

Oregon Maintains Recent Gains In Eliminating Hunger

by BendWeekly News Sources

More work is needed, but Oregon improves from worst in nation to ranking 17th in having the highest percentage of hungry residents

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) released a new report this week showing the number of U.S. households experiencing food insecurity. Eighty-nine percent (89%) of American households were food secure throughout the entire year in 2005, meaning that they had access, at all times, to enough food for an active, healthy life. The remaining households (11%) had low food insecurity at least some time during the year. The prevalence of low food insecurity declined from 11.9% of households in 2004, while the prevalence of very low food security (previously defined as food insecure with hunger) remained unchanged at 3.9%. This report, based on data from the December 2005 food security survey, provides the most recent statistics on food security in U.S. households, as well as on how much they spent for food and the extent to which they participated in Federal and community food assistance programs. In the past few years, Oregon has seen a significant decrease in the number of Oregonians who have low food security and very low food security:

	Oregon Households with Low Food Security	Oregon Households with Very Low Food Security
1996-98	14.2%	6.0% (highest in the US)
2000-02	13.7%	5%
2003-05	11.9% (433,286 Oregonians)	3.9% (142,000 Oregonians)

Oregon fell from being the state with the highest percentage of hungry people in 1999 to a ranking of 17th in the nation in 2004. This positive trend represented one of the most statistically significant decreases in national food insecurity rates. For 2005 (the most recent year for which statistics are available), 11.9% of Oregon households had low food security (slightly above the national average), which did not change from 2004. On the other hand, 3.9% of Oregon households are considered very low food secure, a slight increase from 3.8% in the 2004 report. Some of the reasons Oregon was able to decrease its food insecurity rate so drastically over the years was due to concentrated efforts to increase participation in federal nutrition programs such as food stamps, school lunches and summer meals for children. The Statewide network of emergency food providers has also provided critical assistance, serving more than 190,000 Oregonians each month, including 70,000 children. Although we have made many strides in combating hunger and food insecurity, the current report demonstrates that more must be done to help those who are hungry in Oregon. Although Oregon has made significant improvements, a large number of Oregonians do not have adequate resources to feed their families: 433,286 Oregonians are food insecure and 142,000 of them are experiencing very low food security (see definitions above).

Hunger is an income issue and will continue to exist until the following issues are addressed in Oregon: the lack of living wage jobs, high cost of housing, heating and transportation, the lack of adequate health care and child care, and taxes that un-proportionally burden the poor. When an individual or family with limited resources must use all of their resources to pay for housing, health and childcare, the food budget is either cut or substantially reduced. No bill collectors will knock on your door asking why you haven't paid enough for groceries this month. Prolonged hunger and food insecurity produce serious health consequences, particularly for children, who exhibit behavioral problems, learning delays and get sick more often.

An improvement in Oregon's food security ranking is truly a welcome sign that the state is making progress. However, if Oregon fails to continue its efforts to eliminate hunger by taking action on the state, local and neighborhood levels, the state will again see a rise in the number of Oregonians struggling to put food on their tables.

The Act to End Hunger - a guide to eliminating hunger - outlines effective strategies to end hunger in Oregon: <http://www.oregonhunger.org/content/view/18/0>. The Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force will release its legislative agenda early in December focusing specifically on policy actions our leaders can take to address hunger in Oregon.

TERMINOLOGY -- In this latest report the Committee on National Statistics revised the terminology used to describe food insecure households. The intent is to create a survey instrument in the future that will use new methods to measure hunger, including a survey of individuals, rather than only households. Until the new survey is implemented the following terms are used to describe food secure/insecure households by USDA:

New Definitions:

Food security (this definition has not changed) All members in a household at all times had enough food for an active, healthy life. Food security includes at a minimum (1) the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods and (2) an assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways (that is, without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, or other coping strategies).

Low Food Security (previously called food insecurity without hunger) These households obtained enough food to avoid substantially disrupting their eating patterns or reducing food intake by using a variety of coping strategies, such as eating less varied diets, participating in Federal food assistance programs, or getting emergency food from community food pantries.

Very Low Food Security (previously called food insecurity with hunger) At times during the year, the food intake of household members was reduced and their normal patterns were disrupted because the household lacked money and other resources for food. The majority of households reported one or more of the following: 1) the food they bought did not last and they did not have money to get more; 2) they could not afford to eat balanced meals; 3) they cut the size of their meals or skipped meals, sometimes not eating for whole days; 4) they ate less than they felt they should; 4) they felt hungry but could not afford food; 5) they lost weight.

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