



Oregon Hunger Issues: Finding #2 from OCPP's Analysis of a State Health Survey

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One in Five Adults in Households with Hunger Considered Suicide

Second 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 Factors 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, mostly about the health status of Oregon adults.

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.

Severe financial stress triggers hunger for nearly all households with members who sometimes go hungry. The adults in these households do not always have enough money to eat what their bodies need. In addition, the help they can get from other sources – family, friends, charities, and government assistance – is not always enough to compensate for their inadequate incomes.

The strains of living under these conditions, especially when they are chronic, can be immense, and eventually can produce or exacerbate mental health problems. Not surprisingly, then, adult Oregonians in households with hunger were likely to report mental health problems in 2001 and 2002.

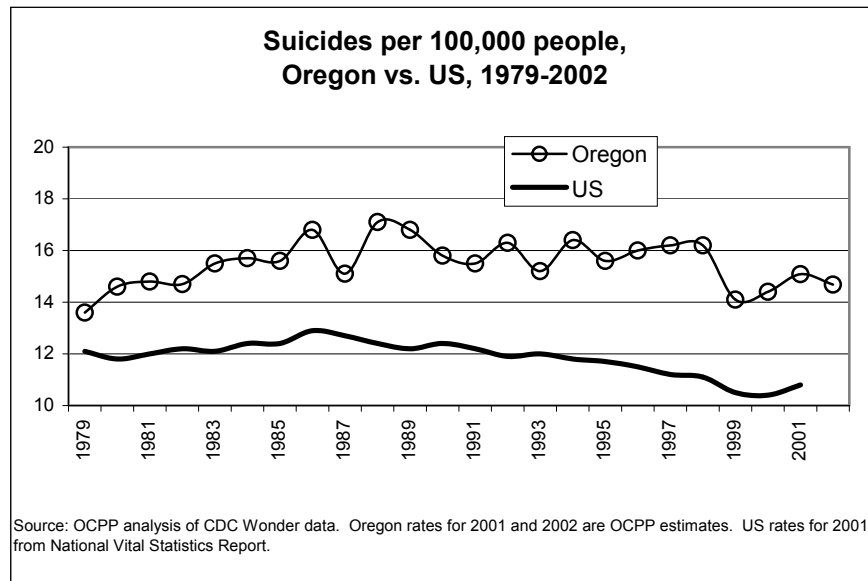
OCPP analysis of the state health survey shows that in 2002, one in five adults, or 20 percent, in households with hunger said that their mental health was not good for nearly all, or all, of the previous month. Fifty-seven percent (nearly three-fifths) said that their mental health was not good at least one day of the previous month.

The stress on adults in households with hunger often reaches extremes with 22 percent of Oregon adults living in homes with hunger during 2001 and 2002 reporting that they had seriously considered suicide in the past year, according to OCPP analysis of the data. That is, more than one in five thought seriously about killing themselves. By contrast, OCPP analysis of the data shows that just 1.4 percent of adults in food secure households in 2001 and 2002 considered suicide. In 2001 and 2002, more than 1,000 Oregonians, including teenagers, actually committed suicide, according to the Oregon Department of Human Services.¹

Oregon has both a high hunger rate and a high suicide rate. In 2000, the latest year for which data for all 50 states is available, Oregon had the 10th worst suicide rate in the nation. Suicide rates in Oregon are 40 percent higher than they are nationally.² In 1979, Oregon's suicide rate was only 1.5 suicides (per 100,000 people) higher than the national rate. Since then, Oregon's rate has increased while the national rate has fallen

(Figure 1). In 2001, Oregon's rate was more than 4 suicides per 100,000 higher than the national rate.

While state health survey data does not reveal how many adults in food insecure homes actually killed themselves, the health survey data suggest that public policies aimed at improving Oregon's high hunger rate may simultaneously improve Oregon's high suicide rate.



Endnotes:

¹ The total number of suicides in Oregon in 2001 and 2002 was 1,041. Data for 2001 from Oregon Department of Human Services, "Oregon Vital Statistics Report 2001," Volume 2. Data for 2002 sent to author by Center for Health Statistics, Oregon DHS, by facsimile on November 21, 2003.

² Nationally, in 2001, 10.8 suicides occurred per 100,000 people, while in Oregon the rate was 15.1 per 100,000 people. National data are from the Centers for Disease Control, "National Vital Statistics Report," Vol. 52, No. 3. Accessed at http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr52/nvsr52_03.pdf. Oregon data are based on "Oregon Vital Statistics Report 2001," Volume 2, Table 6-29, and on US Census Bureau population estimates for July 1, 2001 accessed at <http://eire.census.gov/popest/estimates.php>

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