

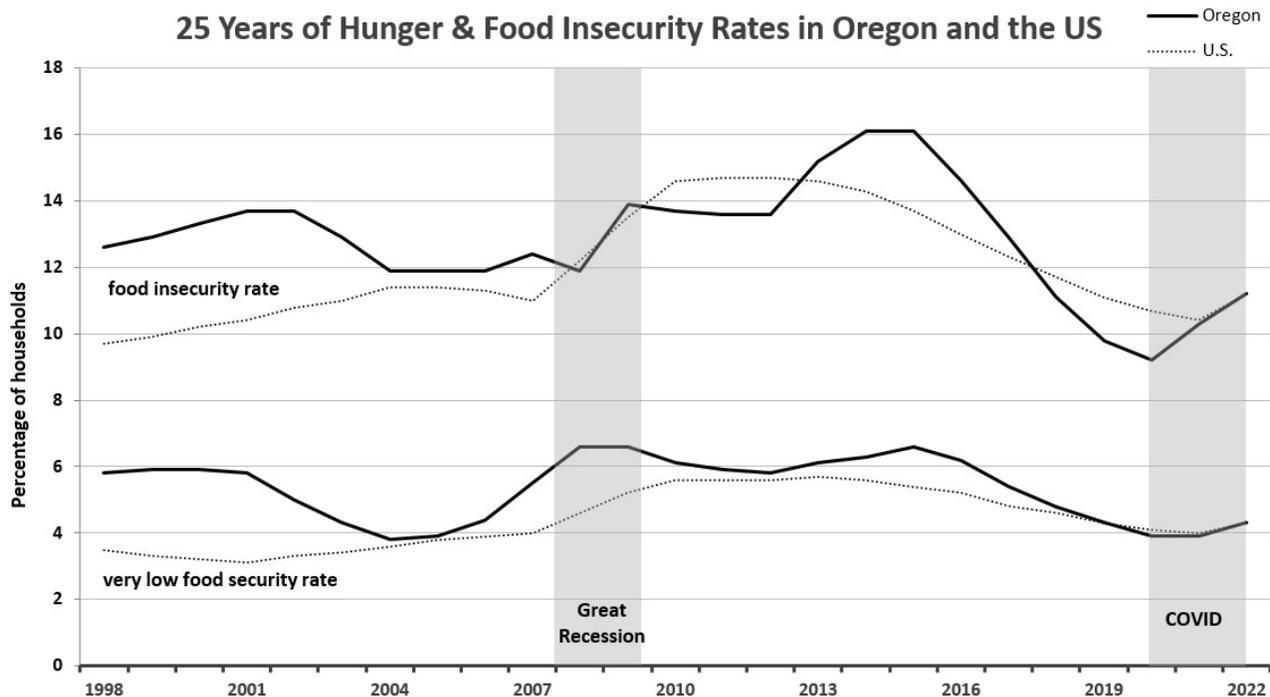
Food Insecurity in Oregon During the COVID Public Health Emergency (2020-2022)

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The food insecurity rate in Oregon for 2020-2022 was 11.2%, indicating a reversal of the downward trend prior to the pandemic.^a This recent higher rate means that about 186,000 households, or around 463,000 people were food insecure over the course of a year.^b

As they do every year, the Current Population Survey continued collecting food security data for all states in December 2022 as the COVID pandemic was winding down. Because sample sizes for individual states are fairly small (around 700 households per year in Oregon), it is customary to append three adjacent years for evaluating data for different demographic groups within states. Thus, the tables below include the merging of 2020-2022 data. Data for 2023 are being collected at the time of writing this report.

Because the data have been collected annually we can observe long term trends in food insecurity and in “very low food security” (a subset of those who are food insecure).^a The figure below shows that Oregon’s rates have often been higher than rates for the US, but Oregon improved substantially from historically high rates in the slow recovery after the Great Recession, to historic lows just before the pandemic. Unfortunately, the rate has increased in the past few years, although not nearly to the extent that we and other researchers had predicted at the beginning of the pandemic.



When comparing different groups of Oregonians during previous periods (2014-2016 and 2017-2019), the most recent data show reversals for some groups and not others. For example, while less educated Oregonians show slightly higher rates of food insecurity in the most recent years, renters and single mothers continued to show some improvement in food security. Some of these modest changes may only be the

result of the fact that we have small samples that produce imprecise estimates, but these changes may also alert decision makers and advocates to possible groups being made more vulnerable in recent years.

Housing: The food insecurity for renters had been declining steadily prior to the pandemic but during the pandemic this improvement stalled. During the pandemic, eviction moratoriums may have reduced renters' vulnerability to food insecurity. When more data become available for 2023 and beyond, as pandemic policies expire, it will be more clear as to how much housing assistance for renters helped them avoid increased vulnerability to food insecurity during the pandemic.

	Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon		
	2014-2016	2017-2019	2020-2022
Renters	29.1%	21.0%	21.4%
Owners	5.9%	2.8%	5.4%

Note: In previous years, these tables also included "very low food security" rates. These updated numbers may be obtained directly from the authors. See contact information below.

While some of the food insecurity rate difference between renters and owners (21.4% v. 5.4%) can be explained by higher poverty rates among renters, the vulnerability of renters, whether poor or not, remains at least 10 percentage points higher for renters than owners, regardless of income. (Analysis not shown)

Education and Income: Within any given time period, food insecurity declines with higher levels of education. Rates among college-educated Oregonians are substantially lower than those of residents without high school diplomas. Pandemic food insecurity for Oregonians without a bachelor's degree grew for those without high school diplomas, while it remained relatively stable (within a few percentage points) for others.

	Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon		
	2014-2016	2017-2019	2020-2022
Less than high school	26.1%	15.1%	25.9%
High school	19.1%	13.0%	14.8%
Associates	12.5%	12.0%	15.1%
Bachelor's	6.6%	5.0%	4.2%

Meanwhile, among the working poor (households with earnings under 185% of the federal poverty line), the food insecurity rate was 28%, over 5 times higher than the rate for those with incomes above 185% the poverty line (table not shown). Given that this number is higher than the most vulnerable education category (those without high school diplomas), it is clear that other influences (e.g., rent, cost of living, unemployment, etc.) beyond only educational attainment lead to low incomes and greater food insecurity.

Rural v. urban: The downward trajectory in food insecurity in rural Oregon leading up to the pandemic appears to have fully reversed during the pandemic but not in urban areas. The reasons for this divergence remain unclear, and the magnitude of this change in rural but not urban Oregon is surprising. If indeed these data accurately capture a disproportionate impact of the pandemic on rural Oregonians, this observation aligns with qualitative reports of the distinct challenges faced by rural social services during COVID, where volunteer, often older, staff at emergency food pantries were home-bound, or where schools struggled to deliver free/reduced price meals to children who would normally receive them in school may have lagged behind. We are cautious however about over-interpreting these numbers regarding rural Oregon because during the pandemic the non-response rate (i.e., households who did not complete the survey) rose

dramatically across the country largely because face-to-face follow up visits for those without phones or who often do not answer the phone were temporarily discontinued by the Census Bureau. As a result, not

	Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon		
	2014-2016	2017-2019	2020-2022
Rural^c	20.7%	10.5%	18.9%
Urban^c	14.0%	9.7%	9.7%

knowing how the pandemic may have impacted the data collection in rural Oregon for the relatively small number of households who represent rural Oregon, we caution against assuming that the reversal was as large as it appears.

Household Composition: In the years leading up to the pandemic, food insecurity rates had been falling for all types of families and households. Pandemic reversals appear here for couples with children and for men living alone, while modest improvements continued for single mothers and women living alone. While these reversals during the pandemic are important to understand, it should not be ignored that food insecurity remains highest among single-mother households, where one in four such households is food insecure.

	Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon		
	2014-2016	2017-2019	2020-2022
Couples with children at home	13.3%	3.5%	7.1%
Couples without children at home	5.9%	3.0%	3.7%
Single mothers	40.2%	31.5%	26.6%
Alone			
- women	22.4%	15.3%	14.2%
- men	12.1%	11.5%	16.7%

Age: Older residents usually have lower food insecurity rates than young and middle aged adults. This pattern remains. Increases during the pandemic for each age group were modest across groups.

	Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon		
	2014-2016	2017-2019	2020-2022
18-45	n/a	13.6%	13.9%
46-64	n/a	9.0%	11.0%
65+	n/a	5.5%	7.8%

* n/a not available; technical problems with the data prohibit completing this analysis

Racial and ethnic minority groups in Oregon: Because the population of Oregon is not as ethnically and racially diverse as much of the U.S., sample sizes for such groups in these survey data are very small. Thus, it is important to aggregate additional years of data to have large enough samples to better assess food insecurity among different racial and ethnic groups. Unfortunately, that means we need to combine data from 2018 through 2022, thus using somewhat dated information. Nonetheless, such a computation can identify social inequities that would otherwise be overlooked. With such data, we can examine the Oregon

situation over the previous five years of available data.

Food Insecurity Rates in Oregon (2018-2022)^d	
Hispanic (any race)	17.8%
Black or multiracial including Black	16.8%
American Indian (A.I.) or multiracial include A.I.	20.9%
Asian or multiracial including Asian	4.1%
White, non-Hispanic	10.0%

During this five-year period, most communities of color in Oregon appear to have higher food insecurity rates than the White, non-Hispanic population. Asian households show a lower food insecurity than all other categories of households. Reasonable people may disagree over how best to divide and distinguish groups or how to categorize multi-racial, multi-ethnic individuals and households. While the size of the differences in food insecurity rates between groups are not statistically significant at the conventional levels of 95% certainty, the consistent pattern, especially as it has appeared over time, suggests that households of color are more vulnerable to food insecurity.

Taken together, these updated tables show that the long and pervasive decline in food insecurity in Oregon prior to the COVID pandemic generally flattened and reversed. Some groups continued to show some improvement, but others either plateaued or began to be more vulnerable. While we and others have elsewhere highlighted the apparently powerful effects of pandemic safety net investments and activities, there is evidence that food insecurity began to increase again in Oregon, as well as in the U.S.. Inequities persist across racial and ethnic categories, between renters and homeowners, and between households with varying levels of education.

Endnotes

- a) Respondents are asked a battery of questions about their previous year's experiences feeding themselves and their families. If they provide 3 or more indications of difficulties, they are categorized as food insecure. For households without children, if they provide 8 or more indications, they are further categorized as having very-low-food-security, a concept referred to in past decades as "hunger". For households with children, they are asked additional questions and then 10 affirmative answers indicate that those households have very-low-food-security. For a further discussion of this measurement, consult the USDA's Economic Research Service website.
- b) These estimates are based on Census data indicating that in 2021 Oregon had 1.66 million households, with an average of 2.49 persons per household.
- c) In this report "Urban" refers to those residing in "Metropolitan" counties and "Rural" refers to those living outside such counties, according to the 2013 Office of Manage and Budget definitions for "Metropolitan" and "Non-metropolitan" counties.
- d) When a household is contacted, surveyors ask for the adult with the most recent birthday, and refer to this person as the "reference person". We use the more common language of "head of household" in place of "reference" person, but make no claim that any such person actually heads the household, only that they are one of the adults who speaks for the household. We use the reference person's self-selected race and/or ethnicity to distinguish households of various racial and ethnic composition.

The categories used here are not completely mutually exclusive since, for example, a Black-Hispanic person may appear in either category of Black or Hispanic. (The label “Hispanic” is used by the U.S. Census Bureau when surveying respondents.)

About the authors

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Additional state reports from previous years may be found at the link indicated below.