



# Food Insecurity in Western States

BY MARK EDWARDS

Every Autumn, Oregon's largest newspaper reports the federal government's newest estimate of Oregon's household food insecurity rate. Oregon's unexpected ranking as one of the "hungeriest" states in the late 1990s embarrassed state political leaders and mystified researchers. Its subsequent improvement in the early 2000s was the source of some pride among advocates and social service agency leaders. Its recent increase during the current economic crisis has swamped human services offices and area food banks. Over the past 10 years, Oregonians' rising awareness of food insecurity as an income issue led to extraordinary efforts to provide emergency food and to enroll eligible people in federal food programs. Oregon's story about food insecurity as

a social problem and the public response to that problem may be unique, but we can only know that by comparing it to its neighbors and other Western states.

Policy makers and citizens sometimes puzzle over why their state's food insecurity rate differs from that of neighboring states, leading to plenty of armchair theorizing about what is special or unique about one state or another. Researchers have made some progress understanding the most important influences on state rates of food insecurity. For example, a study of all 50 states found that, among many other characteristics, housing costs and peak unemployment significantly increase state rates of "hunger" (Tapogna, Suter, Nord & Leachman 2004). Other researchers have noted that the percentage of the state residents who are in a particular category (single mothers, poor people, immigrants, etc.) does not provide a statistically powerful explanation for most state-level differences (Edwards, Weber & Bernell 2007). For example, Oregon's high rates of "hunger" cannot be explained by the state having higher rates of single motherhood or a higher poverty rate than Washington or Montana.

obscure important stories at the state level. For example, Oregon's reduction of its hunger rate between 2001 and 2005 from around 6% to around 3% appears in absolute terms to be a small number getting smaller. However, this decline translates to a reduction from 90,000 to 45,000 households experiencing hunger in a given year. Monitoring such changes does not reveal the exceptional work completed by groups seeking to reduce food insecurity. For example, Oregon's improvement may well have been due to the state's phenomenal growth in enrollment of low-income families in the federal food stamp program. Oregon's collaborative efforts between the Department of Human Services, the Hunger Relief Task Force, the Oregon Food Bank, and other groups dramatically improved access and outreach for the food stamp program. Some Western states have experienced remarkable collaboration between state agencies and nonprofit groups in the fight against hunger, while others lag behind in working well together (Edwards 2008).

What have been the patterns and trends in food insecurity in Western states? Food insecurity rates in the US continue to be slightly higher in the West and in the South than in the Midwest or Northeast (Nord et.al. 2008). But state-by-state, the numbers vary more widely and tend to change substantially year to year,

|    | 2005-2007 |                 | 1999-2001 |                 |
|----|-----------|-----------------|-----------|-----------------|
|    | Hunger    | Food Insecurity | Hunger    | Food Insecurity |
| MT | 3.8       | 9.5*            | 4.0       | 13.2*           |
| ID | 3.4       | 11.4            | 4.5*      | 13.0*           |
| WY | 3.3       | 9.9             | 3.2       | 9.9             |
| CO | 4.6       | 11.0            | 2.5       | 8.6*            |
| NM | 4.9       | 15.0*           | 4.2       | 14.6*           |
| AZ | 4.6       | 12.0            | 3.6       | 11.6            |
| UT | 5.1       | 12.5            | 4.6*      | 13.8*           |
| NV | 4.0       | 10.4            | 3.4       | 10.1            |
| WA | 3.5       | 10.1            | 4.6*      | 12.5*           |
| OR | 5.5*      | 12.4            | 5.8*      | 13.7*           |
| CA | 3.5*      | 10.2*           | 3.3       | 11.8*           |
| AK | 4.8       | 12.4            | 4.3       | 11.1            |
| HI | 2.9*      | 8.4*            | 3.0       | 10.8            |
| US | 4.0       | 11.0            | 3.1       | 10.4            |

Table 1: "Hunger" and Food Insecurity Rates in Western States

Changes in state food insecurity rates over time both reveal and

suggesting some unique local influences that local leaders and researchers should seek to understand.

The most recent report by the USDA, based on the 2005 through 2007 data, shows that Hawaii has a hunger rate significantly lower than the US (Table 1). California's rate is also significantly below the national average (with Idaho, Wyoming, and Washington also showing lower rates but with sample sizes too small to confirm that those are statistically significant). Regarding food insecurity, New Mexico continues to have high rates, while Montana's, California's and Hawaii's rates are below the national average (refer to 2nd column in Table 1).

It is important to be cautious interpreting these numbers because of the margin of error in the state estimates, much like a political campaign where one candidate holds a 2% lead in the polls but who could in fact be behind merely due to the sample upon which the estimate is based. However, state hunger and food insecurity rates can contribute to our assessment of continuity and change in economic and social being for Western states. That warning being said, Montana's food insecurity rate changed from the beginning of the decade moving from well above the national rate to well below (13.2% to 9.5%). Idaho's situation appears to have improved while Colorado's worsened (Table 2).

**Rural Food Insecurity in Western States**

While the Census Bureau's definition of "non-metropolitan" fails to include many places that are rural, we can at least observe some patterns and trends in the west in comparison to the whole country. In 2005-2007, the hunger rate in non-metro areas of the West closely resembled that of the metro West. While hunger increased by about a percentage point in both metro and non-metro parts of the US, hunger actually declined in western non-metro areas and remained stable in metro parts of the region. The reason for this improvement in the rural West is yet to be studied.

The data preclude us from making trustworthy state-by-state comparisons of annual changes in rural hunger rates. However, exploring metro/non-metro hunger and food insecurity rates within states shows that rural food insecurity can sometimes be a few percentage points higher or lower than the urban rates. This implies that state agencies and advocates need to attend to the unique characteristics of rural areas when addressing household food needs.

Several studies have examined some of the unique rural dimensions of food insecurity. For example, Bernell, Weber and Edwards discovered that if rural areas had the same educational levels and occupational opportunities as urban areas, then living in a rural area would tend to reduce a household's chances of being food insecure (2006). However, the lower educational levels in rural areas counteract the ways that characteristics of rural areas otherwise reduce food insecurity.

The rural food insecurity story is not just one of economic and occupational opportunity, but also the social and geographic characteristics of rural places. The lack of options for where to shop, the cost of basic foods in small grocery stores, and the distance between home and shopping locations all impact the affordability of food for low income rural residents. Also, social service agencies often struggle to reach vulnerable families because of transportation, distance, and other community characteristics (Edwards, Torgerson & Sattem 2009). Better understanding the food insecurity patterns and processes in rural places can inform policy makers, advocates and agency leaders seeking to improve quality of life in the rural West. ●

**About the Author**

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**Author's Picks for Further Reading**

USDA's Economic Research Service  
[ers.usda.gov/](http://ers.usda.gov/)

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|                          | 2005-2007 |                 | 1999-2001 |                 |
|--------------------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------|-----------------|
|                          | "Hunger"  | Food Insecurity | "Hunger"  | Food Insecurity |
| <b>13 Western States</b> |           |                 |           |                 |
| Non Metro                | 4.1       | 11.3            | 4.4       | 12.3            |
| Metro                    | 3.9       | 10.7            | 3.8       | 11.9            |
| <b>US</b>                |           |                 |           |                 |
| Non Metro                | 4.0       | 11.0            | 3.2       | 11.5            |
| Metro                    | 4.3       | 11.7            | 3.3       | 10.5            |

Source: 2005, 2006, 2007 Current Population Survey data, December Food Security

Table 2: Metro/Non-metro "Hunger" and Food Insecurity Rates in Western States