

NONMETROPOLITAN HUNGER AND FOOD SECURITY IN THE NORTHWEST

The United States is commonly believed to be a food-secure nation. However, for the past decade, hunger and food insecurity have been major concerns in the Northwest. Many people in Oregon and Washington were surprised in the late 1990s when these states were found to have the highest hunger and food insecurity rates in the country.

Recent studies conducted by OSU Rural Studies researchers found that this situation has been improving. For example, food insecurity and hunger have declined in Oregon in recent years while increasing slightly in the rest of the U.S. (Figure 1). The downward trend in Oregon is good news, but the studies found that households with certain socioeconomic characteristics continue to have difficulty providing enough food for everyone in their family.

COMPARING METRO AND NONMETRO AREAS

One of the studies compared metropolitan (metro) and nonmetro areas in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. Food insecurity was higher in nonmetro (rural) areas than in metro areas for households with unemployed, partially employed, or fully employed adults and in households with two adults and children. Hispanic food insecurity rates were dramatically higher than rates for non-Hispanics, regardless of location.

Overall, the study found that Northwest food insecurity is significantly higher in nonmetro than in metro places. This pattern is not seen in the rest of the country.

THE ROLE OF EMPLOYMENT

To better understand these findings, the study looked in detail at how Northwesterners' occupations are related to food insecurity and hunger. Among nonmetro-area households with women working outside the home, households experienced higher food insecurity when women worked in administrative support, sales, blue collar, or service occupations compared to professional, technical, or managerial occupations. Ironically, the study also found that some of the most common jobs in food-insecure households were in the food preparation and food serving industries.

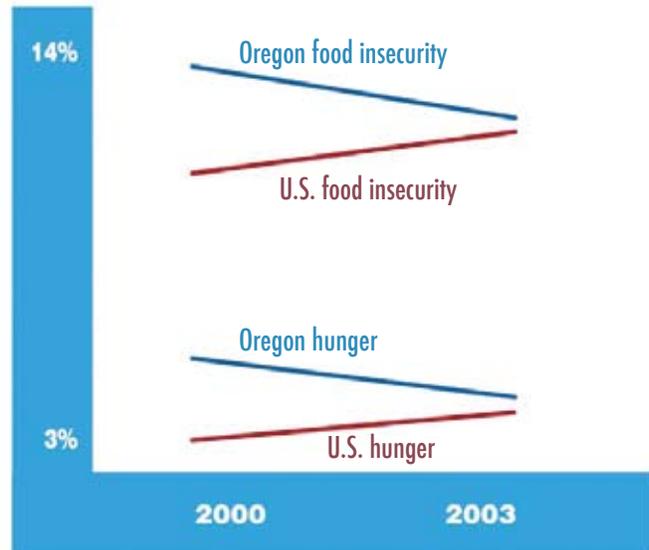


Figure 1. From 2000 to 2003, food insecurity and hunger decreased in Oregon while increasing in the U.S. overall.

WHAT EXACTLY ARE HUNGER AND FOOD INSECURITY?

The study examined data from the Food Security Supplement to the Current Population Survey, which is conducted annually by the Census Bureau. According to the Survey, food insecurity and hunger indicate serious disruptions in usual patterns of food consumption. These disruptions are due to insufficient money or other resources for food.

Households are classified as food-secure, food-insecure without hunger, or food-insecure with hunger. Households that have been uncertain about having enough food to meet basic needs in the previous year (because of insufficient money) are classified as “food insecure without hunger,” or food insecure. Households that have experienced serious disruptions in food intake

due to insufficient income at some point during the year are classified as “food insecure with hunger,” or hungry. University and government researchers created these definitions to distinguish between difficulties in obtaining food and restrictions in food intake due to dieting or intentional fasting.¹

IMPLICATIONS

Based on the studies’ findings, OSU researchers suggest that food insecurity and hunger need to be taken seriously by public agencies, volunteer groups, and the public. OSU faculty continue to study why hunger and food insecurity rates vary among states, and why rates have changed more in some states than in others. For example, as Oregon’s hunger rate declined in the early 2000s, its federal food stamp enrollment increased more than any other state’s. It is likely that hunger and food insecurity rates do not change randomly but rather are the result of changing economic circumstances and the actions of government and advocacy groups.

¹ In 2006 the USDA, based on suggestions by the National Academy of Sciences, stopped using the word “hunger” in favor of the phrase “very low food security.” The rationale for the change was that available data do not measure nutritional status nor the physical sensation of hunger. Although the term has been changed in USDA publications, readers should recognize that families with “very low food security” experience the same difficulties feeding their families as when their experience was labeled “hunger.”

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