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Food Insecurity, Hunger and the Great Recession

Findings from two recent surveys on food insecurity and hunger in Oregon during the downturn and the response by the SNAP program

by Jason Gettel*

The Great Recession created a long list of economic hardship for Oregonians, including sharply higher unemployment, declining income and higher poverty rates. These conditions would seem to be the perfect ingredients for rising hunger and food insecurity rates.

And yet, at least when it comes to food insecurity, such effect has not come to pass. Two separate surveys show that following the onset of the recession, food insecurity rates in Oregon have stayed relatively unchanged.

When it comes to hunger, the most severe form of food insecurity, the two surveys provide differing results. One survey shows no significant change in Oregon's hunger rate following the start of the recession, while the other survey shows a sharp increase. Either way, Oregon's level of hunger — and of food insecurity — remain unacceptably high.

While Oregon's food insecurity rate has remained constant following the start of the recession, the number of Oregon households receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program¹) benefits has risen significantly. The number of households benefiting from this public food assistance program has increased by 68 percent since the start of the recession in December 2007, and the amount of benefits households have received has also increased. The increases in beneficiaries and benefits of SNAP illustrate the importance of having strong public structures that protect Oregonians in times of emergency.

Great Recession: A Recipe for Increased Food Insecurity and Hunger

The Great Recession, the most severe economic downturn in the last seven decades, brought with it the ingredients for increased hunger and food insecurity.

Higher unemployment rates would seemingly make it harder for Oregon families to put food on the table. Oregon's seasonally adjusted unemployment rate topped out at 11.6 percent in May and June 2009, up from 5.2 percent in November 2007, just prior to the recession. It has remained at 10.5 percent through October 2010 (the most recent data available).² To make matters worse, a much larger share of unemployed Oregonians have endured extended periods of unemployment than prior to the onset of the recession.

Other troubling developments are the decline in median income and rise in poverty. From 2007 to 2009 the income of the typical (median) Oregon household dropped by about \$1,900. And over the same period the share of Oregonians living in poverty rose from 12.9 percent to 14.3 percent.³

Oregon Food Insecurity Rates Remain Stable

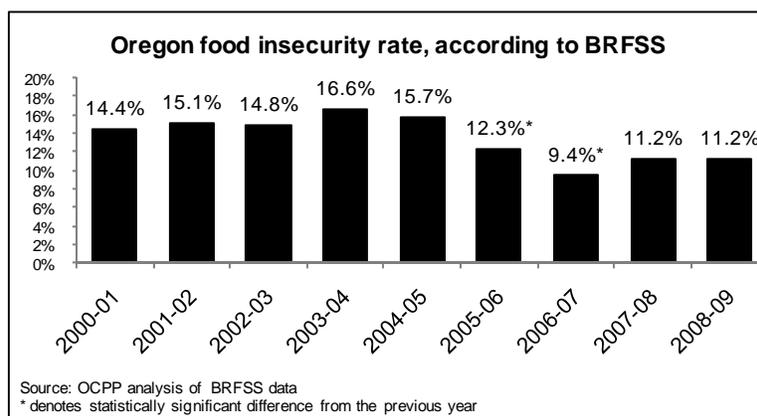
Food insecurity is defined as “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.”⁴ Food insecure households are not always sure where their next meal is coming from. In the majority of cases, even though they do not know how they will pay for their next meal, family members are able to avoid actually going hungry.

While the increased economic hardships wrought by the recession appear to be a recipe for greater food insecurity in Oregon, food insecurity has held steady, according to two separate surveys that estimate the level.

One of those surveys is the Oregon-specific Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) survey, conducted annually by the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) in conjunction with the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Since the BRFSS survey is conducted throughout the year, and respondents are asked about their experiences over the last 12 months, each year’s results actually reflect the conditions of a two-year period. For example, the 2009 survey analyzed in this paper estimates the level of food insecurity over 2008-09.

OCPP analysis of the BRFSS data shows that Oregon has not experienced any statistically significant increase in food insecurity levels following the onset of the recession in December 2007. Specifically, the data show that the share of adult Oregonians living in households with food insecurity remained at 11.2 percent in 2008-09, the same as in 2007-08.⁵ Statistically, these levels were not significantly different from the Oregon’s food insecurity rate in 2006-07.

Oregon’s food insecurity rates during the recession, moreover, remain below levels seen earlier this decade in BRFSS surveys. Food insecurity in Oregon peaked at 16.6 percent in 2003-04 according to the BRFSS data, which began surveying food insecurity and hunger in Oregon in 2001.⁶



A national survey sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau as a supplement to the monthly Current Population Survey also examines food insecurity at the state level. The survey, conducted in December of each year, reflects the experiences of respondents during that same calendar year. While the survey provides useful annual figures for food insecurity nationwide, due to the small sampling size for individual states, proper analysis of state-level food insecurity requires the use of a three-year average of survey data.

The most recent USDA survey, published in November 2010, also shows stable food insecurity in Oregon during the recession. According to the USDA survey, Oregon experienced no statistically significant change between 2004-06 and 2007-09. In other words, from the period before the recession to the period that includes the recession, the survey found no significant change in Oregon's food insecurity level.⁷

The stability of Oregon's food insecurity rate during the recession set the state apart from the nation overall. Oregon's food insecurity rate of 13.9 percent in 2007-09 was not significantly different from the national average rate of 13.5 percent in that same period. During the same time span, the national level of food insecurity showed a significant increase of 2.2 percentage points (from 11.3 percent to 13.5 percent).⁸

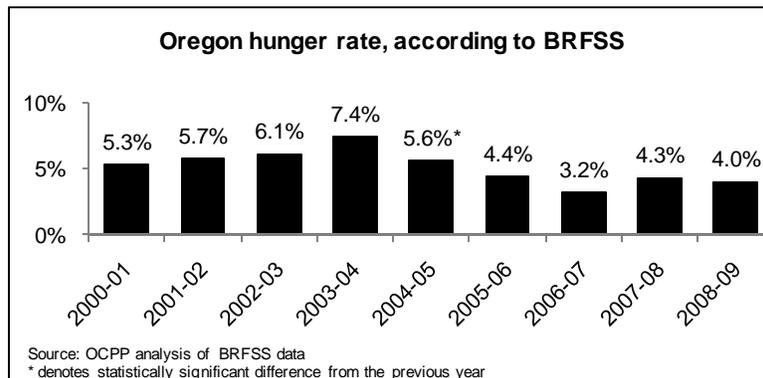
Although there is good news in the fact that Oregon food insecurity rates have remained stable despite the recession, the overall message from both surveys is a troubling one. One in nine adult Oregonians, according to the BRFSS, still lives in a household not knowing where the next meal will come from. The USDA survey estimates that ratio as one in eight and no different than the national average. Either way, Oregon's food insecurity level remains unacceptably high and is not improving.

Recession's Impact on Oregon Hunger Rate is Flat or Rising

Hunger is the most severe form of food insecurity. It is the "uneasy or painful sensation caused by a lack of food; the recurrent and involuntary lack of access to food."⁹ The USDA no longer uses the term "hunger," employing instead the term "very low food security." A household is considered as having very low food security if "the food intake of one or more household members was reduced and their eating patterns were disrupted at times during the year because the household lacked money and other resources for food."¹⁰ In other words, someone in the house was forced to go hungry because of inadequate access to food. To be consistent with the BRFSS survey, and to make use of a term meaningful to the general public, OCPP (and others) continues to use the term "hunger" to describe households with very low food security.

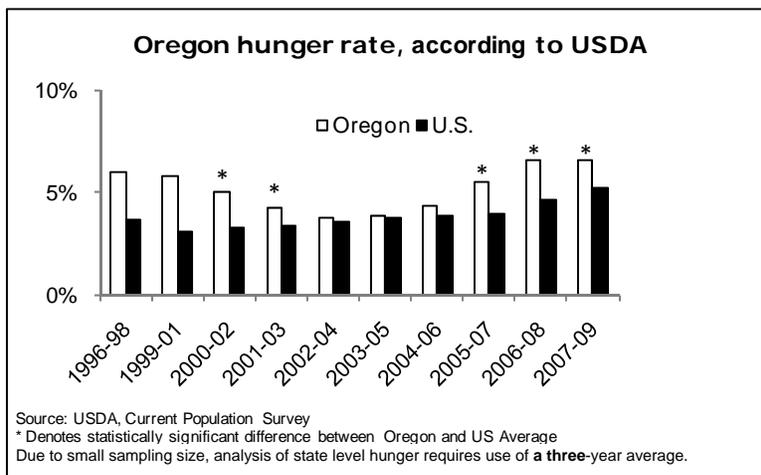
The impact of the recession on Oregon's hunger rate is not altogether clear, given differing results from the BRFSS and USDA surveys: the former shows no significant impact, while the latter shows a sharp increase in Oregon's hunger rate.

The BRFSS data show that the share of adult Oregonians living in households with hunger has, like food insecurity, remained stable in the face of tough economic conditions. In 2008-09, 4.0 percent of adult Oregonians were in households with hunger, virtually unchanged from 4.3 percent in 2007-08.¹¹ As with food insecurity, the level of hunger during 2008-09 remained below the levels of the first half of the decade.¹²



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The USDA survey, however, shows a decidedly negative outcome when it comes to Oregon's hunger rate. It shows that the rate of hunger among Oregon households for 2007-09 was 6.6 percent — a 50 percent increase from Oregon's 2004-06 level of 4.4 percent.¹³ According to the USDA, Oregon's 6.6 percent hunger rate during the recession period exceeded the national average of 5.2 percent.¹⁴ Although the national hunger rate increased as well over the same time period, Oregon's increase was more pronounced. The national hunger rate increased 1.3 percentage points, a 33 percent increase compared to Oregon's 50 percent increase.¹⁵

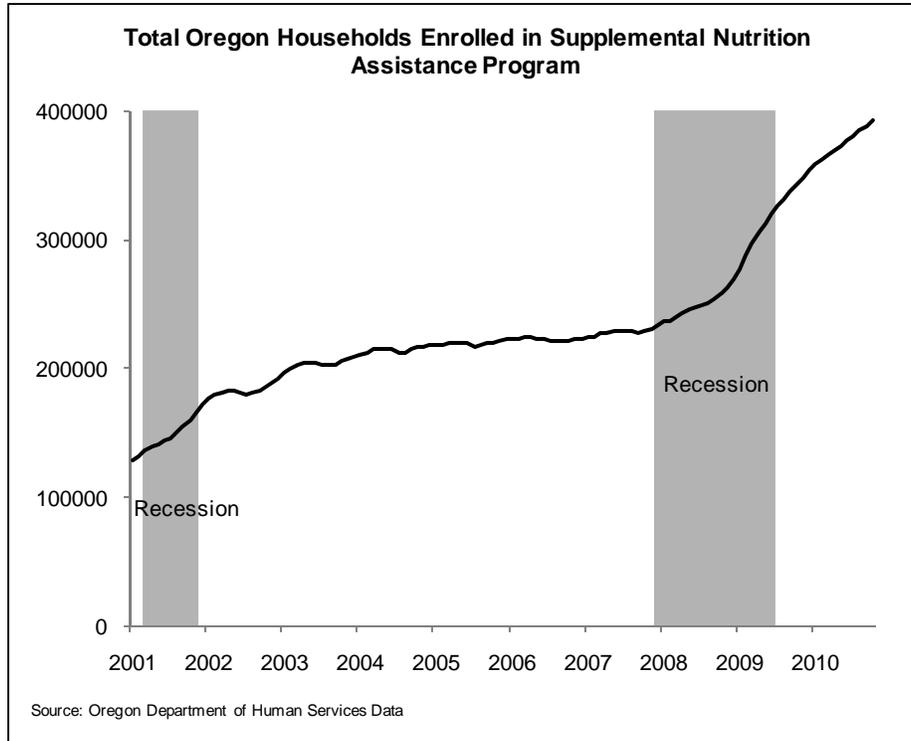


While it is worth exploring why the BRFSS and USDA surveys have different estimates of changes in the rate of hunger in Oregon, one thing that both surveys agree on is that Oregon saw no improvement in its hunger rate. That rate, like the rate of food insecurity, remains unacceptably high, as no one should go hungry.

SNAP, the Federal Food Stamp Program, Responds to Economic Emergency

Even though the two surveys differ on the question of whether Oregon's hunger rate worsened, both the BRFSS and USDA found no significant increase in Oregon's food insecurity rate following the start of the recession. Researchers and policymakers would be remiss if they did not consider the increased participation and increased levels of benefits in the federally-funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) when evaluating these survey results.

SNAP is the main public structure in place to protect Americans from going hungry in times of economic crisis. The program seems to be working as intended. Earlier in this decade, in response to survey data showing Oregon with hunger rates among the highest in the nation, the state broadened eligibility requirements for food stamp benefits. That change has made it less likely that obtaining a low-wage job will exclude someone from receiving food stamps.



The number of households in Oregon enrolled in SNAP increased dramatically through the economic downturn. During the three years prior to the beginning of the recession, from November 2004 to November 2007, the number of households receiving benefits increased by 14,777 households, a 6.8 percent increase.¹⁶ By contrast, from December 2007, the official start of the recession, through October 2010, the period of most recent data, the number increased by more than 158,000 households.¹⁷ That amounts to an increase of nearly 70 percent in less than three years.

In addition to greater participation, the level of benefits has also gone up, thanks in part to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (the Recovery Act). The Recovery Act implemented a 13.6 percent increase in funding for SNAP. On average, a household in Oregon saw a 37 percent increase or \$65 added to its monthly benefits since September 2007.¹⁸ By helping to raise the level of benefits starting in April 2009, the Recovery Act has played an important role in helping Oregonians keep food on the table.

The increase in benefits per household and the growing number of households receiving benefits have boosted the total combined SNAP benefits received by Oregonians. In the month before the official start of the recession, Oregon households received approximately \$43 million in food stamp benefits.¹⁹ By the beginning of 2010 the monthly total had more than doubled to over \$86 million and has continued to climb through the most recent data available.²⁰ In October of 2010, Oregon households together received over \$94 million in total benefits.²¹

In addition to allowing struggling families to keep food on the table, SNAP injects significant amounts of money into Oregon's economy. The federal government pays for all of the benefits, while Oregon and the federal government split the administrative costs. Since the beginning of the recession, SNAP has brought more than \$2.4 billion into Oregon's economy.²² These funds are provided to Oregonians trying to make ends meet and are typically spent quickly within the local economy.

Conclusion

Despite the most severe recession in seven decades, Oregon's food insecurity rate has not changed. The picture is less clear in terms of hunger. One survey estimates no significant change in the rate of hunger in Oregon; another shows a sharp increase. Ultimately, Oregon's hunger and food insecurity rates remain unacceptably high.

The news with respect to food insecurity and hunger in Oregon could well be worse had the federal government not increased benefit amounts and Oregon not increased the enrollment in SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program. SNAP appears to be playing a role in responding to the economic downturn while Oregon's hunger and food insecurity rates remain unacceptably high.

Endnotes

¹ The Food Stamp Program changed its name to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program on January 1, 2010 to emphasize a "focus on nutrition and putting healthy food within reach for low income Oregonians." See Oregon Department of Human Services website, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, available at <http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/assistance/foodstamps/foodstamps.shtml>.

² Oregon Employment Department data, available at <http://www.qualityinfo.org/olmisj/OlmisZine>.

³ "Oregon's Poverty Rate Rises, Median Income Drops: Sobering data arrives as cuts threaten protections for very poor families, news release," September 28, 2010, available at <http://www.ocpp.org/cgi-bin/display.cgi?page=nr20100928ACSPov>.

⁴ Panel to Review U.S. Department of Agriculture's Measurement of Food Insecurity and Hunger, National Research Council, *Measuring Food Insecurity and Hunger: Phase 1 Report* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2005), citing Anderson 1990. Also see Michael Leachman and Joy Margheim, *Empty Cupboards, Empty Feelings: Food insecurity, depression and suicide are intertwined*, November 28, 2007, available at <http://www.ocpp.org/2007/20071128BRFSSfnl.pdf>.

⁵ OCPP analysis of Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System survey data. For more information see <http://www.dhs.state.or.us/dhs/ph/chs/brfs/brfss.shtml>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Although the survey does report an increase of two percentage points in the rate of food insecurity, this number falls within the margin of error of the survey. Therefore, this change could be due to sampling variation and may not reflect any real change among the population.

⁸ Mark Nord, Alisha Colman-Jensen, Margaret Andrews and Steven Carlson, *Household Food Security in the United States, 2009*, USDA, Economic Research Report Number 108, November 2010, p. 21, available at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR108/ERR108.pdf>.

⁹ Panel to Review USDA's Measurement of Food Insecurity and Hunger, National Research Council, *Measuring Food Insecurity and Hunger: Phase 1 Report* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2005), citing Anderson 1990. Also see Michael Leachman and Joy Margheim, *Empty Cupboards, Empty Feelings: Food insecurity, depression and suicide are intertwined*, November 28, 2007, available at <http://www.ocpp.org/2007/20071128BRFSSfnl.pdf>.

¹⁰ Nord, et. al. 2010, p. i.

¹¹ OCPP analysis of Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System survey data. For more information see <http://www.dhs.state.or.us/dhs/ph/chs/brfs/brfss.shtml>.

¹² The rate of hunger for 2001-05 ranged from a low of 5.3 percent (2001) to a high of 7.4 percent (2004).

¹³ Nord, et. al. 2010, p. 21.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 20.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Oregon DHS, Self-Sufficiency Programs, Branch and District Data, available at <http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/assistance/data/archive.shtml> - 2007.

¹⁷ Oregon DHS, Supplemental Nutrition Program Flash Figures, October 2010, available at http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/assistance/data/branch_bk/fsflash.pdf.

¹⁸ USDA, Food and Nutrition Service Recovery Act website, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fns/recovery/recovery-snap.htm> and Oregon DHS, Self Sufficiency Data Charts, p. 35, September 2010, available at http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/assistance/data/branch_bk/grnbk.pdf. Also see “Five Effective Economic Recovery Tools: Federal Recovery Act’s major direct assistance programs prove their worth,” issue brief, March 18, 2010, available at <http://www.ocpp.org/cgi-bin/display.cgi?page=is20100318Direct>.

¹⁹ Oregon DHS, Self Sufficiency Data Charts, pp. 33-35, August 2010, available at http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/assistance/data/branch_bk/grnbk.pdf.

²⁰ OCPP analysis of Oregon DHS data.

²¹ Oregon DHS, Supplemental Nutrition Program Flash Figures, October 2010, available at http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/assistance/data/branch_bk/fsflash.pdf.

²² OCPP analysis of Oregon DHS data.

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