



Oregon Hunger Issues: Finding #3 from OCPP's Analysis of a State Health Survey

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Young Adults with Children Likely to be in Food Insecure Households

Third 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.

An analysis of state health survey data by the Oregon Center for Public Policy (OCPP) shows that the youngest adults have the highest hunger and food insecurity rates. The OCPP analysis shows that more than a quarter - 27 percent - of Oregon's youngest adults (aged 18 to 24) lived in a food insecure household in 2002. By contrast, about one in ten adults aged 45 to 54 lived in a food insecure home, and just 6 percent of Oregon's senior citizens were in food insecure households (Figure 1). Less than two percent of seniors lived in homes where someone went hungry at times during the last year, a rate that nearly one-eighth the rate among the youngest adults.

Figure 1: Percent of Oregon adults in food insecure homes, homes with hunger, by age group, 2002

Age	In food insecure homes	In homes with hunger
18-24	27.3%	13.7%
25-34	24.0%	6.7%
35-44	16.3%	6.2%
45-54	10.1%	4.1%
55-64	7.5%	3.0%
65+	6.0%	1.8%

Source: OCPP analysis of BRFSS.

Young families with children are particularly likely to be affected. Nearly one in three young adults aged 18 to 34 with children lived in a food insecure household in 2002. Households with children had hunger rates that were more than twice as high as the rates among households without children.

When parents do not have enough money to eat, typically they will go hungry themselves and keep the children fed, if possible.¹ Hence, most of the people who were hungry in households with hunger likely were the adults.

The policy lessons

National research suggests that some children in Oregon likely do go hungry at times, but generally only in families facing extreme hardship. The research on hunger suggests children under age 5 are substantially less likely to go hungry than older children, especially

teenagers.² Parents may be more likely to protect their very young children from hunger. Also, because it costs more to keep a teenager adequately fed, families in severe financial stress may be less able to protect their older children from hunger.

At any rate, children's diets are often affected when their family is food insecure, even if they do not go hungry. Researchers at the US Department of Agriculture found that, nationally, in 81 percent of food insecure households with children in 2001, children were fed only a few kinds of low-cost foods because the household was running out of money.³ In 52 percent of food insecure households with children, parents reported that they were unable to feed their children balanced meals because the money was so tight.

Fighting hunger in Oregon means targeting young families with children. Unfortunately, these families are finding that the basic public assistance program, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, is increasingly available to only the poorest families and is less able to support the families' needs. Oregon's income limit for eligibility and monthly support payments have not changed since July 1, 1991, despite the rising costs of living. As a result, every year families have to be poorer to be eligible for TANF and receive less in real dollars. Today, a three-person family with an income less than half of the federal poverty level, or who works 21 hours or more at minimum wage, has too much money to get help from TANF.

The Bush Administration and its Congressional allies have refused to extend a waiver that allows Oregon to operate its TANF program with more flexibility than allowed under federal law. As a result, Oregon is being forced to impose a one-size-fits-all welfare model on low-income Oregon families. Under Oregon's current rules, caseworkers have the flexibility to create case plans that help disabled recipients and others with serious barriers to employment to make progress toward family stability and job readiness. Under the new rules likely to emerge from Congress, Oregon will need to abandon individualized case plans in favor of pushing recipients who don't find private sector jobs quickly into "work experience" positions or community service slots. Recipients who are not yet ready for these sorts of activities will either abandon public assistance or face time limits and sanctions.⁴

Endnotes:

¹ Nord, Mark and Gary Bickel. *Measuring Children's Food Security in U.S. Households, 1995-99*. US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report Number 25.

² Ibid, p. 24-25.

³ Nord, Mark. *Food Insecurity in Households with Children*, Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report Number 34-13, July 2003. Accessed at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/fanrr34/fanrr34-13/fanrr34-13.pdf>.

⁴ In addition, because the one-size-fits-all approach is so expensive to implement, Oregon may have to eliminate or scale back some effective programs. As the Department of Human Services wrote in response to a survey conducted by the National Governors Association and the American Public Human Services Association, "present level funding would not be sufficient to finance a program with the features and scale as that outlined in Administration's proposal. . . . The cost of operating a program with a work experience component capable of serving all TANF families with adults in the grant would require us to completely redesign our program around a work experience component and then determine what we could afford to provide beyond that. This would likely drive up the costs of the program and support services significantly."