent data period, it was found that in Oregon there was a statistically significant increase in food insecurity from the beginning of the post recession recovery period of 13.6% (2010-2012) to the most recent data period of 16.1% (2013-2015), ( $p = 0.058$ ). These findings replicate the statistics of the Oregon Center for Public Policy's (OCP) 2016 report on food insecurity in Oregon. Data was then disaggregated to find trends for single mothers in Oregon.

#### Single Mothers in Oregon vs. United States: Food Insecurity

Looking at food insecurity for single mothers in Oregon, we see a pattern in which food insecurity for this group remains at relatively high levels over time. There are no significant increases or decreases across years. However, we see interesting trends when we compare these figures to what happened over time in the rest of the United States.



Figure 2.



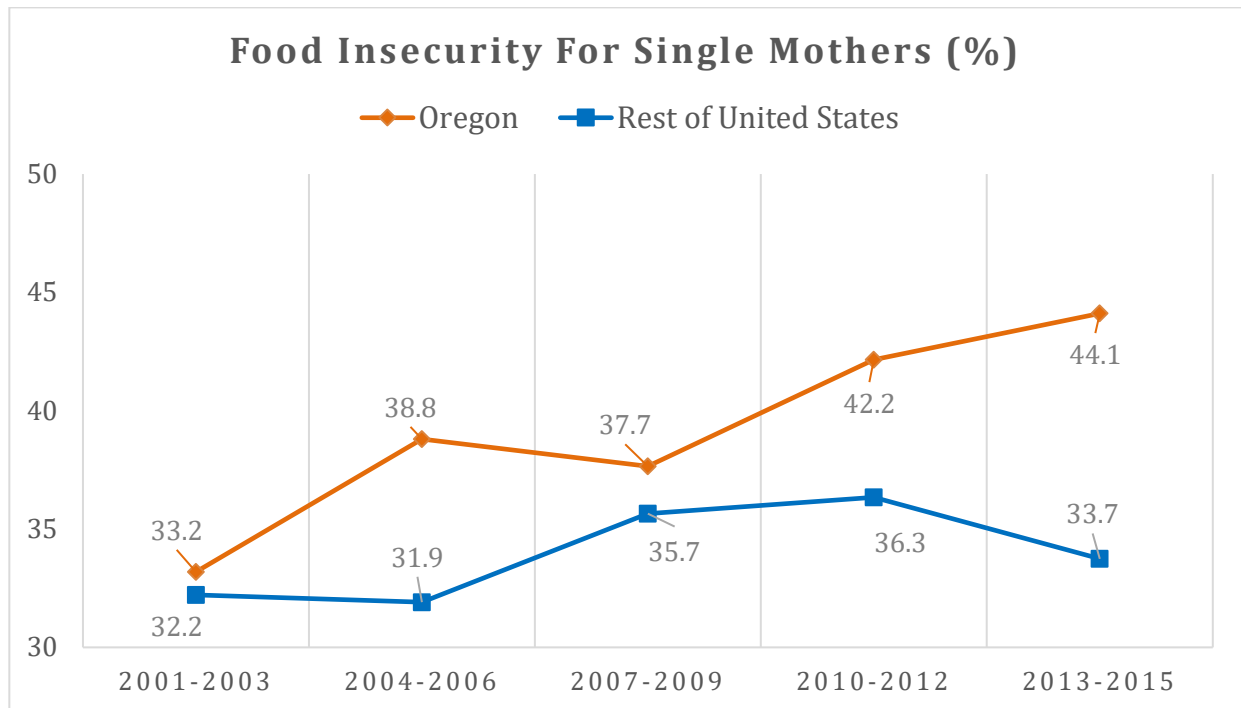
Note: There was no significant increase or decrease in low or very low food security for single mothers in Oregon during these time periods, likely due to small sample sizes.

Food insecurity rates for single mothers have differed between Oregon and the rest of the United States when looking at clustered samples over time. In years 2001-2003, both samples had relatively similar food insecurity rates. Looking at the most recent time cluster of 2013-2015, it is apparent that overall food insecurity for single mothers in Oregon is significantly higher than food insecurity for single mothers in the rest of the United States.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> p=0.0093

Figure 3.

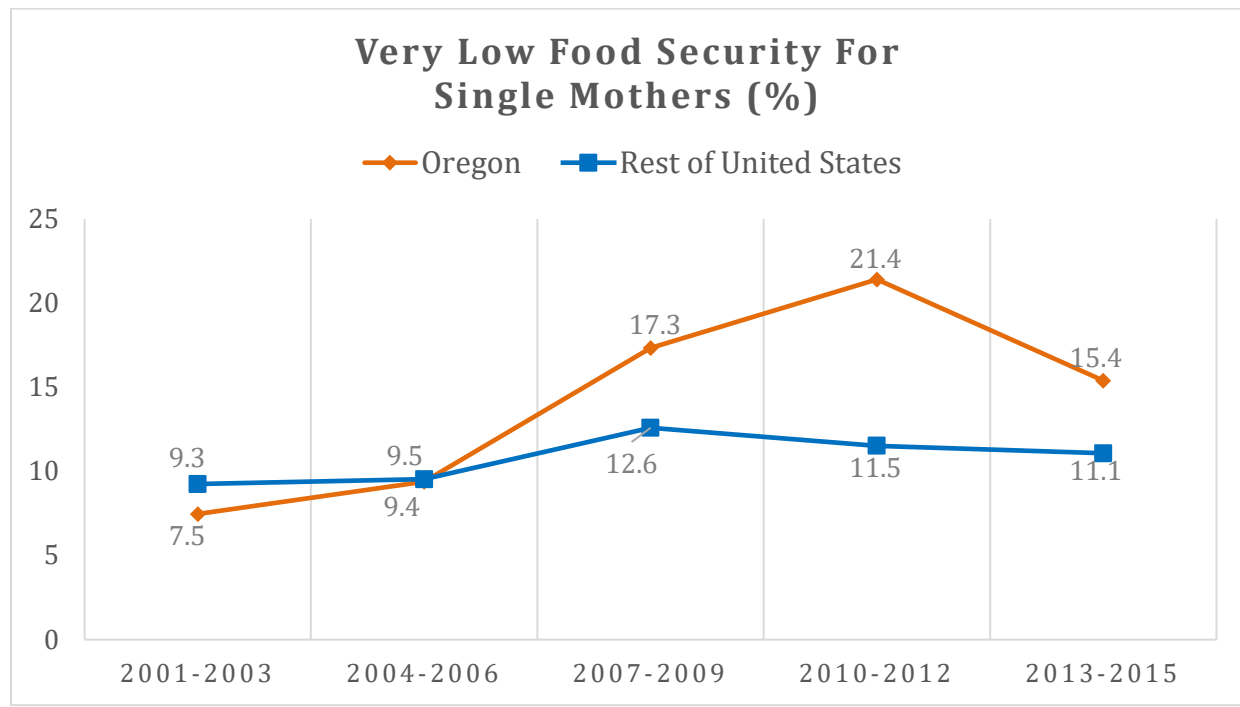


Focusing on recent trends, 2010-2012 data for the United States, shows that single mother households had rates of food insecurity of 36.3 percent. This statistic drops to 33.7 percent in the next three year time period of 2013-2015, a statistically significant decrease<sup>5</sup> indicating that effects from the Recession are beginning to taper for this group. However, single mothers in Oregon had rates of food insecurity that remained statistically unchanged, from 42.2 percent to 44.1 percent, in the same time periods. This could signify that single mothers are still struggling to recover from the earlier Recession.

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<sup>5</sup> p=0.0001

Figure 4.



Breaking down the statistics by types of food insecurity, single mothers in Oregon experience *very low food security* (also known as “hunger”) at different rates than single mothers in the rest of the United States. During the time after the Great Recession (2010-2012), single mothers in Oregon experienced significantly higher levels of hunger than in the rest of the United States<sup>6</sup>. Interestingly, we see this rate for Oregonian single mothers begin to decrease and become similar to the rest of the United States in the 2013-2015 time period, but still remains significantly higher<sup>7</sup>. The increase in low food security in the time after the Recession hints at increased vulnerability for this population, possibly due to lack of access to or affordability of resources. These trends hint that single mothers are slowly being spared from hunger but are not experiencing enough stability to stave off food insecurity, which remains at very high levels.

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<sup>6</sup> p=0.0006

<sup>7</sup> p=0.0700

### Profile of Single Mothers

The following analysis depicts a profile of single mothers in Oregon compared to single mothers in the rest of the United States from 2001-2015. The profile includes variables marked in the literature as being related to food insecurity. This section will be separated into the types of capital that single mothers currently hold as well as the levels of participation in programs specifically designed to assist food insecure families. This analysis provides a focused lens within the food insecurity landscape, allowing for policymakers and food security organizations to pinpoint areas of inaccessibility for this vulnerable population, specifically in the state of Oregon.

CAPITAL: Three types of capital were examined for single mothers to make comparisons across food insecure households in Oregon as well as the rest of the U.S.: physical, financial, and human capital. Three variables were considered in this analysis, including housing tenure, household income, and household education level.

### Housing Tenure

Because of literature depicting increasing rental prices in the United States, especially in Oregon, housing tenure was isolated in the analysis to identify trends in renting and ownership status. Housing is considered physical capital that can influence a household's livelihood strategy and outcome. Housing tenure, or housing status, statistically differs between single mothers in Oregon and single mothers in the rest of the United States. In the years 2013-2015, while approximately 65.2 percent of single mothers in the rest of the United States were renters, 75.8 percent of single mothers in Oregon were renters<sup>8</sup> (Figure 5). Renting rates in Oregon were significantly higher than those in the United States.

Focusing on Oregon single mothers over time, one notices two significant spikes in renting status, one prior to the Recession (2004-2006)<sup>9</sup>, and one during the post-Recession time period (2010-2012)<sup>10</sup>. The pre-Recession increase in renting status rises from 56.1% to 72.5%.

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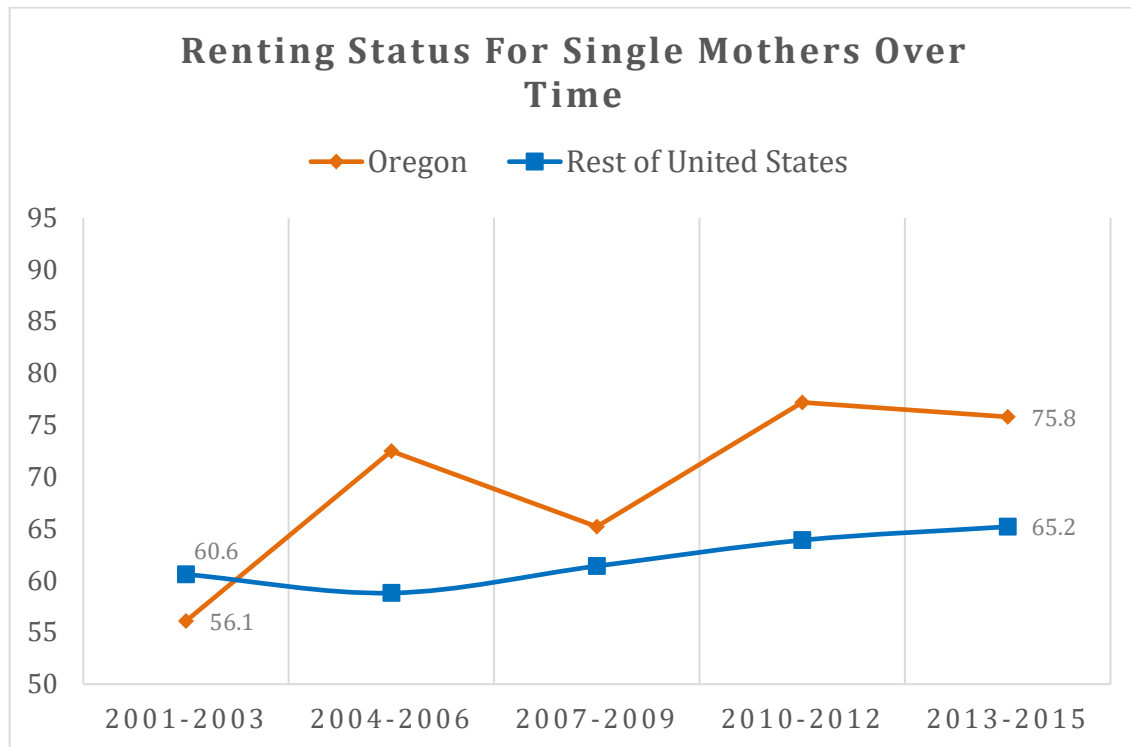
<sup>8</sup> p=0.0079

<sup>9</sup> p=0.0067

<sup>10</sup> p=0.0260

Although it appears as though there is a decline in renting status for Oregon single mothers during 2007-2009, this change is insignificant. However, in the post-Recession time period of 2010-2012, we mark a statistically significant additional increase in Oregon up to 77.2%, and renting status continues to remain unchanged in the most recent years. This mirrors a similar time trend in very low food security after the Recession for Oregonian single mothers.

Figure 5.

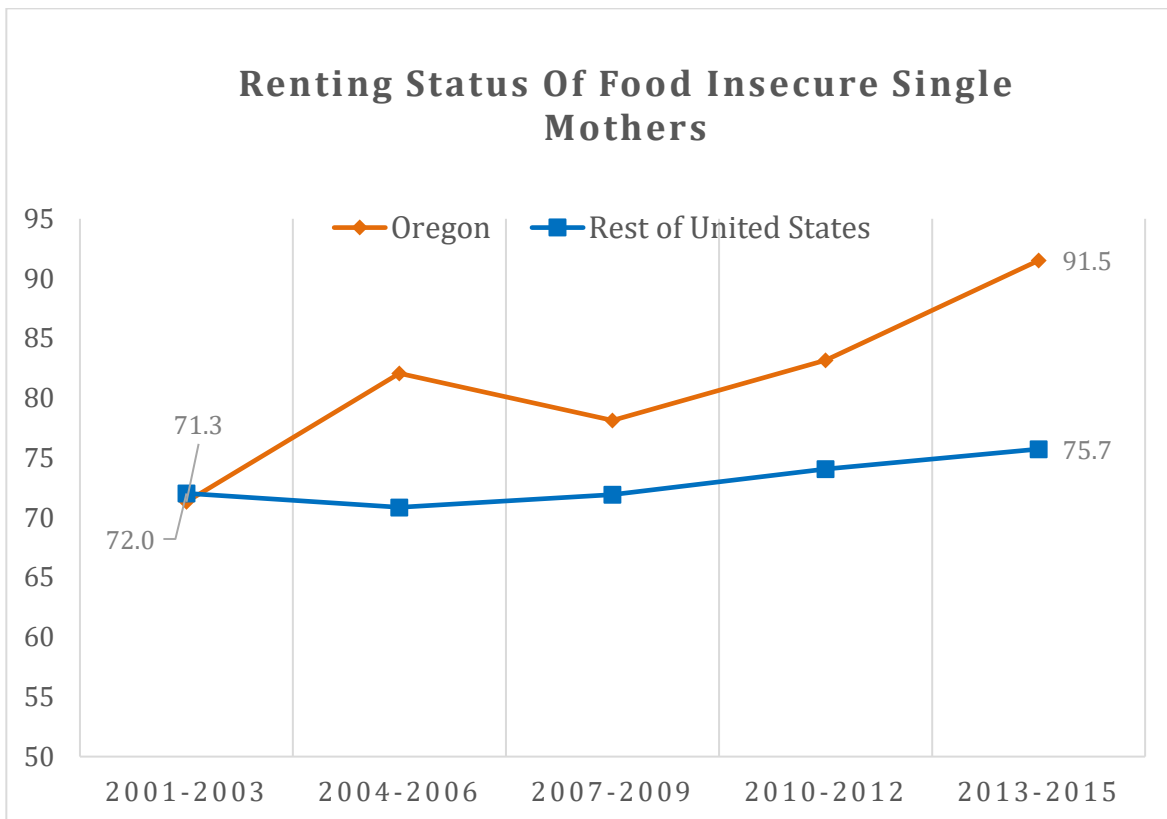


Narrowing in on food insecure households, it was found that almost three-quarters of food insecure single mother households in both Oregon and the rest of the United States were renters in the 2001-2003 time period. In fact, their renting percentages were statistically indistinguishable. Fast-forwarding 15 years however to 2013-2015, we see that food insecure single mothers in Oregon rented at rates as high as 91.5 percent (almost 20 percentage point increase)<sup>11</sup> while the percentage of food insecure single mothers renting in the rest of the United

<sup>11</sup> p=0.0057

States only increased by a little more than 3 percentage points<sup>12</sup>. Oregon’s rate is statistically higher than the rate in the rest of the United States for this recent time period<sup>13</sup>. While this increase in renting household status increased steadily for the general population, the increased vulnerability of Oregonian single mothers further perpetuated this state of housing instability.

Figure 6.



Poverty Status

Income directly influences food insecurity as families need financial capital to purchase food. Looking at income levels for the sample, it is apparent that household type is correlated

<sup>12</sup> p=0.0008

<sup>13</sup> p=0.0041

with a household's income<sup>14</sup>. Estimating the poverty line at below \$15,000<sup>15</sup> for two people, based on 2015 census estimates, 26.5 percent of single mothers in Oregon fall at or below this poverty line in the most recent time period. Similarly, single mothers in the rest of the United States fell below the poverty line at rates of 29.5 percent. These 2013-2015 estimates significantly decreased from the previous time period for single mothers in the United States and for Oregonian single mothers. This could signify that over the five year time period after the Recession, single mothers in both groups have been able to escape poverty.

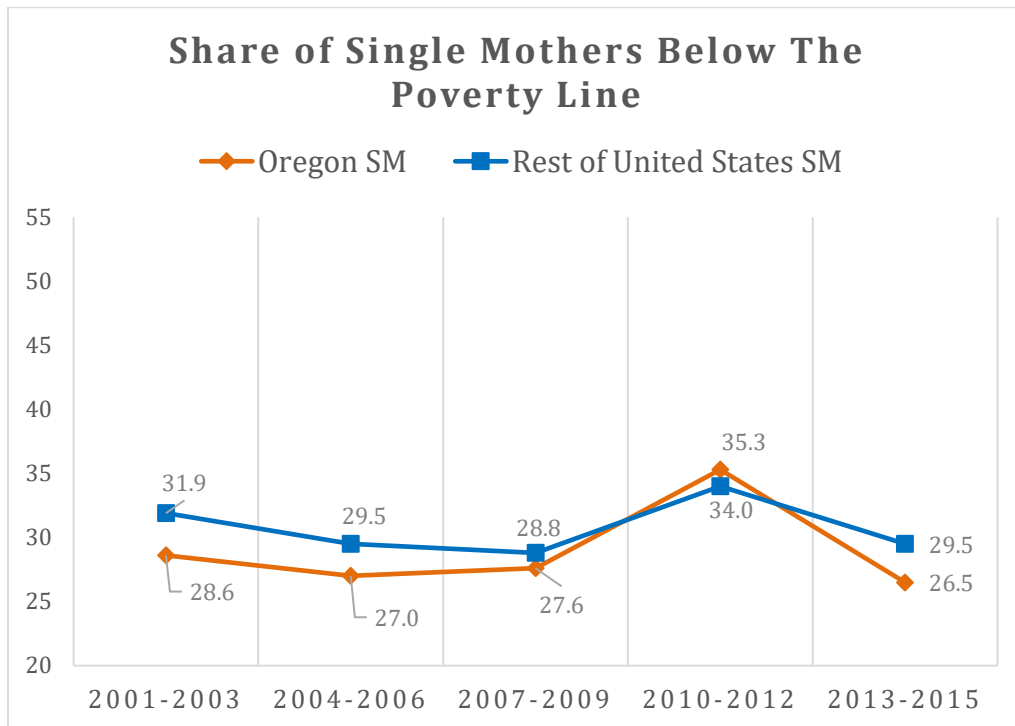
Looking at food insecure single mothers in Oregon, it is apparent that single mothers fall below the poverty line 33.9 percent of the time while food insecure single mothers in the rest of the United States experience poverty at rates of 40.2 percent. These rates both significantly decreased from their respective group's previous time periods. The rate for Oregon mothers saw the greatest decline from a previous surge at the time of the Recession and the years following. However, these two most recent percentages for both groups of mothers were not statistically different from each other, meaning single mothers in Oregon and the rest of the United States experience poverty at similar rates. However, it is important to acknowledge that simply because poverty rates have declined, this does not mean hardships are particularly easier for this population.

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<sup>14</sup> Household income was measured by the variable "hufaminc" prior to 2010. The variable "hefaminc" replaced "hufaminc" in 2010 to better capture nonresponses. Both variables were used for this analysis.

<sup>15</sup> The 2015 poverty guidelines mark the poverty guideline for a family/household of 2 as \$15,930. However, \$15,000 was chosen due to the bracketed incomes in the CPS-FSS survey—therefore this analysis should be interpreted with caution. This poverty estimate is therefore an underestimate because a single mother household could have more than two in the household.

Figure 7.



Note: There were significant declines in 2013-15 for both groups<sup>16</sup>, and also significant changes for United States single mothers in 2004-06<sup>17</sup> and 2010-12<sup>18</sup>.

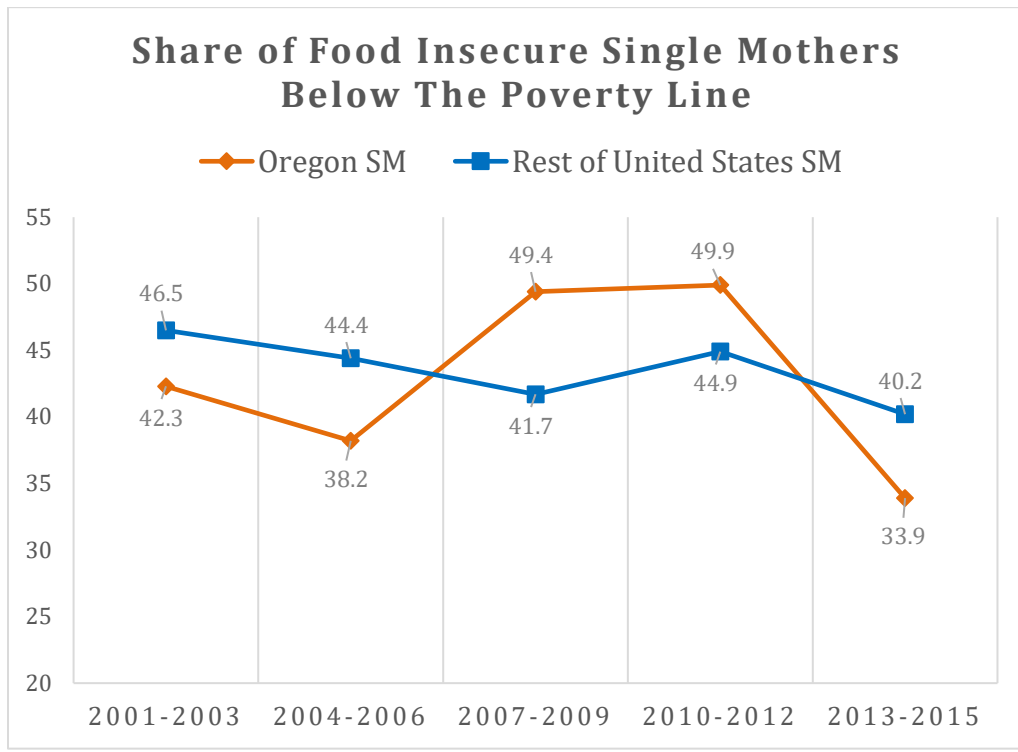
<sup>16</sup> OR p=0.0744, US p=0.0000

<sup>17</sup> p=0.0005

<sup>18</sup> p=0.0000



Figure 8.



Note: There were significant declines in 2013-15 for both groups<sup>19</sup>, and also significant changes for United States single mothers in 2004-06<sup>20</sup>, 2007-09<sup>21</sup>, and 2010-12<sup>22</sup>.

Education

The level of education of households’ adults impacts households’ food security. Looking at single mothers, we see that generally education of the population has increased over time. In 2001-2003, almost half of single mothers had no college experience whatsoever (46.5%).

<sup>19</sup> OR p=0.0524, US=0.0001

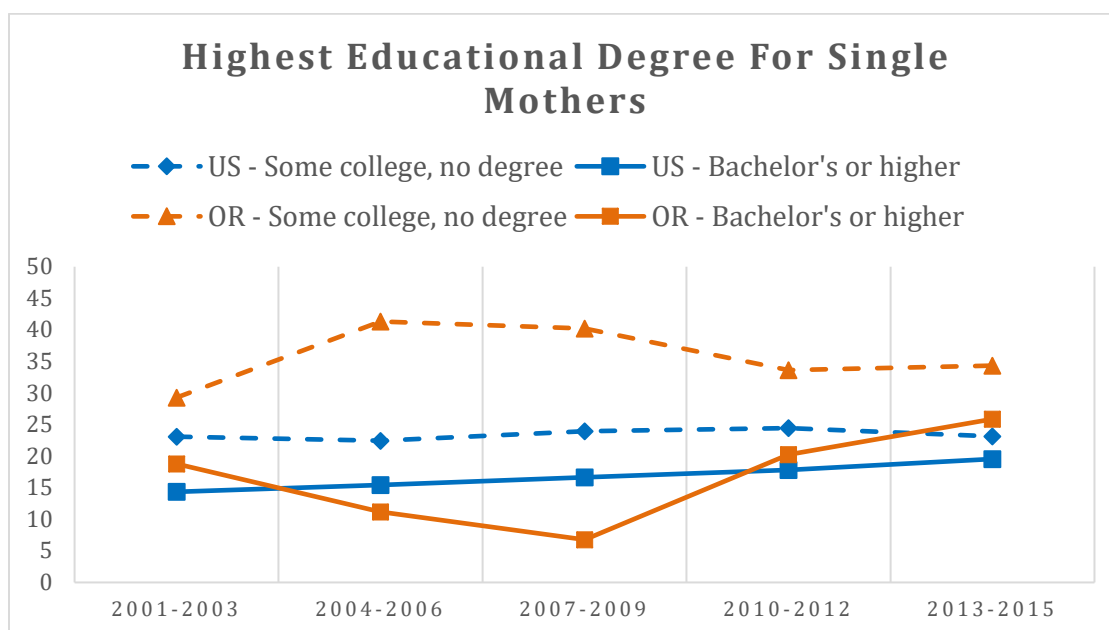
<sup>20</sup> p=0.0660

<sup>21</sup> p=0.0196

<sup>22</sup> p=0.0059

Looking at following time periods, this percentage drops significantly beginning in 2004-06<sup>23</sup>, and continues decreasing in the following time periods, until the most recent time period. Comparing the first time period to the most recent time period (32.7%), we note a significant decrease in the number of Oregonian single mothers that have no college experience<sup>24</sup>. The rest of the United States experiences similar trends. Over half of single mothers (53.0%) did not have college experience, and this decreases in 2004-06 and continues decreasing in the following periods, dropping to 44.5% in the most recent year<sup>25</sup>.

Figure 9.



The share of those who went to college, but did not attain a degree, showed interesting trends for the Oregonian group. While this percentage remained mostly stagnant for the rest of the United States, in Oregon there was a surge in 2004-2006, right before the Recession, from 29.3 percent to 41.3 percent<sup>26</sup>. The rate in Oregon was almost twice as high as that of the United States in that period, and continued to remain statistically higher throughout the years. There is

<sup>23</sup> p=0.0700

<sup>24</sup> p=0.0157

<sup>25</sup> p=0.0000

<sup>26</sup> p=0.0330

also a statistical difference in shares of Bachelor's degrees or higher for single mothers in Oregon and the rest of the United States, particularly in the most recent time period. While the U.S. only saw slightly increasing or stagnant trends across time, Oregon saw a stagnancy in share of Bachelor's degrees or higher before and during the Recession, followed by an increase to 20.2 percent after the Recession in 2010-12<sup>27</sup>, and later to 25.9 percent in the most recent period<sup>28</sup> (See Figure 9). Highlighting overall educational differences between Oregon and the United States in the most recent period, we see that Oregon single mothers have statistically larger shares of those with some college, no degree (34.3 percent vs. 23.1 percent)<sup>29</sup> and Bachelor's degree or higher (25.9 percent vs. 19.6 percent)<sup>30</sup>, compared to U.S. single mothers.

Focusing on food insecure mothers, we see similar trends in educational composition. Looking from time period to time period for both groups, we note that Oregon experiences a large drop in the share of food insecure single mothers with no college experience, beginning in 2004-2006<sup>31</sup>, from 68.4 percent to 35.5 percent. However, this rises in 2007-2009 during the Recession, back to 56.9 percent<sup>32</sup> and tapers off in following periods, whereas the United States only sees slow steady decreases over time. There are also similar trends in the share of food insecure Oregonian single mothers who attended some college, with no degree attainment, with a large increase in share in 2004-2006, (from 24.5 to 42.5 percent)<sup>33</sup> while not increasing in that time in the rest of the U.S. The share of Bachelor's degree or higher food insecure single mothers had similar trends to all single mothers, with Oregon having higher shares of food insecure Bachelor's degree or higher completers (17.8 percent) compared to the U.S. (8.8 percent)<sup>34</sup>.

The interesting trend in higher shares of those who attended some college, but received no degree is particularly interesting for food insecure Oregon single mothers as it hints that this population is struggling with college completion. Because single mothers are not completing degrees, they are less protected against vulnerabilities, including food insecurity. Noncompleters are more vulnerable than college completer groups when it comes to financial burden, especially

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<sup>27</sup> p=0.0021

<sup>28</sup> Not statistically higher than the previous time period.

<sup>29</sup> p=0.0021

<sup>30</sup> p=0.0430

<sup>31</sup> p=0.0018

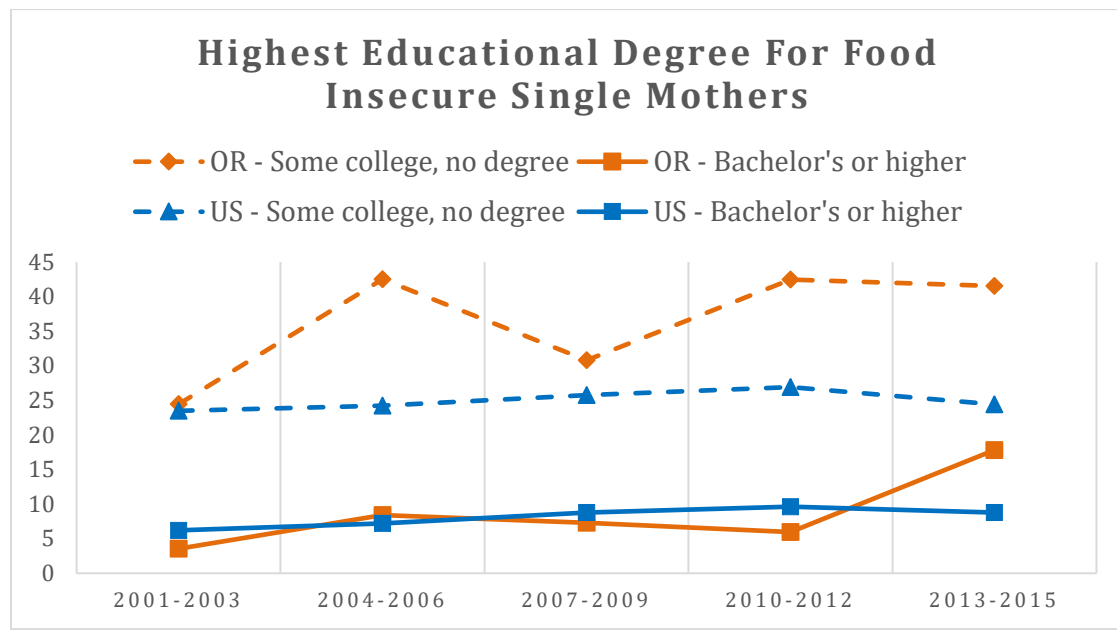
<sup>32</sup> p=0.0317

<sup>33</sup> p=0.0454

<sup>34</sup> p=0.0117

paying back educational loans (TICAS, 2018). For those that raised or are raising children while they are in school, this could also signify that single mothers in Oregon do not have the structural supports to successfully simultaneously raise children and be a student. Anderson, Cruse, and Gault (2017) have found that single mothers are overrepresented at for-profit postsecondary institutions. Known for recruiting vulnerable populations, for-profit institutions have a poor reputation for high costs of attendance, low completion rates, and high debt levels. It could be that this surge in enrollment for single mothers has grown due to an increase in for-profit enrollment. Single mothers made up 30 percent of undergraduates at for-profits in 2011-12 (Anderson et al., 2017). Interestingly, Oregon has higher shares of Bachelor’s degree or higher educational levels. This particularly highlights the fact that even though postsecondary completion is higher for some mothers in Oregon (in regards to Bachelor’s or higher completion), education may not ensure food security to the extent that postsecondary experience in the rest of the United States does.

Figure 10.



ACCESSIBILITY TO PROGRAMS: Single mothers' participation in two food assistance programs was the focus of the following analysis. These programs include nutrition assistance programs that affect livelihoods of single mothers in Oregon and the rest of the United States, WIC and SNAP.

#### Nutrition Program Participation

*WIC.* It has been publicly recognized that WIC participation has wavered across time, and little research has been performed on the causes of changes in participation. It is apparent that in each time period, single mothers in Oregon do not experience higher rates of WIC participation than single mothers in the rest of the United States. When focusing on food insecure single mothers, it is apparent that across time, those in Oregon experienced higher rates of WIC participation than food insecure single mothers in the rest of the United States in the time period during the Recession 2007-2009<sup>35</sup>. There were no significant changes between time periods for Oregon. However, looking at trends from the Recession to the most recent years, we notice that participation drops from 28.9 to 13.3 percent<sup>36</sup>. This change is not evident from looking at similar years of data for the United States. It should be recognized that single mothers in Oregon experience rates of food insecurity at higher levels than food insecure mothers in the rest of the United States, and thus one might expect to see a higher rate of participation. Nutrition program participation is perhaps an area in which single mothers in Oregon could experience more assistance in accessibility to this food nutrition program. However, the decrease in WIC participation in Oregon across the years could also signify that WIC has increasingly kept women *out* of food insecurity that would have otherwise been vulnerable; thus a smaller number of WIC-enrolled food insecure mothers might be a sign of program success. It is important to note that not all single mothers are eligible for WIC, only those with younger children; one can assume, though, that the family composition of single mothers in Oregon has not changed dramatically in different ways compared to the rest of the United States. More specific investigation into WIC participation is needed to fully understand these changes over time.

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<sup>35</sup> p=0.0985

<sup>36</sup> p=0.0455

Table 1.

<b>WIC Participation for Food Insecure Single Mothers</b>					
	<b>2001-2003</b>	<b>2004-2006</b>	<b>2007-2009</b>	<b>2010-2012</b>	<b>2013-2015</b>
<i>Oregon</i>	28.5	26.7	28.9	23.0	13.3*
<i>Rest of the United States</i>	18.8	19.0	19.9	22.0	19.6

\*Statistically significant difference from 2007-2009.

*SNAP*. Generally, looking at participation generally for 15 years, we see a rising trend in SNAP participation for both groups. Oregon single mothers are enrolled in SNAP at higher rates than women in the rest of the United States in the most recent three time periods—2007-2009<sup>37</sup>, 2010-2012<sup>38</sup>, and 2013-2015<sup>39</sup>. While this does show signs of nutritional program enrollment success for Oregon, there is also a significant decline in the most recent time period from 70.6 to 61.0<sup>40</sup>, despite the fact that there was no change for the United States. Narrowing focus, food insecure mothers in Oregon had higher levels of SNAP participation (76.7%) in 2010-2012 than the rest of the United States (60.2%); however, this difference became insignificant in the following time period. And in fact, the United States saw an increase in SNAP participation (64.2%)<sup>41</sup>, while Oregon saw no significant changes. The two groups are not statistically different in the most recent time period. Single mothers in Oregon are more food insecure and may require more program participation or possibly more rigorous and intensive assistance in order to stave off hunger and insecurity. However, similar to WIC, it could be that decreases in

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<sup>37</sup> p=0.0562

<sup>38</sup> p=0.0006

<sup>39</sup> p=0.0837

<sup>40</sup> p=0.0862

<sup>41</sup> p=0.0008

SNAP participation are signs of positive program success; thus more investigation is required to completely understand these trends.

*Table 2.*

<b>SNAP Participation for Food Insecure Single Mothers</b>					
	<b>2001-2003</b>	<b>2004-2006</b>	<b>2007-2009</b>	<b>2010-2012</b>	<b>2013-2015</b>
<i>Oregon</i>	51.3	47.5	64.3	76.7	69.1
<i>Rest of the United States</i>	45.4	49.9	53.0	60.2	64.2

From this quantitative analysis over time using the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement, it can be interpreted that single mothers in Oregon struggle with housing tenure and possible with participation in nutrition assistance programs. There are countless other factors, that are typically more difficult to measure, that contribute to food insecurity as well, including social capital, healthcare costs, general household expenses, childcare, and other costs that are necessary for a good livelihood. Unfortunately a lack of these capitals leads to greater vulnerability: a vulnerability already perpetuated by systemic inequalities. Many public and private groups have acknowledged these inequalities and are actively striving to provide greater security for these underserved populations.

This will be investigated further in the following qualitative portion of this essay:

**Research Question #2: How do public/private food security partners in Oregon collaborate to fill gaps in household food security? What are the challenges of serving single mothers in Oregon and have policies, institutions, and processes influenced the vulnerability context for this population over time?**

In response to the pressing problem of food insecurity in the state, the Oregon State Legislature took legal action with hopes to alleviate and eradicate the issue. Several statutes were enacted by the Oregon State Legislature in 1989 to combat food security statewide, including the initiation of the Hunger Relief Task Force (later renamed Oregon Hunger Task Force). The second part of this study focuses on qualitative data from interviews with members of the Oregon Hunger Task Force, in order to understand partner collaboration and specific single mother vulnerabilities. Using the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework as a guide, special insight will be provided on how the Task Force has influenced policies, institutions, and processes for single mothers over time, with attention to how vulnerability for this population has altered.

### Oregon Hunger Task Force

According to these statutes, the Hunger Task Force serves as an advocate for hungry persons in Oregon. The Task Force is delegated with preparing annual reports about the status of hunger in Oregon, the efforts that are being made, and recommendations for furthering progress. The Task Force's most recent report, the "2017-2018 Plan to End Hunger" contains two goals: 1) Address the root causes of hunger so more Oregonians can purchase the food they need; 2) Increase access to food through nutrition support programs (Oregon Hunger Task Force, 2017b).

The now 28-seat Task Force consists of state legislators, state agency representatives, and non-profit and community leaders (Oregon Hunger Task Force, 2017a). Task Force members are representatives of major organizations including Oregon Department of Human Services Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), Oregon Health Authority Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Oregon Food Bank, Oregon State University, Oregon Faith Roundtable Against Hunger, Farmers Ending Hunger, and many more. The collaboration among these public and private organizations exhibits the collaboration needed to eliminate the "wicked" food insecurity problem in Oregon.

### Sample

Study participants for the qualitative portion of this study are all current members of the Oregon Hunger Task Force. Participants were identified through online research into the Oregon Hunger Task Force, as well as consultation from a Task Force member who is a faculty member at Oregon State University. A specific and purposive sample of these members was taken based



on each member's understandings of food insecurity issues for single mothers in Oregon, the mission of the member's organization, and/or the length of time spent as a member of the Task Force--as special attention for this study is given to changing trends over time. In regards to recruitment of participants, at the February 2017 Task Force meeting, the faculty member from Oregon State University announced the opportunity to participate in research interviews to further understand the food security situation for single mothers in Oregon. Following this announcement, a recruitment email was sent to the members of the population group that work with single mothers, with the intent of interviewing an even split of publicly and privately employed members. Participants from two public and two private organization were interviewed by phone, with the use of an audio recorder to document interviews. Interviewees have experience in food insecurity issues ranging from 12 to 21 years and experience on the Oregon Hunger Task Force ranging from 2 to 12 years. Qualitative interview data was collected through a semi-structured format.

#### Data Collection and Analysis

Each participant verbally consented to be interviewed, and interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded, with the consent of the participant, and comprehensive notes were taken during the extent of the interviews. Each interviewee was asked the same in-depth eleven (11) questions in order to assure comparability across participant responses<sup>42</sup>. The goal of these questions was to answer the questions:

1. How do public/private food security partners in Oregon collaborate to fill gaps in household food security?
2. Have policies, institutions, and processes influenced the vulnerability context for single mothers over time? What strategies has the Task Force utilized when addressing single mother food insecurity?

When analyzing interview data, interview notes and audio were transcribed and coded to identify emerging themes. Interviews were coded using themes previously identified in literature,

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<sup>42</sup> See Appendix for list of 11 interview questions.

such as reasons for single mother insecurity and collaboration techniques utilized by collaborative governance systems.

The following results describe relevant themes extracted from interview data with the four organizational members of food security partners in Oregon that work specifically with single mother populations. The themes highlight the context of food insecurity for single mothers as well as the strategies devised to promote security for this population in Oregon. Interviews were coded based on *structural coding techniques*. Structural coding involves applying conceptual phrases to segments of data and sorting the segments for analysis based on the structure of semi-structured interview questions (Saldaña, 2009). In this study, codes were developed to answer the question, "How do public/private food security partners in Oregon collaborate to fill gaps in household food security?" and "What are the challenges of serving single mothers in Oregon and have policies, institutions, and processes influenced the vulnerability context for this population over time?" Various topic lists, categories, and themes emerged from gathering structural codes. When analyzing the interview data, several themes surfaced relating to structural processes hindering food aid and organizational approaches to remedy food insecurity.

#### Inter-Organizational Communication

All participants acknowledged the benefits resulting from inter-organizational communication within the Oregon Hunger Task Force (OHTF). Meeting at least once a month, the Task Force provides an open venue for communication among partners. Mary (an anti-hunger organizational leader) argued those that are food insecure rely on the Task Force's continuing collaboration, because each organization only has one piece to the puzzle of food insecurity. She claimed, "What they [the food insecure] can get from us is never enough to last the month. We have to be able to work collaboratively". Wilma, another organizational leader, described the communicative workings of the Task Force:

"There are nonprofits and service providers who are able to come to the same table with the state agencies—so the Department of Human Services, WIC, the Department of Education, that run the primary anti-hunger programs. And we are able to say this is what we're hearing, this is what

the focus groups found, this is what people say that they want, and are able to make those recommendations.”

Clear internal communication is necessary for clarity in the external system. Similarly, Betty (an agency head) remarked, “When we share as a Task Force—and the Department of Human Services is sharing, and non-profits, and the Department of Education—there’s a message that comes together...That’s what I believe the benefit of the Task Force is...It gives a full picture and it also gets the message to the top levels, where it is really important to be heard.”

Mary is grateful for the ability to be a member of the Task Force, claiming, “One of the biggest benefits that I get out of the Task Force is the relationship building and the information sharing I get with the state administrators and the federal programs. That it is a forum for that information sharing that is not otherwise available to me. And so I will learn about what . . . (a certain) program is doing and what they’re changing, and they will hear about the things that we’re working on and they’ll say ‘Wait, is there a way we can participate in that, or is there an opportunity for us to connect on that?’”

The OHTF serves as a platform for communication sharing among food insecurity experts in Oregon. Participants mentioned sharing their own expertise at the Task Force meetings, remarking that they have “worked successfully to expand the knowledge” of fellow partners, and one participant Bonnie mentioned her goal is “to educate and inform” and be a “voice for vulnerable children” at meetings. Inter-organizational communication surfaces ideas that can redirect the focus of anti-hunger efforts, prompting more successful campaigns. Mary mentioned that the Task Force’s “biggest utility” is its “best-practice giving” through information sharing. When one organizational team gains valuable insight and is successful with an endeavor, multiple partners can learn from it and change the current dialogue. Wilma discussed the profound effect that the “childhood hunger” focus in multiple organizations has had on the attention to the hunger movement within her organization. She shared that in order for the single mothers issue to come to the forefront, increased awareness through campaigning must be conducted in a similar fashion. She remarked, “We should launch a campaign on motherhood hunger” because “it is the parents, and particularly single mothers, who are going without food,

who are making that sacrifice, who are using every strategy they can to protect their kids.” Wilma expressed that inter-organizational collaboration would be necessary for the success of this movement.

### Data Collaboration

Participants discussed the benefits of a different and deeper form of information sharing—quantitative and qualitative data collaboration. Many local organizations collect qualitative data via focus groups with participants in federal nutrition programs. Participants commented on the great utility coming from data, as it conveys the story of population’s participation, or lack of participation, in programs, as well as trends in insecurity. With rich data, programs can be revamped for increased efficiency and effectiveness. Reacting to decreases in WIC participation, Mary noted the importance of collecting data and information from program clients:

“When I think about WIC, I think that the challenges there have to do with program design. The WIC program design was built 40 years ago and hasn’t changed all that much, and that the cost-benefit equation often doesn’t work for moms anymore—the needing to go in and talk to a nutritionist on a monthly basis can be a barrier to accessing WIC that makes moms go ‘This isn’t worth it for me, I don’t get enough food out of this for the amount of time it takes for me to get it.’”

Wilma commented on the utility of client-centered interviews because of the rich detail that they can provide for program change:

“There are barriers to when the offices are open. They’re open during business hours on weekends. So we just hear a lot of stories about how that program is out of reach because they don’t have someone else to watch their child. Or they’re taking time off work and there’s not another income to make up for that...If programs by the government were offered outside of office hours during the weekends, at places that were close to public transit, that would make it easier for everyone...Ok now we know these things, how is that informing the policy we’re crafting and program design?”

The advantage of the Oregon Hunger Task Force is the ability to share data among non-profit organizations and state agencies to build concrete policies to reduce food insecurity. The power and positioning of the Task Force allows for possible restructuring of the current system. Wilma, who helps lead focus groups, suggested that policy creation is "the most effective is when we are developing strategies in conjunction with people who are the target audience." She continued, "the reality of doing focus groups related to food insecurity is you tend to get women—rooms full of women with babies on their laps with questions in the realm of 'If you had a magic wand, what would you want to change about this program?.'" This dialogue enables real-client data to shape how policies are made. Wilma went on to share a finding from focus groups with mothers and how this data informs policy:

"If programs run by the government were offered outside of office hours during the weekends at locations that are close to public transit, that would make it easier for everyone. So most of the things we hear are structural things around how programs are provided that we directly can't change because we don't run them. But we compile and make recommendations and give them to state agencies, which is one of the things that the Task Force does well."

While local organizations collect qualitative data, it is merely a piece of the food insecurity data puzzle. Few local and state agencies collect large-scale, detailed demographic, quantitative data like national agencies like the USDA collect. Participants provided insight into the food insecurity data analytical process and how little available data has the ability to be teased apart into key variables such as race, class, and household type and tenure. One participant noted that although the WIC program collects information on mothers and children, there is little to no ability to "pull out and separate single moms. So it makes it a little challenging" to hone down to specific solutions. The potential to tease apart data on female-headed households for WIC participation, for example, assists in the assessment of which groups are being served and which groups are underserved.

The availability of group-specific data provides "tools to be able to talk about [food insecurity]" (Wilma). In recent years, a professor at Oregon State University was the first to disaggregate

USDA food insecurity statistics for the state of Oregon. The Wilma remarked on the colossal effects of this recent data availability:

"In the last two years, as we've had access to more data...pulling out more information about food insecurity among single moms, where we've been able to take that disaggregated data and say, okay, the food insecurity rate for the general population might be 16 percent or 25 percent among families with kids, but then you look at the fact that half of single moms are experiencing food insecurity...We really want to move the dial; we need to prioritize and be thinking about what particular policies can we proactively push that would address that disproportionality."

More access to group-level data furthers the push for greater awareness of gaps in food security. National statistics tend to blur the image of minority group well-being in certain states, not allowing for the identification of crucial indicators of insecurity. This is one reason why "the Task Force has worked to make questions about food insecurity available on state datasets" (Wilma).

Betty also discussed the importance of detailed food insecurity data collection:

"Together we can see a lot more of the possibilities...Work has been done to coordinate when we ask food security questions and coordinate that with other types of variables...so we have them on the same year...[With this] we can ask questions that are important for the health of people."

The ability to compare household types and isolate key variables provides the potential to create specific policy tools for groups in need. Especially in the health field, recent technological innovations allow for the building of complex data systems. Bonnie notes, "It's getting easier and easier with the electronic data records" However, data collection and analysis can be more expensive than many organizations and agencies have funding to perform. While the data collaboration among the Task Force is strong qualitatively, more quantitative research should be performed, data collected, and shared among Task Force members to reveal trends in population-specific food insecurity.

### Program Referrals

Another area in which the partners of the Oregon Hunger Task Force collaborate is with coordinating referrals to various food security services. Three participants made it apparent that there has been a *change over time* in the coordination of services. Betty commented on the fact that in previous years the Oregon Health Authority “didn’t screen for food insecurity.” Recognizing a change coming from surveying advancement, she claims, “We didn’t have the tools to coordinate some of our referral processes...So we have changed in those ways.” Change has come from recognizing food insecurity needs in clients in addition to working with health practitioners to handle food insecurity issues in a preventative manner. Betty recognized that WIC professionals “work hard with the OBGYNs to refer as soon as someone is pregnant.” Vice versa “if [OBGYNs are] seeing them on Oregon Health Plan, and they’re not on WIC, they should be referring.” Bonnie gave an example of how referrals to food security services can come from health professionals:

“In some clinics, they ask every family two questions about their food insecurity status, and ask them about what programs they are a part of, and if they need more resources. If the clinic identifies families in need of resources, they would link them to resources . . .or get a social worker to link them to resources available. Some have a food pharmacy, so they might be able to link them with vouchers for the farmers market and pick up produce.”

While the Task Force partners work within their own organizations to refer clients, the Task Force as a collaborative entity has contracts that enable client intervention strategies through community outreach. According to Betty “The Task Force has a contract with SNAP to do SNAP outreach.” Interestingly, “WIC doesn’t have a contract with [the Task Force] but they work to wrap the WIC message into what they do with the SNAP outreach. Even as subtle as, ‘You know, if you have children under the age of 5, if you’re pregnant, you also are eligible for WIC.’” In addition to encouraging program participation among community members, the Task Force creates “educational materials” that are provided for legislative purposes with the hopes of increasing awareness of program support for food insecure households.

Referrals do not merely involve a relationship between state agencies and health practitioners, but also require the assistance of non-profit and charitable organizations. Wilma mentioned that it is a primary goal of one of the partnering organizations to “connect people to existing federal nutrition programs” focusing on “SNAP, child nutrition programs—like school meals and summer meals—and WIC.” Some members of these organizations wished for further bridging of services where there appear to be gaps. Mary discussed the need for increased formal coordination of services with non-profit organizations, claiming, “The Oregon Food Bank, for example, doesn’t have formal outreach programs with the WIC program. So if they identify someone as a single mom who would qualify for WIC, what do they do in the food pantry system? How do they help make that connection? There’s more work that can be done to be a part of that connection.” Similarly, a participant echoes the future need for increased bridge-building to improve inter-organizational networks, saying, “I think we do a pretty good job of being available, doing good customer service, having people know that we exist. Then how do we cross that over into the other?” By focusing on boosting efficiency of program referrals, the Oregon Hunger Task Force is fulfilling its goal to “recommend ways of filling gaps in services” (ORS 458.545). It is apparent that the referrals process may need some reevaluation in order to better fill service gaps for certain populations.

### Vulnerability from Oppression

The vulnerability context for single mothers is apparent not only in the quantitative findings of this study, but also indirectly through interviews with members of the Oregon Hunger Task Force. Single mother households face multiple levels of oppression, leading to vulnerability of livelihoods. Typically having a single-income, renting a place of residence, being younger in age, suffering from lower levels of education, and facing sexism, single mothers suffer from the highest rates of food insecurity in Oregon, as well as nationally. All participants were aware of the strikingly high rates of food insecurity and hunger faced by single mothers in Oregon. Interestingly, many participants did not directly refer to the systemic oppression faced by single mother households as the cause of food insecurity. Participants alluded that oppression is a root cause due to the hardships faced by single mothers, but policies, institutions, and processes mostly remained unstated and implied.



For example Mary claimed, “There’s less of the formal support network that [single mothers] had in the past, [and] additional financial pressures. If you look at Oregon in general, the cost of housing, the cost of childcare—some of the highest in the nation...It makes it very difficult for moms.” One participant mentioned that having children and working is “the hardest period in your life” because of childcare issues. While single mothers are facing these struggles, there is little to no discussion of the why social policies are structured in such a fashion that promotes difficulty for single mothers. There is an unstated understanding of structural inequalities and a general lack of discussion of systemic issues, according to the interviews conducted. However, when asked about challenges and vulnerabilities faced by single mothers, Wilma blatantly mentioned the systemic poverty as a cause food insecurity:

“If we are going to move the dial of food insecurity among single mothers, you have to be looking at poverty. You have to be looking at other systemic issues. [However], it’s much easier to think about what can we do to remove barriers to participation in federal nutrition programs.”

She continued to discuss social inequalities related to poverty:

It’s economic inequality. It’s the reality of raising children. The two pieces of that identity “single” and “motherhood” are the highest predictors of whether you’re going to live in poverty... and then you couple that with having a one-income household. And the chances that you’re going to be food insecure obviously go through the roof...Our society isn’t set up for people with children to make it on one income...and then you couple that with the gender pay disparity...”

Wilma hinted that creating action and reducing food security disparities comes from changes to the social atmosphere. She remarked there is “not a clear path” to solving this issue of inequality. However, discussing barriers to participation indirectly touches on issues of social inequality. Her organization is advocating for public policy that “addresses some of those particular barriers that apply to single moms”, such as affordable childcare, employment related daycare, paid family leave, etc. These policies fill unacceptable security gaps that can result from structural inequalities, such as the fact that single mother households typically are one-income, low-income

families without proper resources to care for children during working business hours. She mentioned that the Task Force “always had single mothers in mind” with reforms related to TANF expansion and income tax credits, which are primarily taken advantage of by vulnerable populations, including single mothers. However, single mothers’ food insecurity issues have not been formally recognized or at the forefront of the policy battle in these efforts.

### STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS SINGLE MOTHER’S FOOD INSECURITY

The Task Force has utilized a variety of strategies to address single mother food insecurity. A couple of these have seen changes over time:

Strategy 1: Redirecting the Blame. Reflecting on the last decade, Task Force participants recognized a shift in the way hunger is approached by their respective organizations, especially for the single mother population. Organizations are recently granting more light to systemic and situational causes of food insecurity rather than dispositional and personal causes; this indirectly creates awareness of inequalities which perpetuate the food insecurity cycle for disadvantaged groups. All members acknowledged recent organizational priorities in regards to bringing awareness to the root causes of hunger.

Participants overwhelmingly discussed how revealing the story of single mothers and bringing awareness to a single mother’s struggle are the most important steps to changing perceptions about poverty and food insecurity. When discussing disadvantaged populations, participants acknowledged a societal-wide “blaming” with phrases like, “Oh, you’re food insecure because of choices you’ve made” (Betty). In an effort to seek tools which fight for more comprehensive understanding, one member discussed the realities of motherhood from a systems-blaming approach:

“Our public perception is that the hungriest person in Oregon is someone who doesn’t deserve the help. Someone who could work and isn’t. And so for us to turn that on its head and say the hungriest person in Oregon is someone who is a mom with small kids...because when you have

small kids, working and maintaining employment is the hardest period in your life...your expenses are at the absolute highest...because of childcare, because of health insurance for kids, because of child seats and all the equipment that small children need. Your expenses are at your highest and your ability to maintain employment is at its shakiest" (Mary).

Strategy 2: Raising Her Voice. Using the stories of the target audience “raises the voices of people experiencing hunger” (Wilma) and “gives a more complete picture of what people are facing” Betty). Participants remarked that qualitative research with groups experiencing hunger is becoming increasingly popular to capture the stories of the food insecure. Wilma highlighted a program in Philadelphia called Witnesses to Hunger, a research and advocacy project partnering with mothers and caregivers experiencing hunger. This program has mothers and caregivers who are experiencing poverty and food security photograph daily issues they face, with the hopes of spreading awareness and informing policymakers to promote community change. She claimed that this program is a model example of how to raise the voices of mothers in Oregon:

“[They] provide training and support and funds to be able to take these groups of women to D.C. to testify with members of Congress and talk to the media to really help share their stories and be advocates...That’s my vision, that’s...one way that I would like for us to focus on the experience of mothers” (Wilma).

Wilma emphasized the importance of the Task Force in coupling original stories with community awareness and engagement, especially “external audiences that [aren’t] experiencing hunger.” Participants mentioned how the Task Force “put[s] together educational materials that go out for business groups, they’ve done business seminars, they’ve worked with the legislature to educate them on the root causes of hunger” (Betty). The Task Force acts as an advocacy body, “taking those messages and carrying them forward” Betty). Organizations have brought equity issues to light via social media, including agency websites and Facebook.

Strategy 3: Altering Policy Focus. The interviewed Task Force members have displayed the entity’s ability to collaborate and provided areas where improvement is needed.

Organizationally, an area in which the Task Force has exceeded in recent years is its recognition of the root causes of food insecurity and hunger and its strategies to produce policies that aim at altering institutions and processes that perpetuate vulnerability contexts. In 2010, the Task Force devised its second statewide plan “Ending Hunger Before It Begins: Oregon’s Call to Action 2010-2015.” The proposed goals involved increasing economic stability for all, improving food assistance safety nets, and cultivating a strong regional food system in the state (Oregon Hunger Task Force, 2010). The most recent statewide plan for 2017-2018 takes a more equitable focus, and this change is apparent not only at the Task Force level, but also at individual organizational levels. The two goals include addressing the root causes of hunger in addition to increasing access to nutrition support programs. With this new equity-lens, the Task Force plans to support programs for childcare, paid family leave, housing policies, health policies, and taxing policies (Oregon Hunger Task Force, 2017b). The members of the Task Force continue to be a voice for vulnerable populations. The following analysis disentangles how the focus of the Task Force body is currently in a transitional period from developing universal policies to developing targeted universal policies.

It is evident that many policies and programs in the food security arena in Oregon have specific population groups that are the forefront of their efforts, yet policy seems to follow universal approaches. Universal approaches to policy apply to an entire population rather than a priority sub-group within the population. Within this doctrine, “eligibility and access are based simply on being part of a defined population such as all women, all children under age six, or all people living in a particular geographic area, without any further qualifiers such as income, education, class race, place of origin, or employment status” (National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health, 2013). This signifies that “each member of society...[has] equal access to basic services such as education or health care,” when this may not be true in the case of rooted social inequality.

All interviewed participants reported that there are not many active projects aimed specifically at improving food insecurity for single mothers, but "there is a common, shared awareness and a motivation to want to do something" (Wilma). Due to the nature of social inequality structures, single mothers tend to be a majority of those enrolled in the services provided by nonprofits and

state agencies, including WIC, SNAP, and TANF. For example, Wilma claimed that her organization's focus on single mothers in TANF is "not necessarily an intentional effort." However, "by virtue of that program...that [single mothers] is the primary population that is a beneficiary of TANF." Participants claimed that on the surface, it may seem as though single mothers are not receiving proper outreach and accessibility to services. Three participants claimed that single mothers are not a priority above other food insecure groups that face similar barriers as other family groups:

"There's a lot of challenges. It's not a single mothers population. Most ... moms are married. The majority of ... families are working families" (Betty).

"We are not calling out single mothers specifically to say that there is a different set of resources that are needed for single mothers...So that...the [office] hours are open for people that are working, [and this] would be true for single moms as much as it would be true for other working families...I guess I would say that I'm not trying to target programming specifically for single moms, but we are trying to target programming in a way that thinks about people with kids, people with transportation challenges, people who are working; and so how is our system built up to go with all of these multiple barriers....So that it will work well for everyone. Including single moms" (Mary).

"I would say that [we] recognize that need [to serve single mothers], but the purpose is to address the needs of children. So we certainly do address children of single mothers as a vulnerable group. It's not our primary purpose, but it's underneath what we do...We work with everybody. There are single mothers that we work with. We try to screen them for food insecurity and try to point them to resources the same that we would with other people" (Bonnie).

Participants all recognized the exceedingly high rates of food insecurity for single mothers; however, two discussed that there is ambiguity as to "what the Task Force's role would be or what we could do" to lower these rates. One participant mentioned the changing nature of more recent Task Force agenda, which is now leaning towards a "targeted universal" lens in recent years. According to the Haas Institute at the University of California, Berkeley, **targeted**

**universalism** is the concept that universal goals can be achieved through targeted approaches, addressing "the varying needs of each group while reminding us that we are all part of the same social fabric" (Haas Institute, 2017). Rather than developing policies that aim at decreasing food insecurity rates for the entire population, targeted approaches focus on sub-populations that fall short of the goal. This notion is based on a belief that specific "social constructs (for example, classism, sexism, racism and colonization) are barriers to equitable access to the determinants of health, and that interventions directed to disadvantaged members of society are needed to close the health gap" (National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health, 2013).

Studying the Task Force's state-wide plan for 2017-2018, it is apparent that targeted universalism was in mind during the development of goal strategies. For example, the first goal of "addressing the root causes of hunger so more Oregonians can purchase the food they need" is followed by this strategy:

"Strategy 3: Protect access to health care for low income Oregonians through Medicaid and promote expanded use of health systems best practices to promote food security for vulnerable populations (e.g. food insecure, chronic conditions, malnutrition, homebound, seniors, etc.)" (Oregon Hunger Task Force, 2017b).

The strategy to address root causes of hunger focuses on vulnerable sub-populations rather than on all food insecure Oregonians. In its second goal of "increasing access to food through nutrition support programs", a strategy involves increasing "emergency food services in 10 underserved communities (geographically and demographically)."

This targeted mindset is present not only in the overarching Task Force body, but also in the individual organizations' missions. For example, the legislative priorities and public policies of one organization, Partners for a Hunger Free Oregon, stem from roots in targeted universalism. An Equity Statement, publicized by the organization, "points to elevated rates of food insecurity for single mothers, by people of color, people of rural Oregon, people of LGBTQ communities..." (Wilma). Within this statement, the organization vows to "contextualize instances of historical and current oppression into the conversations [they] are a part of" and

“advocate for policy changes to dismantle systemic oppression” (Kirschner, 2016). Wilma discussed policies in the works which target a specific subset of the food insecure population:

“There are, in addition to TANF, a couple [of policies] that...address some of those particular barriers that apply to single moms. One of them is around affordable childcare. Employment-related daycare is something that we really advocate for expanding and funding so that families can take advantage of that. The other being paid family leave—knowing how difficult that is. Particularly for mothers that don’t have paid time off from work and how soon they have to return to work, and how able they are to return to work.”

Furthering policy-work which focuses on specific populations seems to be a logical follow-through from the Task Force’s state-wide plan. A continued targeted strategy rooted in understanding causes of food insecurity is likely to make headway in the current climate and will certainly inform the greater population about the vulnerabilities of specific populations, like single mothers.

### Conclusion and Next Steps

Through this investigation of food insecurity for single mothers in Oregon, it is evident that this issue is a wicked problem that requires continued attention by community leaders, academics, and researchers, and policymakers alike. Readdressing the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, some intervention needs to occur at the structural/processes level to improve vulnerability for those with few assets or capital. Single mothers have been exposed to varying levels of vulnerability across time, particularly around the time of the Recession, with increases in renting status and possible struggles to gain participation in nutrition assistance programs. The fact that single mothers’ food insecurity rates remain so high and stagnant across time signifies that insecurity could have risen to greater heights without present support systems, but it could also signify that certain structural barriers to program participation remain in place for single mothers. Unfortunately, many of these changes over time are perpetuated by systemic oppression, and therefore it is increasingly difficult to recognize simple solutions to more pressing issues, such as increases in rental prices. However, many efforts have been made by members of the Oregon Hunger Task Force to recognize and eliminate barriers that are within

reach of alteration for these insecure single mothers. These efforts should continue at this caliber to see continued progress for single mothers.

The Task Force makes a complete commitment to minority and underserved populations. While not directly focusing on single mothers, the Task Force utilizes inter-organizational communication and collaboration to understand how systems harm marginalized populations. They have gathered skills, knowledge, and brilliant strategies to be able to raise the story of single mothers. There is no doubt that the Task Force has helped to ease insecurity as well as involve others in a movement against hunger. However, there are many steps that the Task Force can continue to take in future years to continue to be at the forefront of the food insecurity issue for single mothers. Creating a movement focused on targeted universalism for single mothers may not increase the number of assets single mothers hold, but it will ease the systemic oppression faced by this specific population and continue to shelter them from vulnerability shocks. A targeted universalism movement could come in the form of program assistance or subsidized housing options for women who are experiencing difficulty paying their rents. It could also come in the form of an organized movement to ensure childcare costs are kept reasonable and affordable for working women. Additionally, education scholarships to keep single mother retention and graduation at competing levels could be very beneficial for this population. Before any of these policies are supported, there should be a thorough investigation into the capacity of resources. While single mothers do lack capital and access to resources like many other hungry populations, they also have increased vulnerability because of the economic and social inequality that comes with sexism and being a single-headed-household. With a targeted universalism movement, single mothers may be better protected from vulnerabilities.

Within this strategic movement, there can be increased data collection and collaboration to determine the needs of single mothers. The data on single mothers in Oregon that is publicly available, or used among organizations, is limited in scope. Because of data limitations, differences across time may have been muted due to small sample sizes. With larger samples of single mothers, or a population specifically focused on single mothers, trends may be more easily recognized across time. Data specifically focused on state-wide or local populations over time may also be able to tell specific geographic stories. More qualitative work with single mothers, with the hope of sharing findings among organizations could provide crucial insight into how participation in programs can be made more accessible and valuable for this population.



Exposing specific barriers faced by involving stories of single mothers can spur collaborative discussion and ignite a fire to solve the wicked problem of food insecurity.

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## Appendix

**OHTF: Interview Guide**

- Please state your name and your position (which makes you affiliated with the Oregon Hunger Task Force).
- How long have you been working for your current organization?
- How long have you been involved in anti-hunger work in Oregon?
- Approximately how long have you have been with the Task Force?
- What *role* does your agency/organization play in reducing food insecurity? How does your agency/organization assess food security *need* in the population?
- How do you believe approaches to food insecurity have changed within your agency/organization within the last 15 years?
- To what extent does your agency/organization recognize the need to specifically assist single mothers in Oregon?
- What challenges arise with serving this population, and what specific measures have been taken to ensure food security for this population over time?
- How can outreach to single mothers be improved by your agency/organization?

- To what extent has your agency/organization's participation in the Task Force assisted in information sharing and decision-making when addressing Oregon hunger?
- Please provide an example of a successful *collaboration* effort among the partners of the Oregon Hunger Task Force.
- How has the Task Force helped to promote community awareness and conduct outreach for food insecure single mothers in Oregon? How has this changed over time?