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Oregon Rural Residents, Workers, and Renters More Likely to go Hungry Compared to their Counterparts Nationally

(Silverton, OR) At the peak of Oregon's economic expansion rural Oregonians were more than twice as likely to live in homes with hunger than were residents of rural areas nationally, according to an analysis of recently released census data by the Oregon Center for Public Policy (OCPP). Workers and renters in Oregon were also more likely to live in homes with hunger than workers and renters nationally.

Rural Oregonians

OCPP's analysis of Census data for 1998 through 2000 showed that 7.2 percent of rural Oregonians lived in homes with hunger, compared with just 3.1 percent of rural residents nationally. Oregon's overall hunger rate for 1998-2000 was 6.2 percent. The national rate over the same period was 3.3 percent.

"These findings confirm that Oregon's rural economy is failing many of its residents," said Michael Leachman, policy analyst for OCPP. "There aren't enough jobs, too many jobs pay low wages, and too many jobs disappear in the winter."

"A high hunger rate during our best economic times is particularly troubling and helps explain the increased demand at food banks throughout the state," said Leachman. "The prosperity of the 1990s was too short-lived in rural Oregon to make up for the long-term economic decline."

Leachman noted that the annual earnings of workers in all regions of the state except the Portland area were lower in 2000 than they were in 1979, after adjusting for inflation. On the Oregon Coast, earnings were down 19 percent.

Leachman added that in the last half of the 1990s, Oregon's rural counties posted an unemployment rate substantially higher than the rate in rural areas nationally. Moreover, he said, the unemployment rate in rural Oregon fluctuated much more than the rate in rural areas nationally.

Workers and Renters

Oregon's hunger rates for workers and renters were significantly higher than the rates nationally in 1998-2000. Workers in Oregon had a hunger rate of 4.4 percent, while

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nationally 2.3 percent of workers lived in homes where at least one member went hungry. Renters in Oregon had a hunger rate of 11.5 percent, compared to 7.2 percent nationally.

“Workers in Oregon are more likely to work in low-wage service and retail industries than their parents were,” said Leachman. “On average, the poorest fifth of families in the state earned less income in the late 1990s than they did ten or twenty years earlier.”

As rents rose over the last decade, low-wage workers in Oregon felt their incomes increasingly squeezed, particularly in areas experiencing rapid growth in rental costs. The percentage of renters in Multnomah County spending more than 35 percent of their income for rent nearly doubled over the 1990s.

The rental cost squeeze is a key part of the reason for Oregon’s high hunger rate, said Leachman. “People who don’t have enough money to pay the bills know they can skip a meal and get by until the next day. They may be tired at work and less active at home, but they’ll still have a roof over their heads.”

Oregon’s 6.2 percent overall hunger rate means Oregon has one of the highest rates in the nation. Because of sampling error in the Census survey, it is only likely, not certain, that Oregon’s is the highest in the nation. Oregon also posted likely the highest state hunger rate on an earlier version of the survey conducted in 1996-98.

The OCPP analyzed three years of data (1998 to 2000) from the Food Security Supplement to the Current Population Survey, a Census Bureau survey conducted once a year in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The survey determines whether households are “food insecure” - financially stretched to the point they cannot be certain all household members will avoid hunger without resorting to emergency measures like soup kitchens or food banks. Some food insecure households avoid hunger; others do not. The survey also determines whether at least one household member went hungry at times because there was not enough money for food.

Note charts on next page.

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Food insecurity and hunger rates for various groups in Oregon vs. the US, 1998-2000

	Percent living in food insecure homes		Percent living in homes where at least one member goes hungry	
	Oregon	US	Oregon	US
Children	22.6%	18.2%	6.5%	4.2%
All persons	15.7%*	12.4%	5.9%*	3.2%
Workers ¹	12.7%*	8.9%	4.4%*	2.3%
Less than bachelor's degree ²	14.3%	11.8%	6.2%*	3.3%
Hispanics	n/a	25.6%	n/a	5.8%
Blacks	n/a	24.2%	n/a	6.8%
Non-Hispanic whites	13.4%*	8.1%	5.0%*	2.2%
Metropolitan area residents	14.4%	12.2%	5.3%*	3.2%
Rural area residents	19.5%	13.0%	7.2%*	3.1%
Renters	30.2%	24.6%	11.5%*	7.2%
Homeowners ³	8.1%	7.4%	3.0%	1.6%
Low-Income ⁴	35.2%	29.9%	13.3%*	8.2%

Source: OCPP analysis of Food Security Supplement to the CPS, 1998-00
 * = statistically significant difference from US figure (90 percent confidence)
 n/a = survey sample was not large enough for reliable results, or margin of error was too wide

Overall rates: household level

Percentage of food insecure households, households with hunger, Oregon vs. US, 1998-2000		
	Percent that are food insecure	Percent where at least one member goes hungry
Households in Oregon	14.4%	6.2%
Households in the US	10.8%	3.3%

Source: OCPP analysis of Food Security Supplement to the CPS, 1998-2000

¹ Oregonians who were employed at the time the survey was taken.

² People age 25 and over.

³ Includes all members of households owned by someone in the household.

⁴ Persons in households with incomes under 185% of the poverty line (185% of poverty equals \$27,787 annually for a family of three in 2002).