



CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE

A Voice for Washington's Children, Youth & Families

HUNGRY IN WASHINGTON

25 Million Americans -- 272,000 Washington Residents -- Faced a Constant Struggle Against Hunger in 2005 November 2006

Washington's food insecurity and hunger rates improved somewhat last year, thanks to efforts to expand access to key anti-hunger programs such as food stamps and school meals. However, 95,000 Washington residents went hungry in 2005 despite the progress made and 272,000 were stretched so close to the edge financially that they couldn't be sure they'd have money to put food on the table every day.

The percentage of Washington residents with "very low food insecurity," or hunger, decreased in the period 2003-05 when compared to 1996-98, from 4.7% to 3.9%. This rate, continued to hover above the national average. Washington's overall food insecurity also decreased from 13.2% to 11.2%, a statistically significant decrease.

Gains may be attributed to a rise in Food Stamp (or Basic Food as it's called in Washington) participation in the state. The latest US Department of Agriculture information shows that 65% of eligible individuals received food stamps in 2005, compared to 56% in 2002. Three years of legislative initiatives to expand access to school lunch, breakfast and summer meals may also have affected the rate of food insecurity.

The results of the eleventh annual survey conducted by the Census Bureau for the US Department of Agriculture show a continuing increase in food insecurity nationally, where 11.4% or 35 million people continue to struggle to put food on the table due to lack of resources. Eleven million people, 3.8% of the nation's population, experience what USDA now calls "very low food insecurity" instead of the term used for ten years – **food insecurity with hunger**. (See information box on this page for definition of terms.)

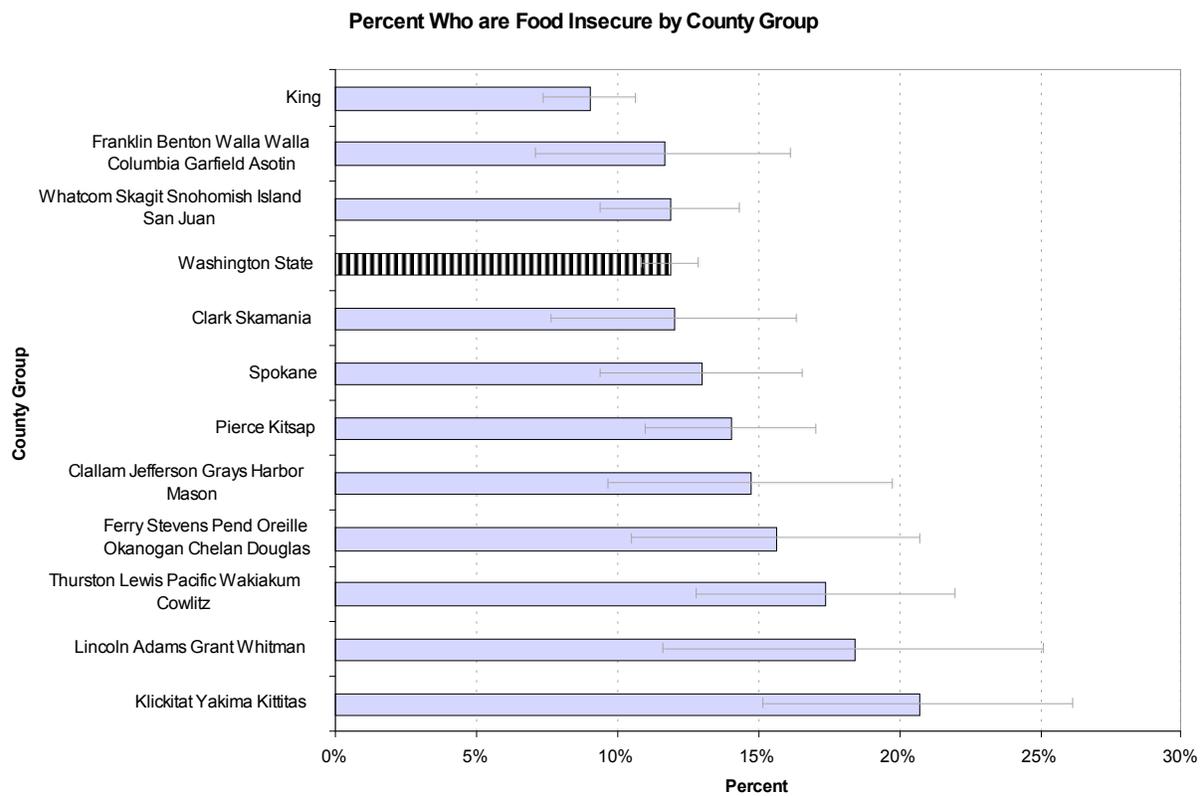
"Food insecurity" is a term developed to describe households financially stretched to the point where they cannot be certain that all household members will not go hungry.

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.

Regional Food Insecurity in 2003

For the first time, regional food insecurity data within Washington State is also available. In 2003 the Department of Health Behavioral Risk Factors Survey (BRFSS) included the six significant food insecurity questions used by USDA and the Census Bureau in their research. The BRFSS data also confirmed that the annual USDA surveys provide reliable information on food insecurity and hunger in Washington – the overall rate of food insecurity in Washington in 2003 from the BRFSS was 11.9% compared to USDA’s estimate of 11.6% in 2001-2003 and 12% in 2002-2004.

Because the statewide sample was not large enough to yield reliable county-level estimates of food insecurity, counties were grouped into regions of the state. Even with grouping, it was not possible to generate estimates of hunger due to small sample size.



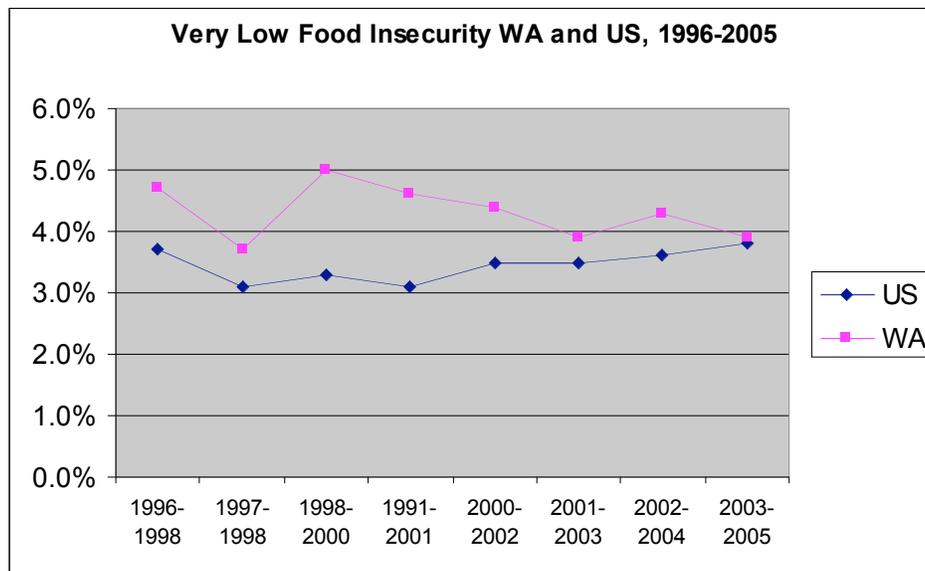
The data indicates that in rural areas of the state, particularly rural farm areas, households are most likely to be food insecure.

These areas face several factors identified by the USDA as influencing food insecurity, including low education levels and average wages, high housing costs, residential instability (moving frequently), and a high tax burden on low-income households. As in past years, Hispanic, African American and Native American households have much higher rates of hunger.

Rankings for Food Insecurity and Very Low Food Insecurity

For eight years, Washington was in the top five states for hunger. The last two years, the state ranked 14th and 12th respectively. The following chart outlines Washington's rates and rankings since 1996. It should be noted that Washington's precipitous drop to 22nd in hunger this year is primarily due to increases in hunger in other states. Washington's hunger rate did not drop significantly.

	United States	Washington
1996-98	3.7%	4.7%
		Ranking: 4
1997-1998	3.1%	3.7%
		Ranking: 2
1998-2000	3.3%	5.0%
		Ranking: 2
1999-2001	3.1%	4.6%
		Ranking: 2
2000-2002	3.5%	4.4%
		Ranking: 5
2001-2003	3.5%	3.9%
		Ranking: 14
2002-2004	3.6%	4.3%
		Ranking: 12
2003-2005	3.8%	3.9%
		Ranking: 22



Conclusions:

State Policy Choices Reduce Hunger

Authors of the November 2006 USDA report, *What Factors Account for State-to-State Differences in Food Security?* conclude their report by stating that a number of the factors affecting food security can be addressed through state policy: "For example, state policies that increase the supply of affordable housing, promote the use of Federal food assistance programs and reduce the total tax burden of low-income households are likely to reduce the prevalence of food insecurity in the state."

Actions taken by Washington policy makers in the 2004 Act for Hungry Families to increase access to Basic Food, including simplifying reporting requirements and providing transitional benefits for households leaving TANF cash assistance, have played a role in the significant decline in food insecurity since 1998. Three years of legislative work to increase access to child nutrition programs in schools, after-school and in the summer months has also had a positive influence. This fall, initial estimates from school districts show that at least 30% more low-income students in the "reduced-price" category are eating school breakfast, a rise attributable to this year's legislative action to eliminate a 30 cent "co-pay" for these meals.

Many new initiatives likely to greet legislators this January – housing initiatives, further expansion of school meals, TANF grant increases – can also have a positive effect. The one initiative that would have a significant impact on low-income families is **tax reform**. Until state taxes are changed to promote fairness, poor families will continue to pay a disproportionate percentage of income for taxes, compared to more wealthy state residents.

Federal Policy Choices Are Even More Critical

In 2007 Congress will reauthorize the Farm Bill, major federal legislation that contains the Food Stamp Program and other anti-hunger initiatives. The Food Stamp Program has not yet recovered from benefit cuts made in 1996 as part of welfare reform legislation. Today, an average family receives \$400 less in benefits per year than they would have if 1996 cuts had not been made. **It's time for members of Congress to review and raise Food Stamp benefits.**

The USDA survey showed that food secure families spend 34% more on food than their food insecure counterparts. Many of these households receive food stamp benefits but cannot stretch them enough to cover a healthy family diet. As evidence of the major impact of childhood obesity on health continues to grow, Congress must take steps to insure that low-income families have the resources and access they need to purchase a healthy diet.

In addition, some households continue to be left out of the nation's anti-hunger safety net. Congress in 1996 denied food stamps to legal immigrants. Later legislation restored food stamps to many but not all of these individuals. Congress in 2007 should restore the Food Stamp Program to its key role as the number one, universal anti-hunger resource in the United States.

References:

Household Food Security in the United State, 2005, Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews and Steven Carlson. USDA Economic Research Service, November 2006.

What Factors Account for State-to-State Differences in Food Insecurity? Judi Barfield, Rachel Dunifon, Mark Nord, Steven Carlson. USDA Economic Research Service, November 2006.

Reaching Those in Need: State Food Stamp Participation Rates in 2004, Karen E. Cunyngham, Laura Castner and Allen Schrim. Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. US Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. October 2006.

Washington Department of Health, *Behavioral Risk Factor Survey 2003*. Katrina Wyncoop Simmons, BRFSS Coordinator, July 2006.

**For more information contact Linda Stone at (509) 747-7205 or linda@childrensalliance.org
www.childrensalliance.org**