



Hungry in Washington September 2012

Since the beginning of the recession, the number of Washington state families struggling with hunger has increased sharply. Between 2008 and 2011, 75,000 new households joined the ranks of the hungry, and the rate of hunger in the state is the highest it has ever been.

According to the most recent report on food insecurity and hunger in America released September 5th by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), hunger has hovered between 5.4 and 5.7 percent nationally since 2008. During the same time period, hunger in Washington rose from 4.3 percent to 6.2 percent.

Rates of food insecurity are higher in households with children. Nationally, 16.6 million American children live in households that experience food insecurity – 22.4 percent of all children. **The Children’s Alliance estimates that more than 440,000 children in Washington – or 25 percent – live in food insecure households.**

Washington ranks 14th among the states in both hunger and food insecurity. States with the highest rankings include Mississippi, Arkansas, Texas, and Alabama.

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 2011 survey, including food insecurity and hunger prevalence for Washington, and the state's ranking for food insecurity over the period from 2009 through 2011.

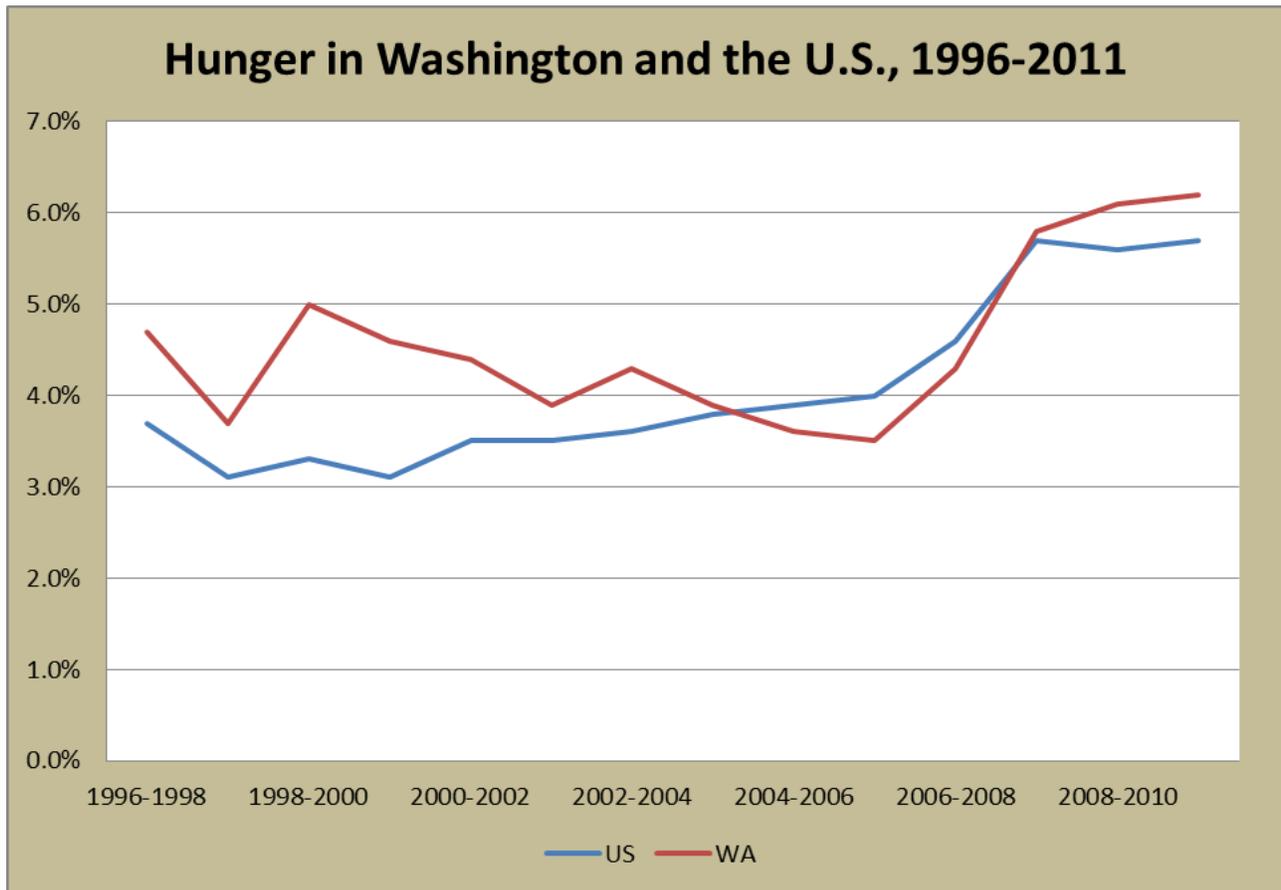
Food Insecurity in the United States and Washington in 2011

In 2011, 14.9 percent of American households experienced food insecurity, up from 14.6 percent in 2010 and the highest level since the survey began in 1995. Food insecurity in Washington increased from 14.7 percent for the period from 2008 and 2010 to 15.4 percent for the period from 2009 to 2011. Households with substantially higher rates of food insecurity than the national average include:

- Households with incomes below the official poverty line (41.1 percent),
- Households with children, headed by single women (36.8 percent) or single men (24.9 percent),
- African-American households (25.1 percent), and
- Hispanic households (26.2 percent)

The rate of hunger for 2011 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: A Four-Year, 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 2011. **According to the latest USDA report, hunger in Washington continued to increase from 2010 through 2011 to 6.2 percent, demonstrating that the economy that has yet to show significant signs of recovery for low-income Washingtonians.**

After several years of fairly low rankings among the states, Washington is now 14th in food security and 14th 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 40th out of 50 states in reaching low-income children with summer nutrition.

Washington’s rates of hunger and food insecurity exceed those of neighboring states. In Oregon, 13.6 percent of households are food insecure and 5.9 percent are hungry. In Idaho, 13.7 percent are food insecure and 5 percent are hungry. Oregon ranks 18th for hunger and Idaho is ranked 33rd.

Data Summary:

	Washington	United States
Rate of Food Insecurity	15.4%	14.9%
Ranking among states for food insecurity	14	
Rate of hunger (very low food security)	6.2%	5.7%
Ranking among states for hunger	14	

Conclusion

Economic conditions in Washington in 2008 through 2011 continued to drive food insecurity and hunger rates to all-time highs, putting increased pressure on public and private sources of food assistance.

State budget cuts have placed more families at risk of hunger. More than 11,000 households in Washington saw their State Food Assistance benefits cut in half July 1, 2012. State Food Assistance provides food stamp benefits to legal, documented immigrants ineligible for federal food stamps.

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.

Also on the table are cuts to food stamps proposed in Congressional Farm Bills. The Senate and House Farm Bill proposals will result in a loss of up to \$90 per month in benefits for 230,000 Washington households. Other provisions in the House Agriculture Committee Farm Bill will end food stamp eligibility for a minimum of 80,000 Washingtonians. The House Budget proposed by

Rep. Paul Ryan would block grant the food stamp program to the states, capping spending and ending the ability of the program to respond to economic changes.

At the same time, community food providers report increased demand. Food banks in communities as diverse as Tenino and Kettle Falls tell the same story of increased need and rising numbers of families turning to food banks more frequently.

Recommendations

The 2011 food security survey reflects continued steep increases in food insecurity and hunger in Washington. Immediate federal and state actions are needed to address hunger and food insecurity as the economic downturn continues.

First, a final 2012 Farm Bill **must not include reductions in the food stamp program**. With over one million Washingtonians receiving food assistance, and demand increasing every month, 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.

Second, in 2011 the State Legislature cut benefits in the State Food Assistance program by 50 percent, citing state budget woes. In July 2012, these cuts went into effect and legal, documented immigrants across Washington found themselves with less than \$2 per person, per day for food. 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 2013, and State Food Assistance cuts should be reversed.**

Third, federal discretionary spending cuts initiated by last year's debt ceiling deal 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. The National WIC Association estimates that more than 16,000 women, infants and children would be cut from the program should current sequestration plans move forward. **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 and local action is needed to link more children to critical child nutrition programs. The Children's Alliance's Fuel Up First for Breakfast Challenge asks schools to serve breakfast after the bell so that more kids can participate.

[Click here to read the full USDA report.](#)

[Learn about the Fuel Up First for Breakfast Challenge.](#)

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**75% of Americans
oppose major cuts to
food stamps proposed
by the House and
Senate this year.**
*Source: Hart Research Associates' Poll,
September 2012*

