



Hungry in Washington September 2013

Economic recovery has yet to reach Washington families struggling with hunger. The rate of hunger remains high – 6.1 percent of all Washington households.

According to the most recent report on food insecurity and hunger in America released September 4th by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the rate of hunger in 2012 remained 5.7 percent nationally. **Washington’s rate of 6.1 percent continues to exceed the national rate.**

Rates of food insecurity are higher in households with children. Nationally, nearly 16 million children live in households that experience food insecurity – 21.6 percent of all children. **The Children’s Alliance estimates that up to 400,000 children in Washington live in food insecure households.**

Washington ranks 15th among the states in hunger, one spot higher than in 2011. The rate of food insecurity in Washington dropped in the period 2010-12, indicating that families on the margin may be experiencing improvements in the economy. Hungry families, however, did not see a significant decrease.

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 USDA’s survey on household food security, outlining the impact of food insecurity and hunger on Washington families. Monitoring the extent of childhood hunger in Washington is an integral part of working collaboratively with state agencies and community-based organizations to end childhood hunger in Washington.

Hungry in Washington presents national data from the USDA 2012 survey, including food insecurity and hunger prevalence for Washington, and the state's ranking for food insecurity over the period from 2010 through 2012.

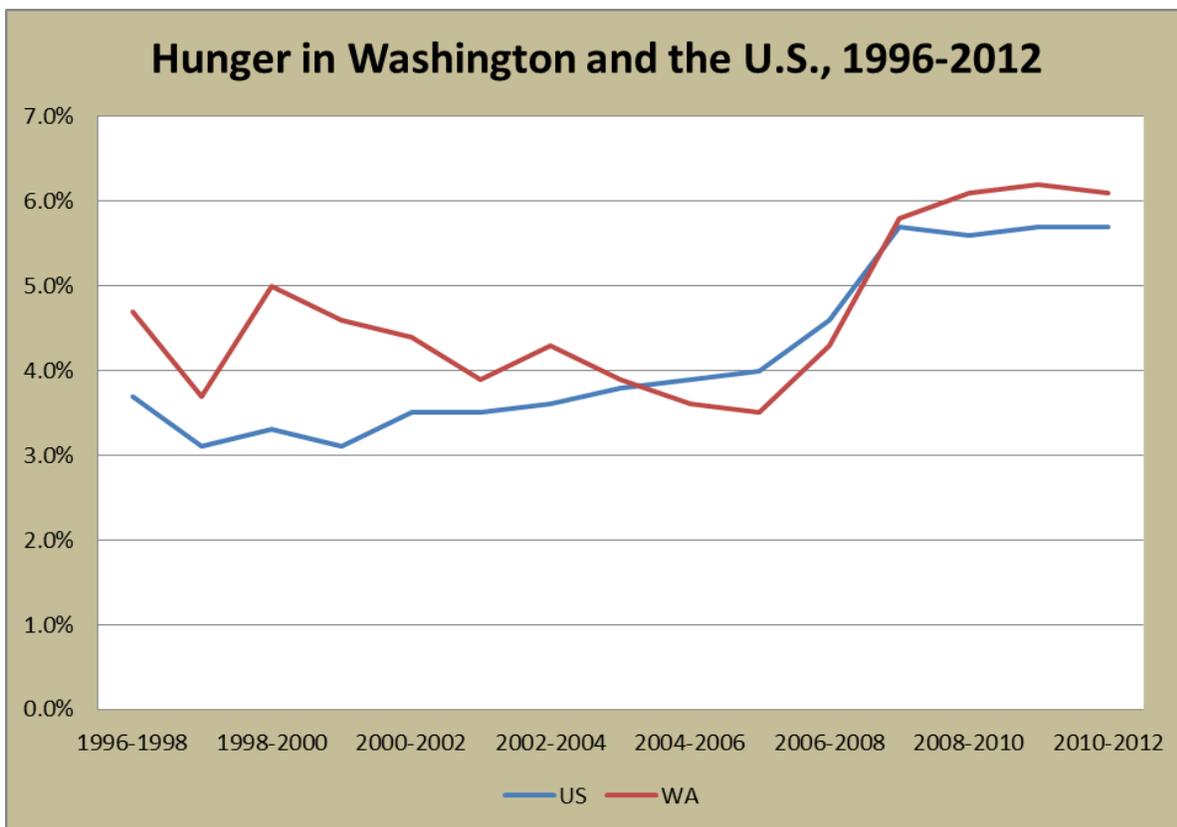
Food Insecurity in the United States and Washington in 2012

In 2012, 14.5 percent of American households experienced food insecurity, compared to 14.6 percent in 2011. Food insecurity in Washington dropped from the record high 15.4 percent for the period from 2009 and 2011 to 14.6 percent for the period from 2010 to 2012 although hunger (very low food security) did not change. Households with substantially higher rates of food insecurity than the national average include:

- Households with incomes below the official poverty line (41 percent),
- Households with children, headed by single women (35.4 percent) or single men (23.6 percent),
- African-American households (24.6 percent), and
- Hispanic households (23.3 percent)

The rate of hunger for 2012 in the U.S. was 5.7 percent, declining from 5.8 percent in 2010, which was the highest level since the survey began.

Trends: Record Breaking Rise in Hunger



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 2012.

After several years of fairly low rankings among the states, Washington is now 15th in hunger. Differences between states in food insecurity are attributable to a number of factors, according to 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 the summer meal programs for children. Washington ranks 39th out of 50 states in reaching low-income children with summer nutrition and 39th in reaching low-income students with school breakfast.

Washington’s rates of hunger and food insecurity exceed those of neighboring states. In Oregon, 13.6 percent of households are food insecure; 5.8 percent are hungry. In Idaho, 14.3 percent are food insecure and 5.3 percent are hungry. Oregon ranks 17th for hunger and Idaho 30th.

Data Summary:

	Washington	United States
Rate of Food Insecurity	14.6%	14.5%
Ranking among states for food insecurity	22	
Rate of hunger (very low food security)	6.1%	5.6%
Ranking among states for hunger	15	

Conclusion

Economic conditions in Washington in 2010 through 2012 continued to push rates of hunger above the national average, putting increased pressure on public and private sources of food assistance.

State budget cuts have placed more families at risk of hunger. State Food Assistance (SFA) provides food stamp benefits to legal, documented immigrants ineligible for federal food stamps. Benefits for SFA recipients are set at 75 percent of food stamp benefits, up from 50 percent in 2012. However, full restoration is needed.

Major reductions in food assistance programs are being debated at the federal level as well. Despite a USDA report that increased food stamp benefits through the economic stimulus package in 2009 resulted in better food security among participating households, the benefit increase is scheduled to end in November 2013, resulting in a steep and sudden drop in nutrition assistance for qualifying families.

Current monthly food stamp benefits average the equivalent of \$4.50 a day per person – an inadequate level that barely gets families through the whole month, let alone allows them to buy the foods needed for a healthy diet. Recently, the prestigious Institute of Medicine, after a thorough study, outlined the factors that explain why the SNAP allotment is not enough to help most families obtain a minimally adequate diet.

Also on the table are deep cuts to food stamps proposed in Congressional Farm Bills. The Senate Farm Bill will result in a loss of up to \$90 per month in benefits for 230,000 Washington households. The House has yet to pass a bill including the Nutrition Title from the Farm Bill. A proposed bill, to be acted upon after the August 2013 Congressional recess, is likely to include \$40 billion in cuts to food stamps, ten times the amount in the Senate budget.

At the same time, community food providers report increased demand. Food banks in communities as diverse as the Rainier Valley, Puyallup, Loon Lake and Bellingham tell the same story of increased need and rising numbers of families turning to food banks with increased frequency. As Mike Cohen at Bellingham Food Bank states,

“The new normal for food banks and hunger relief agencies in Whatcom County is that we continue to see record setting numbers of new individuals and families accessing services—more regularly and for longer periods of time. For food banks to meet the need we need to continue to find new food resources and funding sources because no funding source, particularly government, is keeping pace with the growing numbers of visits. The families we talk to frequently describe losing what meager benefits they had 3-6 months ago. We continue to hear about food stamps going down at a time when we certainly believe they should be growing, increased health care costs and increased inflation of costs for food and other essential items.”

Recommendations

The 2012 food security survey reflects a continued high rate of hunger in Washington. Immediate federal and state actions are needed to address hunger and food insecurity as families struggle with unemployment, part-time jobs, low wages and rising housing costs.

First, a final Farm Bill **must not include reductions in the food stamp program**. With over 1 million Washingtonians receiving food assistance, and demand only slightly moderating, this is not the time to cut funding, reduce state options to streamline the program, or end the program’s ability to grow in tough times and shrink in good ones. In November 2013, families will lose up to \$36 per month in benefits when the 2009 economic stimulus benefit increase ends.

Second, in 2011 the State Legislature cut benefits in the State Food Assistance program. The legislature increased the benefits to 75 percent of food stamp benefits beginning July 1, 2013, however, after the November benefit cut much of this increase will be erased. Targeting a small group of households (11,000 out of more than 600,000), primarily families of color, for cuts in food assistance is an unfair solution to the state’s budget problems. **Added revenue, not continued cuts to critical safety net programs, should be prioritized by the legislature in 2014, and State Food Assistance cuts should be fully restored.**

51% of Americans feel strongly that cuts to food stamps are the wrong way to reduce government spending.

Source: Hart Research Associates’ Poll released, 2013

Third, federal discretionary spending cuts initiated by the federal sequester could reverse the significant impact made over the past several decades as more Washington kids received a strong start through the Supplemental Nutrition program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). Fifty percent of Washington babies receive WIC at the time of their birth, with 65 percent in Washington's rural areas. WIC not only provides specific, nutritious food to moms and babies, it links families with health care and nutrition education. **WIC cuts are a bad idea.** WIC works, saving billions in health care costs and providing specific health and nutrition interventions when they matter most.

Finally, Additional state action is needed to link more children to critical child nutrition programs. On the summer meals front, a combined effort of state agencies and community organizations has resulted in increased program sites and participation. United Way of King County projects a 15 percent increase in meals served this summer in King County, largely due to United Way's work with community partners to increase sites and outreach.

Progress is not being made on linking more low-income students to school breakfast, however. **Washington ranking among the states has dropped from 26th in 2001 to 39th in 2012.** We know how to increase these numbers – change breakfast service until after the bell through classroom breakfast, grab and go breakfast and second chance breakfast. Take-up of these options in Washington, however, is very low.

Click here to read the full USDA report: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err-economic-research-report/err155.aspx>

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For information about the demand for food bank services, contact Christina Wong at NW Harvest, christinaw@northwestharvest.org; 206-306-5877.