



# Oregon Hunger Issues: Finding #1 from OCPP's Analysis of a State Health Survey

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## State Health Survey Confirms Oregon's Hunger Problem

### First in a Series of Five

This issue brief is part of a series of five briefs based upon OCPP's analysis of a new source of information on hunger in Oregon, the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System survey (BRFSS). In 2001 and 2002, this random telephone survey of adults in Oregon sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and the Oregon Department of Human Services asked a series of hunger-related questions as part of a larger health status survey.

### Definitions

**Food security** for a household means access by all members at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.

**Food insecurity** is limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods.

**Hunger** is an uneasy or painful sensation caused by a lack of food. The sort of hunger measured in the BRFSS means involuntary hunger that results from not being able to afford enough food.

A state health survey, the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System survey (BRFSS or "state health survey") shows that in 2002 about one in seven Oregon adults lived in a home where getting enough to eat was not always assured. Typically, these adults and their families were sometimes on the verge of running out of money for food. In addition, help from other resources – family, friends, food banks, and government assistance – was not enough to assure these adults that their families would avoid hunger. In the parlance of nutrition researchers, these adults lived in "food insecure" homes.

In some cases, despite their worries and the instability of their lives, these adults managed to avoid going hungry. Help arrived in time; the money stretched. In other cases, these adults or other family members, or both, were forced at times to go hungry, because they didn't have enough money or access to enough other resources to eat what their bodies needed. No Oregonian starved to death, but too many involuntarily experienced an uneasy or painful sensation caused by a lack of food. On average nationally, households with hunger include at least one member going hungry at times in 8 or 9 months of the year. Regrettably, similar data for Oregon is not available.

### Origins of the state health survey on hunger

Oregonians have heard a lot in the last few years about the state's high hunger rate. Since 1995, a national survey conducted annually by the US Census Bureau, the national Food Security Supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS), has gathered data on hunger in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Since its inception, the CPS survey has consistently found that Oregon has a high hunger rate.

When the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) first released state-by-state results of the CPS survey in October 1999, some Oregonians questioned the validity of the findings. Though no convincing evidence ever emerged that the national findings were flawed, concern about their validity has lingered in the public debate over hunger in Oregon.

In 2000, the Interagency Coordinating Council on Hunger (ICCH) - a committee of state agency heads charged with providing recommendations to the Governor on reducing hunger sought to settle the debate. They decided they needed more information to know whether the national survey was producing reliable results, and they wanted more information about hunger in

Oregon. The ICCH met these needs by asking its member agencies to pay the Oregon Department of Human Services to add hunger-related questions to the BRFSS.

The six questions used on the state health survey are those recommended by the US Department of Agriculture in its *Guide to Measuring Household Food Insecurity*.<sup>1</sup> Research on hunger measurement has demonstrated that these six questions do a good job of imitating results from the larger 18-question hunger survey used by the US Census Bureau in conducting the national Food Security Supplement to the Current Population Survey.<sup>2</sup>

### What the data show

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Two years of data on hunger and food insecurity are now publicly available from the state BRFSS survey. These data fully support the findings from the CPS. OCPP analysis of the CPS found that in 1998-2000, prior to the economic downturn, 13.4 percent of Oregon adults lived in food insecure households and 5.4 percent lived in homes where at least one member went hungry. The new state health survey found similar percentages for food insecurity and hunger among Oregon adults in 2001 and 2002 (Table 1). In 2001, the state survey found that 14.4 percent of adults lived in food insecure households, while 5.2 percent lived in households with hunger. In 2002, the survey found that 15.0 percent of adults lived in food insecure households, and 5.7 percent lived in households with hunger.

<b>Table 1: Percent of Oregon adults in food insecure households or households with hunger</b>		
	In food insecure households	In households with hunger
National survey, 1998-2000	13.4%	5.4%
State survey, 2001	14.4%	5.2%
State survey, 2002	15.0%*	5.7%*
<small>* Change from prior year not significant. Source: OCPP analysis of CPS, BRFSS data.</small>		

These state health survey results do not mean necessarily that food insecurity rates have been increasing. The results of the state survey cannot be compared reliably to the national survey results because they were gathered on two different survey instruments. Moreover, the apparent increases in food insecurity and hunger between 2001 and 2002 on the state survey are not statistically significant. That is, the chances are too high that the survey sample itself – and not an actual change – is responsible for the year-to-year difference.

Still, the state survey findings support the high rates found on the national survey.<sup>3</sup> The two years of data from the BRFSS should erase all doubt that Oregon has a serious problem with hunger and food insecurity.

### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Bickel, et al. *Guide to Measuring Household Food Insecurity, Revised 2000*. Office of Analysis, Nutrition, and Evaluation, US Department of Agriculture, March 2000. Accessed at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsec/FILES/FSGuide.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Blumberg, Stephen J., et al. "The Effectiveness of a Short Form of the Household Food Security Scale, *American Journal of Public Health*, August 1999, 89 (8): 1231-1234.

<sup>3</sup> The state survey undercounts hunger and food insecurity because it is conducted only by telephone. The national survey, by contrast, reaches respondents in their homes if they cannot be reached by phone. Hence, the state survey provides support for even higher hunger and food insecurity rates among adults in Oregon than the unadjusted results indicate.

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