



Hungry in Washington September 2011

*Since the beginning of the recession, the number of Washington state families struggling with hunger has almost doubled. Prior to 2008, 88,000 households across the state experienced hunger. During the past three years, this number rose by nearly 100 percent to more than **160,000 households**, 6.1 percent of total households and the 11th highest rate in the nation.*

According to the most recent report on food insecurity and hunger in America released September 7th by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), hunger has moderated somewhat nationally. Yet Washington is among the states where the prevalence of hunger has continued to climb.

Rates of food insecurity are higher in households with children. Nationally, 20.2 percent of American children live in households that experience food insecurity. The Children's Alliance estimates that as many as 400,000 children in Washington – or 25 percent – live in food insecure households.

Washington ranks 11th among the states in hunger and 18th in food insecurity. Oregon's rate of hunger ties Washington at 11th. States with the highest rankings include Arkansas, Oklahoma, Alabama, and Mississippi.

An outline of immediate federal and state action to address hunger and food insecurity as the economic downturn continues is included at the end of this report.



"Food insecurity" is a term developed to describe households financially stretched to the point where they cannot be certain that all household members will not go hungry.

The USDA survey also measures "very low food security" (formerly called "food insecurity with hunger"), describing the household where at least one family member goes hungry at times because there is not enough money for food. This report uses the more common term "hunger" to talk about this phenomenon.

Background

Each year the Children's Alliance publishes an analysis of the results from the USDA's survey on household food security, outlining the impact of food insecurity and hunger on Washington families.

Hungry in Washington presents national data from the USDA 2010 survey, including food insecurity and hunger prevalence for Washington, and the state's ranking for food insecurity over the period from 2008 through 2010.

Food Insecurity in the United States in 2010

In 2010, 14.6 percent of American households experienced food insecurity, down slightly from 14.7 percent in 2009, the highest level since the survey began in 1995. Households with substantially higher rates of food insecurity than the national average include:

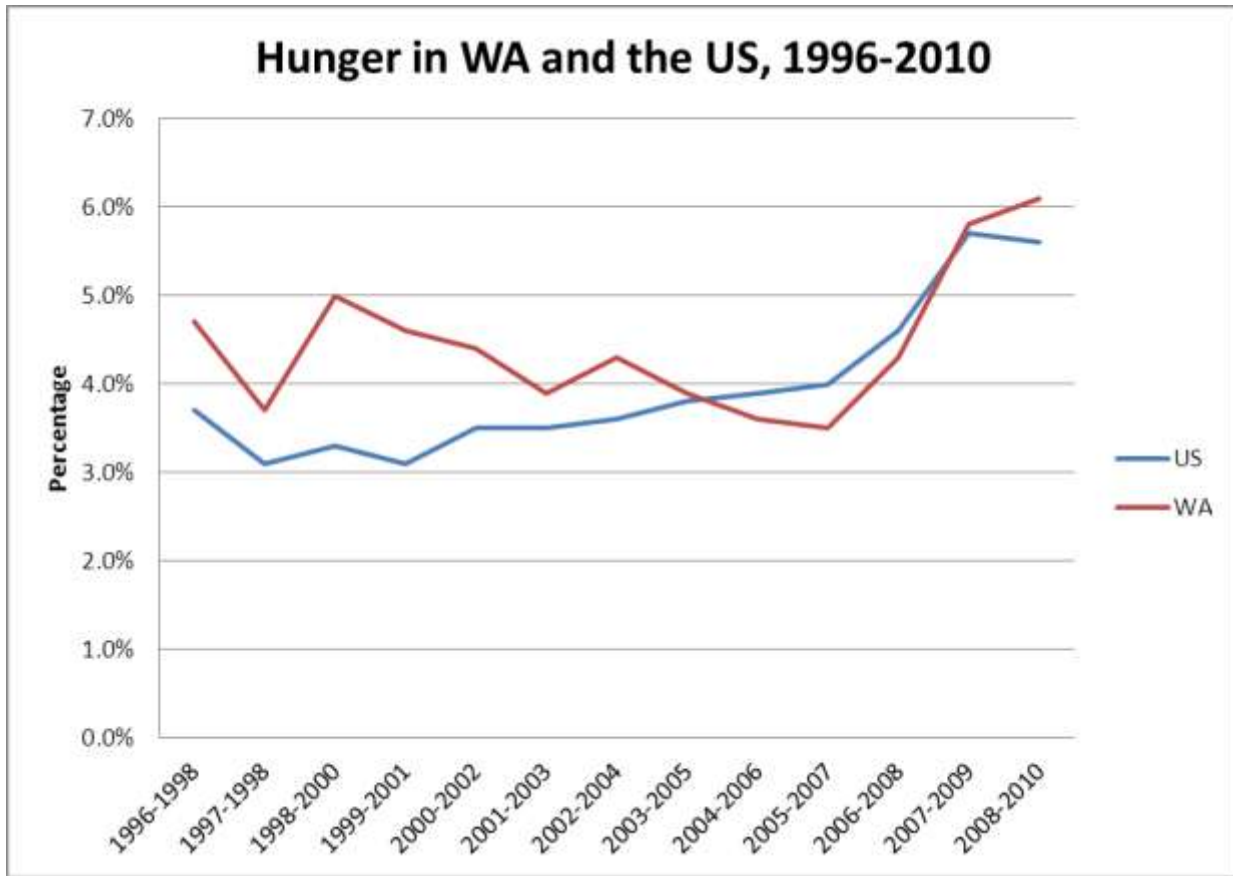
- households with incomes below the official poverty line (40 percent)
- households with children, headed by single women (35 percent) or single men (25 percent),
- African-American households (25 percent), and
- Hispanic households (26 percent)

The rate of hunger for 2010 in the U.S. was 5.6 percent, declining from 5.8 percent in 2009, also the highest level since the survey began.

Trends in Washington

The USDA began conducting the food security survey in conjunction with the U.S. Census Bureau in 1995. For the first eight years of the survey, Washington had one of the highest rates of hunger among the states. After several years with relatively low levels, hunger began to rise again from 2006 through 2008. According to the latest USDA report, hunger in Washington continued to increase in the 2008 through 2010 period to 6.1 percent, bucking the national downward trend and demonstrating the persistence of the economic downturn that has yet to show significant signs of recovery for low-income Washingtonians. In other words, the state experienced its highest rate of hunger since the survey began in 1995.

After several years of fairly low rankings among the states, Washington is now 18th in food security and 11th in hunger. Differences between states in food insecurity are attributable to a number of factors, according to the USDA, including low wages, high housing costs, residential instability (moving frequently), and a high tax burden on low-income households. Other factors are relatively low rates of participation in federal food programs, including Basic Food (food stamps) and summer meal programs for children.



Conclusion

Economic conditions in Washington in 2008 through 2010 continued to drive food insecurity and hunger rates to all-time highs, putting increased pressure on public and private sources of food assistance. While Basic Food (food stamps) participation grew between 2008 and 2010, USDA found that 32 percent of food insecure households income-eligible for Basic Food did not participate. Approximately one-fourth of income-eligible households with school-aged children did not participate in the subsidized school lunch program either.

While rising hunger is likely to accompany tough economic times, the above data indicates that about one-third of food insecure families are not receiving available food assistance. Despite dramatic increases in program participation, there is a continued need to reach families who are experiencing hunger.

The USDA reported earlier this year that increased food stamp benefits through the economic stimulus package in 2009 resulted in better food security among participating households. This higher benefit level is schedule to end in 2013, resulting in a steep and sudden drop in nutrition assistance for qualifying families.

Recommendations

The food security 2010 survey reflects continued steep increases in food insecurity and hunger in Washington. Immediate federal and state action needs to address hunger and food insecurity as the economic downturn continues:

- Congress is contemplating major reductions in key anti-hunger program as part of the recently approved debt limit agreement. Women, Infants and Children (WIC), the highly successful nutrition and health program for pregnant and nursing mothers, infants and young children, is included in the \$1 trillion in new discretionary spending cuts slated to begin this year. Basic Food (food stamps) and Child Nutrition Programs currently grow with rising demand – critical in recessionary times. **These programs' ability to respond to families' needs must be preserved by the Congressional Super-Committee**, co-chaired by Sen. Patty Murray, which will debate spending reductions this fall.
- The stakes are very high for hungry families in the state's budget crisis as well. Last year the Governor proposed to eliminate the 11-year-old program that provides food assistance to thousands of immigrant families not eligible for federal food stamps. The legislature instead slashed program benefits in half, although it is likely that the entire program will once again be on the chopping block as the state's budget deficit continues to rise. In addition, one-third of state funding for school and summer child nutrition programs was cut. **There is no room for additional budget cuts if the state nutrition safety net is to prevent more families from going hungry.**
- The food stamp program, Basic Food, is our number one defense against hunger. Changes made in local Department of Social and Health Services community service offices over the past several years have enabled staff to handle a dramatically increased number of applications with greater speed and accuracy, despite major staffing reductions. **Now is not the time to back off of program streamlining that reduces program errors and gets key benefits to needy families quickly.**
- Finally, the Farm Bill is due for reauthorization by Congress in 2012. The last two Farm Bills have brought needed changes in the food stamp program, resulting in improved access for low-income families and seniors. Farm Bill 2012 should continue this trend and reject current calls to unrealistically complicate the program by limiting food choice and rolling back positive changes.

To read the USDA report: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR125/ERR125.pdf>

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