



**OREGON
FOOD BANK**

To: House Committee on Human Services
From: Matt Newell-Ching, Senior Policy Manager, Oregon Food Bank
RE: Child Hunger in Oregon - Scope, Impact, and Solutions
Date: December 8, 2022

Chair Reynolds, Vice Chair Scharf, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Matt Newell-Ching (he/him), and I'm the Senior Policy Manager at Oregon Food Bank. Oregon Food Bank's mission is to eliminate hunger and its root causes... because no one should be hungry.

Oregon Food Bank operates a statewide warehouse and equitably distributes food to 21 Regional Food Banks in Oregon and Southwest Washington, which in turn distribute food to 1,400 Partner Agencies. We do this with the goal of providing access to nutritious food for all.

We also know that food banking alone will never solve hunger. Hunger is not just an empty stomach or an individual experience. We know that the root causes of hunger are systemic injustices — including racism, classism, sexism and more. There is a direct line between these historic injustices and disparities that exist today. Oregonians who are Black, Latinx, and Indigenous, and Pacific Islander are more than twice as likely to experience hunger as Oregonians who are White¹. Renters are six times more likely to experience hunger relative to homeowners. Households led by single parents who provide a disproportionate share of uncompensated care work experience significantly higher rates of hunger. Addressing the reasons behind these disparities is why - in addition to the work of food banking - we also advocate to end hunger and its root causes. We often say we would love nothing more than to work ourselves out of a job.

Today I will focus on the impact of hunger and food insecurity on kids, and later in the meeting I will share some ideas about how we as a state can make inroads to address hunger - because hunger is an insidious, but ultimately solvable problem.

I'd like to share credit for this testimony with Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon, whose vision is an Oregon where everyone is healthy and thriving, with access to affordable, nourishing, and

¹ Edwards, Beck. Oregon's Food Insecurity Rates At The Arrival of COVID (2018-2020). OSU School of Public Policy, 2022.

https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/sites/liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/files/oregon_food_insecurity_rates_at_arrival_of_covid_2018-2020.pdf

culturally appropriate food, and who have played a critical role in leading coordinated efforts to reduce hunger in our state.

Scope and Impact of Child Hunger in Oregon

Today, more than one in eight kids (13.2%) in Oregon live in households that struggle to afford food². That's more than 114,000 kids in Oregon. To put that in perspective, that's more than the combined population of Albany and Springfield.

The experience of hunger and food insecurity for a child is not merely about the temporary sensation of your stomach growling. It's an experience of trauma. And it exists in the context of the sum of the traumas that happen when you're experiencing poverty. It can mean the stress of not knowing if you'll be able to sleep in your bed or stay at your same school if your family is evicted. It can mean living with the stress of a parent who sacrifices their meals so that you can eat. It can mean adverse health outcomes when families stretch budgets by purchasing food that is less expensive but perhaps with fewer fruits and vegetables. It can mean living with the toxic stress that is inevitable when your parents are working multiple jobs at irregular hours while worrying about how to make rent and pay the bills each month.

The impacts of this trauma can last a lifetime. Experiencing toxic stress related to food insecurity and poverty at an early age leads to early onset of chronic diseases, a decrease in lifetime education and earnings, an increase in depression and suicide ideation. First and foremost, the impact of hunger and poverty robs each individual of their full potential to flourish. It also harms all of us. Bread for the World estimates that the health-related costs of food insecurity and hunger are a staggering \$160 billion every year in the United States³.

SNAP reduces hunger and makes Oregon's kids stronger, but also leaves many out

The nation's largest and most effective anti-hunger program for kids is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly "Food Stamps"). SNAP is a federal program that provides qualifying households money to spend on food at grocery stores with an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card. In Oregon, over half of SNAP participants are in families with children⁴. In Oregon, SNAP lifts 50,000 children out of poverty each year.

Nearly 50 years of research consistently shows that kids who live in households that participate in SNAP have better outcomes related to health, education, and future earnings⁵. The following data are borrowed heavily from [this review paper](#) by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities:

- Participating in SNAP reduces food insecurity among kids by one third after their families receive SNAP benefits for six months

² Map the Meal Gap. Feeding America, 2022. <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2020/child/oregon>

³ The Nourishing Effect: Ending Hunger, Improving Health, Reducing Inequality. Bread for the World, 2016. <http://hungerreport.org/2016/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/HR2016-Full-Report-Web.pdf>

⁴ Oregon: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (state fact sheet). Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2022. https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap_factsheet_oregon.pdf

⁵ SNAP Works for America's Children, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2016 <https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/9-29-16fa.pdf>

- Moms who participate in SNAP during pregnancy gave birth to fewer low birth weight babies.
- Participation in SNAP makes kids less likely to be in poor health and experience underweight.
- A recent study of kids who are immigrants finds that one additional year of SNAP eligibility early in life is correlated with positive health outcomes later in childhood.⁶
- Participating in SNAP can lead to improvements in math and reading, and increases the chance of graduating from high school by as much as 18 percentage points.
- Adults who were in households participating in SNAP as kids report better health and economic outcomes as adults.

Oregon has made progress to reduce hunger, but we need to go further

In the late '90s and early 2000s, Oregon had the highest rate of hunger among any state in the nation. This was a wake-up call for Oregonians. Over the last 20 years, Oregon has made a concerted effort to address this, both through policy changes and community-efforts. Much of this work was led by the Oregon Hunger Task Force and through the work of Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon.

One of the most effective things Oregon did was make it easier to access the Supplemental SNAP. Oregon began utilizing flexibilities in the SNAP program offered to states to ensure more people have access to food assistance. Oregon removed penalties for working families, penalties for owning assets like a reliable car, simplified many reporting requirements, and led outreach efforts to reach more people who are eligible for SNAP but not participating.

The pandemic: Early data show us that hunger increased during the pandemic, but the increase was more modest than we originally feared. We believe a robust response from federal and state governments to increase assistance assistance played a critical role in preventing the impacts of the pandemic from causing a crisis of hunger.

Many researchers, including us here at OSU, had anticipated that food insecurity would increase dramatically early during the pandemic, but the increases were modest. National rates of food insecurity also remained fairly stable. The consensus now among researchers is that the impressive public investment in safety net programs helped prevent food insecurity among families and individuals who were unemployed or vulnerable to foreclosure or eviction early in the pandemic.⁷

During the pandemic, Oregon exercised federal options to ensure families participating in SNAP received “emergency allotments,” boosting food benefits for hundreds of thousands of Oregonians. Schools were able to serve meals to all kids at no charge and without applications.

⁶ East, Chloe. The Journal of Human Resources, 2016.

<http://jhr.uwpress.org/content/early/2018/09/04/jhr.55.3.0916-8197R2.abstract>

⁷ Edwards, Beck. Oregon’s Food Insecurity Rates At The Arrival of COVID (2018-2020). OSU School of Public Policy, 2022.

https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/sites/liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/files/oregon_food_insecurity_rates_at_arrival_of_covid_2018-2020.pdf

This chamber provided millions of dollars of support to purchase emergency food at a time when food supply chains were significantly disrupted. Oregon also took measures to keep Oregonians at risk of eviction in their homes.

Our collective work over the decades gives us a roadmap for what we need to do moving forward. When we boost support for programs and coordinate our efforts, Oregon has been successful in limiting and even reducing our rates of hunger in food insecurity. **Today, Oregon's rates are near the national average. But while that's better than being the state with the highest rate of hunger, merely being average simply isn't good enough.** We have a long way to go to create an Oregon in which everyone has enough nutritious food to thrive.

Solutions

Hunger does not exist because of a lack of food. We live in a unique time in human history in which - both in the United States and throughout the world - there is enough food produced to feed everyone on planet earth. Hunger exists because not everyone has enough resources to afford food.

That's why the solutions to hunger must be comprehensive. Solutions must both focus on improving food assistance directly, as well as addressing the underlying reasons why hundreds of thousands of Oregonians seek food assistance each year. Ending hunger means breaking down barriers that prevent equal access to housing, health care, child care, employment and more. Ending hunger means uprooting unfair systems rooted in racism, classism and sexism systems which lead to disparate impacts of hunger for Oregonians who are Black, Indigenous, Latinx, households led by women, and people who are LGBTQIA+.

We are grateful for the opportunity to put forth solutions we believe would reduce hunger and child poverty in Oregon, and we hope the legislature considers and passes the following proposals in 2023:

Food For All Oregonians

Everyone in Oregon should have access to food. Our freedom, our health, our ability to thrive all depend on access to food that is nutritious and culturally familiar.

Hunger was a crisis in our communities before the pandemic, and the health and economic impacts of COVID-19 have fallen especially hard on newly-arrived Oregonians. Immigrants, refugees and Compact of Free Association (COFA) community members, in particular, have long faced higher rates of hunger and poverty in Oregon. Just one example: Latinx and Pacific Islander families experienced hunger at twice the rate of white Oregonians pre-pandemic — and this gap has only widened as our communities continue to struggle in COVID's wake.

Six other states have state-funded programs that increase eligibility to SNAP. Modeled after these programs and built on the expertise of Oregonians with lived experiences of hunger and our immigration system, we will introduce the Food For All Oregonians bill in 2023 that will:

- Create a state-funded program that eliminates exclusions to SNAP.
- Build on successful, community-driven navigator models to ensure trust and community safety.
- Make applying for assistance more culturally-responsive and welcoming.

The Food For All Oregonians is a joint effort led by a steering committee consisting of: Adelante Mujeres, APANO, COFA Alliance National Network, Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon, Latino Network, The Latinx & Immigrant Family Wellness Hub (Centro Latino Americano, Downtown Languages, Huerto de la Familia), Micronesian Islander Community, Oregon Food Bank, Unite Oregon.

Additional Solutions

- **Double-Up Food Bucks**

We have the opportunity to expand and strengthen the Double-Up Food Bucks program, which doubles the purchasing power of SNAP for fruits and vegetables at many farmers markets, CSAs, and grocery stores. Increasing Oregon's investment in "Double-Up" will increase access to healthy food, support farmers and local economies, and make the program easier to use.

- **Client Bill of Rights**

This policy would take important steps to ensure Oregonians seeking food benefits are welcomed, supported, treated with respect and dignity, and provided with transparency while seeking assistance from the Oregon Department of Human Services (ODHS). An updated Client Bill of Rights would center clients' rights by ensuring services are trauma-informed, creating a supportive and welcoming environment, providing timely and clear information to clients, ensuring client access with a particular focus on language access and disability support, and transparency on benefit decisions. This effort is led by Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon.

- **Strengthening the Emergency Food System**

The need for emergency food in recent years has been unprecedented. Oregon can support our community response by strengthening Oregon's food distribution network with one-time investments to increase our ability to distribute fresh foods (\$22m), funding critical food purchases (\$10m), and supporting the Oregon Hunger Response Fund (\$4.6m).

- **Stable Homes for All**

Everyone deserves a safe place to call home. We will urge the legislature to enact policies that will keep people housed, save lives, reduce stress on families, and stabilize our workforce by addressing Oregon's housing crisis.

- **Increase Direct Cash Assistance**

Providing unrestricted cash assistance is one of the most effective ways to reduce

poverty and boost food and housing security. In 2021, the federal monthly Child Tax Credit reduced Food Insufficiency by 26%. Sadly, that policy expired. The legislature should invest in our communities by increasing cash assistance to Oregonians facing hardship through programs like TANF, and should consider enacting a Child Tax Credit.

Conclusion

The State of Oregon enshrined into law its policy on hunger in ORS 458.530.⁸ An excerpt of this policy is found here:

- (2) The Legislative Assembly finds and declares that it is the policy of this state that:
 - (a) Hunger is defined as the state of being unable to obtain a nutritionally adequate diet from nonemergency food channels. Hunger is not one discrete event. Hunger is a series of events that lead up to and follow a lack of adequate food intake. It is the process in which people become at risk of hunger, attempt to cope with the problem and suffer a variety of health and social consequences.
 - (b) All persons have the right to be free from hunger.
 - (c) Freedom from hunger means all persons have food security. Persons lack food security if they are uncertain of having, or being able to acquire in socially acceptable ways, enough acceptable food at all times to meet basic needs because they have insufficient money or other resources for food.
 - (d) Oregon will strive to rank among the top states in the nation in providing food security without hunger.

I appreciate the opportunity to offer solutions that we believe will reduce hunger and align with Oregon's stated policy above.

When everyone is well-nourished, we are all better off. Kids do better in school, our families' health and well-being improves, and our economy thrives through support of local businesses. This is true in every corner of Oregon — in rural, urban and suburban communities alike.

We are grateful for the chance to share ideas to help build an Oregon where no child has the experience of hunger. I am happy to answer any questions.

⁸ https://oregon.public.law/statutes/ors_458.530