

Information Hearing  
Oregon Senate Committee on Health Care  
February 5, 2024

**Hunger and Health in Oregon and Beyond**

Thank you for your interest in discussing food insecurity and hunger in Oregon and the relationship between hunger and health more broadly.

I am a Professor in the School of Nutrition and Public Health at Oregon State University. I also serve as the Center for Global Health Director at OSU. I will first briefly overview Dr. Edwards and his team's recent study about food insecurity and hunger in Oregon, highlighting its key findings. I will then broadly discuss the relationship between hunger and health.

Food insecurity describes a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food. It shows that household members may have to make decisions about paying rent, paying for prescriptions, or paying their grocery bills. A household is described as "food insecure" if it "had difficulty at some time during the year providing enough food for all their members due to a lack of resources" (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2012).<sup>1</sup>

Low food security ("food insecurity without hunger") can be described as reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet with little or no indication of reduced food intake. Very low food security ("food insecurity with hunger") can be described as disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake. Hunger is often considered a part of a very low level of food security. At the individual level, it indicates a prolonged, involuntary lack of food, resulting in discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain.

Twenty-five years ago, Oregon had the country's highest food insecurity rates. We started making some progress in the first decade of this century, or at least our rates remained somewhat stable while the rates in the rest of the country worsened. But starting with 2008, things badly reversed around the Great Recession. Food insecurity in Oregon kept rising even during the economic recovery period. It rose to an unprecedented level in 2015 and peaked around 2016. Then, it took a steep dive to the lowest levels in 2019. Sadly, this progress appears to have reversed again during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2022, about 11 percent of Oregon's households were food insecure. We are eagerly waiting for the data from 2023, which will be available to us in about nine months. However, we are learning that the demand for emergency food assistance throughout the state is extremely high and rapidly growing. This demand level can be a proxy indicator of Oregon's food insecurity level.

As mentioned earlier, the 2022 figures suggest that nearly 11 percent of Oregon's households are experiencing food insecurity, and slightly more than 4 percent are experiencing very low

food security. This roughly translates into almost half a million residents in Oregon experiencing food insecurity at some time during the year. Out of those 463,000, about a third (178,000) are experiencing very low food security.

The problem of food insecurity is not evenly spread around the state or even any particular social group. The data suggests that, since 2014, those paying rent are dramatically more likely to be food insecure than homeowners. The rent burden faced by Oregon families is a significant contributor to food insecurity.

Individuals with less than a high school education, a high school degree, or even an associate degree are consistently more likely to be food insecure than those with a bachelor's degree.

Since the pandemic, food insecurity rates have been significantly higher in rural households than in urban or metro counties. Notably, just before the pandemic between 2017 and 2019, the rates of food insecurity in rural and urban households were similar. The spike in rural areas could be that perhaps rural communities faced a deeper financial hit than urban counties or could be that safety net efforts were less present or effective in rural areas, or it could be that the ways the data was in rural areas during COVID did not give us an accurate picture.

Single-mother households in Oregon experience the highest levels of food insecurity, followed by men and women living alone. Couples without children at home recorded the lowest level of food insecurity in this group.

Across different racial and ethnic minority groups in Oregon, Native American, Hispanic/Latinx, and Black households are more likely to experience high levels of food insecurity than Asian and White households.

The concentration of these problems among some family structures and communities of color suggests that our public policy could respond more effectively by addressing housing affordability, making SNAP available as readily as possible, and ensuring that all children have access to school meals.

We were making good progress in reducing food insecurity in our state during the pre-pandemic period. Since the pandemic, Oregon has experienced a concerning upward trend in food insecurity. Even so, we need to reflect that our efforts to reduce food insecurity before COVID-19 were working and that we should continue those efforts, keeping in mind the larger patterns of the distribution of food insecurity across different demographic and social groups in Oregon.

I want to emphasize that food insecurity is not just an Oregon problem. It is a persistent national and global problem. Based on the 2022 data, 1 in 6 adults and 1 in 5 children in the U.S. experience food insecurity at least once a year.

Hunger and the associated malnutrition are risk factors for health worldwide, and a large majority of people who experience food insecurity live in low- and middle-income countries.

Paradoxically, food insecurity can coexist with obesity. Just because someone is overweight or obese, it does not mean they are well nourished. For example, if someone eats calorie-rich, dense food items regularly, they probably are not getting enough valuable nutrients they need. This is especially true for households that lack food security.

The relationship between food insecurity and health can be cyclical. Poor health can reduce productivity and income-earning capacity, exacerbating poverty and food insecurity. Food insecurity often leads to nutritional deficiencies, which can have profound effects on physical and mental health. It can lead to irritability, anxiety, and difficulty concentrating. Prolonged hunger may contribute to the development of mood disorders and cognitive impairments.

Finally, I want to emphasize that food insecurity is a global issue, affecting millions worldwide. Since 2015, countries have been working to address poverty and hunger within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals. While the world has made progress in reducing global poverty and food insecurity in recent years, much work remains to be done to end food insecurity and hunger locally, nationally, and globally.

Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> Coleman-Jensen A, Robbitt M, Gregory C, Singh A. *Household food security in the United States in 2021*. Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2021.