



CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE

A Voice for Washington's Children, Youth & Families

Hungry in Washington November 2009

Executive Summary

A new report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture on food security confirms growing hunger in Washington households consistent with reports from emergency food providers and rising participation rates in key anti-hunger programs. The survey's data were gathered in December 2008, as the economic downturn was taking root in Washington.¹

Estimated Washington households who are food insecure rose from 255,000 in 2007 to 288,000 in 2008, a 13 percent increase. 112,000 households met the definition for hunger ("very low food insecurity"), up 22,000 or 24 percent.

Rates of hunger are higher in households with children; the Children's Alliance estimates that 373,000 children live in households that struggle to put food on the table on a regular basis. Nationally, 22.5 percent of American children live in households experience food insecurity.

"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 survey also measures "very low food insecurity" (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.

Washington's ranking among the states for food insecurity for the 2006-08 period is 34 out of 50, slightly improved over last year when Washington ranked 32nd. However, the state's ranking for hunger (very low food insecurity) rose from 32nd last year to 28th this year.

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

Background

Each November the Children's Alliance publishes an analysis of the results of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Household Food Security Survey, outlining the impact of food insecurity and hunger on Washington families.

¹ Data from the 2008 survey is averaged with data from 2006 and 2007 to determine state-level prevalence rates due to the small sample size of each yearly survey. National data is one-year data from 2008.

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

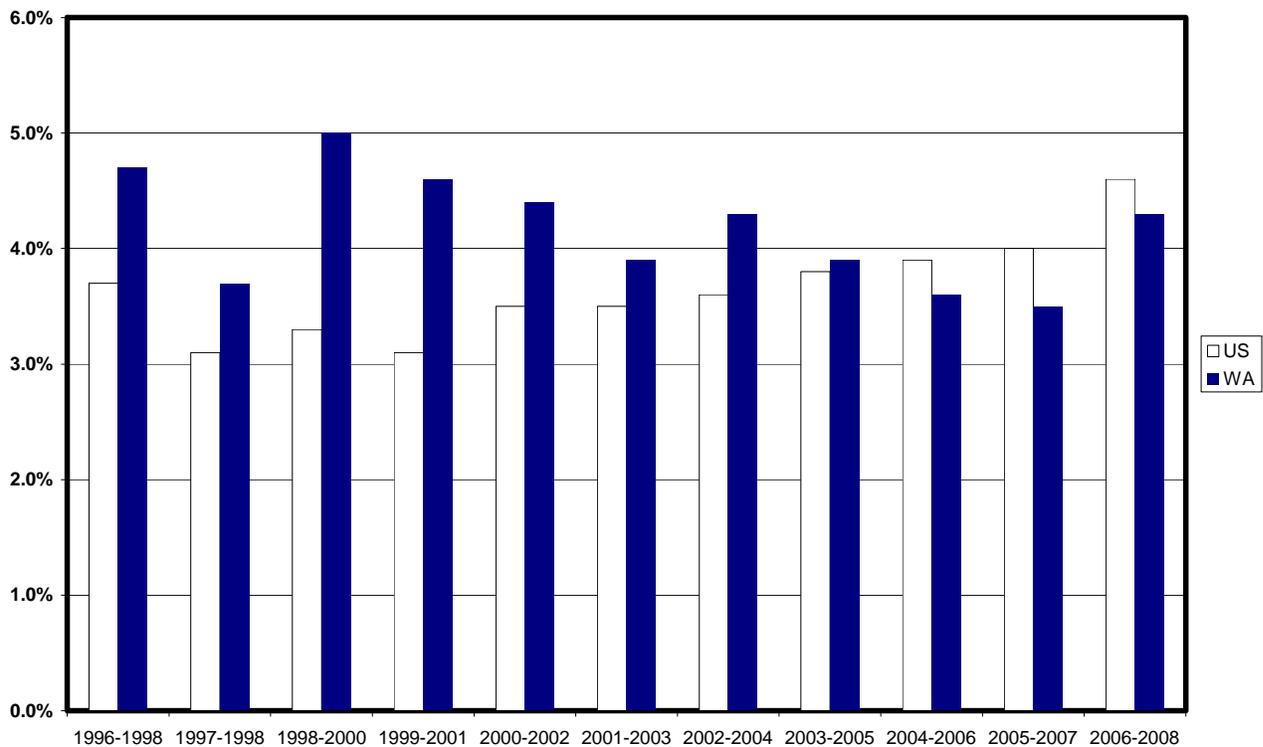
Food Security in the United States and Washington State in 2008

In 2008, 14.6 percent of American households experienced food insecurity, a steep increase from 11.1 percent in 2007, and the highest national rate 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 (42.2 percent)
- households with children, headed by single women (37.2 percent) or single men (27.6 percent),
- African-American households (25.7 percent), and
- Hispanic households (26.9 percent)

The rate of hunger (very low food security) for 2008 in the U.S. was 4.7 percent, also the highest rate of national hunger since the survey began in 1995.

Very Low Food Insecurity in the U.S. and WA, 1996-2008



Washington State was in the top five states for very low food insecurity for the first eight years of the USDA survey. In the last few years, Washington's rates of food insecurity and very low food insecurity dropped significantly only to rise again for

the 2006-08 period. In the 2006-2008 period, 11.1 percent of Washington households were food insecure and 4.3 percent were hungry.

Despite rising rates of food insecurity and hunger, Washington's rankings among the states stay relatively low: 34th out of 50 for food insecurity and 28th out of 50 in hunger. State food insecurity differences 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 Food Stamps and summer meal programs for children.

Food Security Across Washington

Last year the Children's Alliance reported the results of the 2007 Behavioral Risk Factors Surveillance System (BRFSS) survey conducted by the Department of Health. The 2008 BRFSS survey did not include the food security questions; we anticipate inclusion of the questions in the 2010 BRFSS survey.

The 2007 data indicated that rates of food insecurity varied from 20 percent in Adams County to 1 percent in Garfield County. Most high-food-insecurity counties are rural and a number represent areas where timber, fisheries, and agriculture fuel the local economy, areas requiring plentiful, low-wage workers, or areas affected by changing resource-based industries.

Recommendations

The 2008 survey reflects expected steep increases in food insecurity and hunger. Immediate federal and state action is needed to address hunger and food insecurity as the economic downturn continues:

- Congress should consider additional stimulus funding. Top priority is state fiscal relief -- Basic Food (food stamp) participation in Washington has increased 48% in the last year, 275,000 people, while staffing has decreased by 200 FTEs. Processing times for Basic Food are lengthening, clients are experiencing appointment delays and are unable to get through to call centers. Congress recognized the key role food stamps play in reviving the economy; they now must help states insure that benefits are issued timely and customer service is preserved.
- In addition, 2010 Child Nutrition Act reauthorization provides a key opportunity to strengthen programs that provide meals to kids in child care and in school, afterschool and in the summertime. As key committees ready reauthorization bills, they should increase and simplify program access, provide added funding to improve meal quality, and streamline programs to encourage communities to provide afterschool and summer meals.
- The Washington State Legislature must continue strategic investment in nutrition programs to expand access to more children particularly in the summertime when family budgets are most stretched. Only 16 percent of

students participating in subsidized meals programs during the school year have access to community meals in the summertime. A small request, \$250,000 from the legislature, can jumpstart summer meal programs in 10-12 communities, increase participation statewide to 70,000 kids and bring in an added \$2-3 million in federal meal reimbursement

- Key state institutions need help to maintain their capacity: School districts reduce nutrition programs in tight budget times, and public health is already suffering an emergency from a lack of stable funding. Most major health departments across the state are considering discontinuing or reducing the size of WIC programs – yet WIC saves \$3 in Medicaid costs for every \$1 invested.
- The private sector food safety net cannot backfill reductions in federal and state spending and is not designed as an ongoing nutrition support. Current state investments to assist local food banks are essential and should not be reduced or eliminated in the 2010 state budget.
- The Basic Food Program is our number one defense against hunger. Washington must continue to encourage participation in Basic Food by providing clear information on eligibility and application process; simplifying application, verification and reapplication processes; reducing the number of times families must travel to state offices to obtain assistance, and extending certification periods for as many recipients as possible. Every possible effort must be made to insure access to eligible families and to maximize benefits.

To read the USDA report: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR83/>

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