

OREGON HUNGER TASK FORCE

Creating Policies for a Hunger-Free Oregon

Hunger and Program Access during the Pandemic

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This report intends to look at how the pandemic and resulting economic impacts have affected Oregonians experiencing poverty and essential needs insecurity, especially those who have been marginalized as a result of systemic oppression and state violence. To this end, we gathered research and have conducted interviews with representatives from community-based organizations.

The data in this report is reflective of conditions around May of 2021.

A note on process and approach

The research team at Hunger-Free Oregon worked through a lot of iterations of this report and want to explain a bit about our intentions and approach to illustrating the impact of this pandemic on hunger and poverty for Oregonians. This is not a purely analytical document; it strives to combine and balance the best research we have with the real stories and narratives we have heard from the community-based organizations we were able to meet with across the state.

During our interviews, we heard something that sums up this approach. Brittney Raine, director of Community Outreach through Radical Empowerment (CORE) in Eugene told us, "These numbers represent human suffering." For that reason, we were not able to give the numbers as mere statistics. This pandemic has shown itself in many ways, some that we expected and some that we could not predict.

Pre-pandemic food insecurity in Oregon

Before the COVID outbreak in early 2020, Oregon was still in recovery mode. We had finally been on the decline in food insecurity and hunger (or "low food security") following the Great Recession and the following years. In 2004, Oregon's rate of food insecurity was 11.9%. Around the height of the Recession in 2012, it was 16.1%. In 2018, Oregon had the first year where food insecurity was lower than pre-Recession numbers, coming in at 11.1% ([Edwards, 2018](#)). Many have pointed to the changes in minimum wage and decreases in unemployment statewide as contributors to these most recent numbers.

That does not mean that we were thriving in the years leading up to the pandemic. We saw that statewide statistics on food insecurity do not show the whole picture. In 2018, Black Oregonians were experiencing food insecurity at 21.4%, Indigenous Oregonians at 32.4% and Latinx Oregonians at 26.3%, as compared to white Oregonians at only 10.5%. There are further disparities for single mothers who experience food insecurity at a rate of 34.7% as compared to 4.4% of couples with children and renters who experienced food insecurity at a rate of 23.8% versus homeowners who came in at 4.4% ([Edwards, 2018](#)).

We also know that nationally, Queer communities, especially Trans people, experience poverty at disproportionate rates. As of the latest data from 2016 [published by the Williams Institute](#), both Trans people and cis Bisexual women experience poverty at a level of 29.4%.

Even without the conditions of a national emergency and a pandemic, some of us are always facing higher levels of hunger and poverty, because of systemic discrimination.

Overall pandemic food insecurity in Oregon

On March 23, 2020, Governor Kate Brown issued a statewide stay-at-home order to protect Oregonians from contracting Sars-CoV-2, commonly known as COVID-19, the virus that had been recently named a global pandemic by the Center for Disease Control (CDC). Throughout the ensuing months, Oregon, like the rest of the world, has maintained an elaborate balance of keeping open what services can safely remain so, while simultaneously restricting in person activities such as schools, sports events, and other gatherings both large and small.

Although the stay-at-home order was necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the negative economic impacts of the shutdowns were swift and fierce. During the spring of 2020, nearly [13,000 Oregon small businesses](#) had shuttered and 329,550 Oregonians had filed for unemployment. Government agencies (1-ames works cited), nonprofit organizations (2-ames works cited), and mutual aid networks (3) pivoted to emergency response, attempting to provide essential support to ensure folks had food to eat, maintained safe and stable housing, and had cash on hand to pay their bills. Compounding the impacts of the pandemic, Oregon also suffered historic wildfires in 2020, displacing many residents, interrupting crucial food delivery chains, and destroying even more small businesses, homes, and community infrastructure that people rely on for well being (4).

Most data about food insecurity are collected and published slowly, the most widely used often having a lag time of over a year and a half. Early estimates, however, conducted by [Mark Edwards at Oregon State University](#), make it clear that the economic impact of the pandemic “has brought the state to levels of food insecurity not seen before.” He suggests that the food insecurity rate in Oregon has more than doubled in a year, with at least one million Oregonians experiencing food insecurity this year. If true, it would mean that one in four Oregonians felt the stress of not knowing where their next meal would come from in the past year.

Perhaps as telling as academic estimates are the stories shared by organizations serving communities on the ground. CORE Eugene, a street food provider in Eugene, Oregon, increased the number of meals exponentially in 2020, pointing directly to the pandemic and the wildfires as the cause of increased demand. As Brittney Raine, the Executive Director of Community Engagement at CORE put it, these statistics are not merely statistics. They represent human suffering and should be presented as such.

Staff spoke to the tremendous amount of work and pressure they felt at the urgency of delivering essential services and goods to communities. Debra Porta at Pride Northwest described how their organization shifted from a mission primarily about putting on the Pride Festival each year in June, to spending nearly all their time coordinating responses to the pandemic. Burnout and stress impacted every staff person we spoke with, as the need simply outpaced capacity.

Finally, even as we learned about the tremendous increase in need for access to food, we also heard how specific and intersectional communities, including Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and members of the queer community, did not have equal access to food supports due to political marginalization or inadequate services.

Gregg Griffin from the Hand Up Project spoke to how intersectional identities and experiences impact people's access to services. For example, because there are fewer organizations serving the Trans community specifically, a person may have to travel farther to access food in a Trans-friendly environment. Because of this, they may also have to contend with longer bus routes—facing higher potential for exposure to the virus, while also facing higher potential for experiencing transphobic aggression. It was the awareness of these overlapping layers of oppression, resulting in deepening experiences of food insecurity, that seemed to weigh most heavily on those we spoke to.

Disproportionate impact of the pandemic

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), Queer, Trans, and immigrant communities are disproportionately experiencing the pandemic's impact through access to food, employment, housing, and now even the COVID-19 vaccine. Oregonians who are a member of multiple impacted communities are at an even higher risk for food insecurity and economic uncertainty during this continuing crisis.

We know that households headed by single mothers are specifically impacted. Before COVID, households headed by single women were more likely to experience food insecurity than any other family structure, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. [In 2019](#), Oregon households headed by single mothers experienced food insecurity at a rate of 31.5%, as compared to 9.8% of the general population. With the pandemic, this gap has probably grown, given that single mothers have lost work at higher rates than many other demographic groups. The U.S. Census reports that about a quarter of households with children are headed by single mothers ([The 19th](#)).

Many jobs lost due to COVID-19 have been service positions in the hospitality and leisure industry, or lower wage positions, both of which are predominantly filled by BIPOC and immigrant individuals. For workers who made less than \$16 an hour prior to the pandemic, employment has decreased by as much as 30% at times during the past year ([Oregon Economic Analysis](#)). During this time of rising unemployment, essential workers are putting their health at risk to keep grocery stores, health facilities, and more essential services operating. 12% of Oregon's frontline workers are immigrants ([Protecting Immigrant Families](#)).

Black and Latinx communities experienced higher rates of food insecurity before the pandemic, and the impact of the crisis suggests hunger continues to increase for families in Oregon. At the end of 2020, 32% of Latinx adults in Oregon living in households with children reported sometimes or often not having enough food to eat in the past week compared to 16% of the overall population. Data available from Summer 2019 shows 22% of Black households with children in Oregon reported food insecurity compared to 13% of the general population at that time. As families face unemployment and reduced work hours, this financial strain affects other basic needs as well. By the end of 2020, 56% of Latinx households with children reported difficulty paying for usual household expenses in the prior week. 34% of the Latinx households reported little or no confidence in their ability to pay their next rent or mortgage payment on time compared to 23% of the overall population ([AEC Foundation](#)).

Nationwide, Trans people are experiencing high rates of decreased income, with more than half reporting a reduction in their work hours because of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Human Rights Campaign, 19% of Trans people have become unemployed during this time. Trans people of color have reported even higher rates of impact by economic difficulties during this time. 58% of transgender people of color have experienced reduced work hours, while 26% reported unemployment. 51% of Trans people of color reported a change in their household budget, and 67% are concerned they cannot pay their bills or debt, not including mortgages ([HRC Report](#)).

Impact of surrounding political environment

Where we are now is based on the effect of nearly four years of policy. The Trump administration delivered on their policy promises of reducing access to essential needs benefits.

In 2019 alone, the administration published four administrative rule changes that had wide-ranging effects on people's ability and willingness to access benefits. One of the first big changes was an elimination of broad based categorical eligibility, a rule that restricted states' ability to streamline how people apply for assistance and lower the income level at which someone is eligible for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) and block people with very modest assets, like a used car, from qualifying ([Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon](#)). The administration followed this with a rule standardizing utility allowances which reduced benefit costs by directly reducing benefit amounts for people receiving them ([Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon](#)). Both of these rules were struck down by executive orders signed by President Biden on his second day of office, but the impact is unknown as to how many people were discouraged or even denied benefits under these rules.

The Trump Administration's change to the public charge rule would block documented, tax-paying immigrants and their families from going through the official immigration process for receiving benefits for which they are legally eligible, including SNAP, Medicaid and housing assistance. This rule was enacted, and it weaved through courts, getting struck down and reinstated again and again. President Biden has requested a reexamination of these rules through an Executive Order on February 2, 2021. The Trump administration's changes to Public Charge rules served a dual purpose: both to cut benefits for immigrant families who are eligible for them and to scare families who need benefits into not applying.

Data collected nationwide a few months before the pandemic demonstrates evidence of the Public Charge rule's chilling effect on Latinx immigrant populations. Fear and confusion surrounding the policy has kept families from accessing the support they need to maintain their health, even if participating in the food program in question would have no impact on their immigration status. While 75% of the survey's immigrant parents screened positive for food insecurity, more than 25% reported that they stopped using food programs, including SNAP, because of immigration concerns in the past two years. 78% of nutrition service programs reported immigrants in their communities are afraid to access SNAP, with 43% reporting fear of accessing emergency food, and 27% reporting fear of accessing school meals ([FRAC, NILC](#)). Families fear that food programs will share their information with immigration enforcement agencies or that going out to receive food from support programs will physically expose them to such agencies.

Mutual aid groups filling the gap in government response

As the pandemic went on, we saw how slow the federal and state governments were to act effectively to address the real suffering of people across the country. The first federal bill to address instabilities created by pandemic conditions was passed within a week of the first lockdowns but had a limited scope. The next bill, the CARES Act, was passed at the end of March, which was much more expansive than its predecessor, including one-time payments of \$1200 to a limited group of taxpayers. Even with this speedy action, this did not translate into sufficient or even quick distribution of needed resources.

At the federal and state levels, bureaucracy holds up the ability to bring resources to people at the speed that needs arise. The very process of bill-making requires programs to be created or changed, then have those changes implemented at various lower levels until communities can actually access those resources. Once these resources are available, only certain people are able to access them.

During this pandemic, we have seen this in action. Changes to SNAP, including emergency allotments that boosted benefits and waiving of interview and some application requirements, creation of Pandemic EBT to cover lost school meals and changes to unemployment benefits were implemented to address essential needs security. All of these took time to implement and still have not reached all the people who could access them. In the case of Pandemic EBT, Oregon is still distributing those benefits for the previous school year.

With that, changes to resources were difficult to communicate. As Hunger-Free Oregon did their outreach on changes to SNAP and school meals, the constantly changing nature of information on benefits made information sharing a herculean task. This led to calls and emails from community members across Oregon asking how they could access essential needs benefits, including some from those who were eligible for benefits, but did not know that from what they had heard.

While state and federal government benefits were confusing or time-consuming to access during this pandemic, mutual aid groups began popping up as a way to get needs met quickly. These groups would gather funding from individuals and either provide funds directly to those who requested them or provide specific resources to folks. With these groups, they frequently focus on a particular group of people, getting money directly to individuals in communities disproportionately impacted by state violence. In March 2020, there were 50 mutual aid groups and by May, there were 800, [according to the AP](#).

While the urgency of the pandemic birthed a mass of these groups, mutual aid is not a new concept. There is a history of mutual aid groups in Black and Latinx communities extending back to the 1700's, from the African Union Society in Rhode Island, established in 1780, Mexican American societies called Sociedades Mutualistas in the late 19th century, to the Black Panther Survival Programs from the late 1960s. Anh-Thu Nguyen, director of strategic partnerships at Democracy at Work Institute and a Vietnamese American woman, said mutual aid has long been a means for survival for many Asian American immigrants, including Lending Circles in Asian American communities ([AP](#)).

As time has gone on, mutual aid has followed in the footsteps of this history and morphed as times and technologies have changed. The availability of online payment systems, like Venmo, CashApp and PayPal have made instant and direct payments more accessible. Social media has also made it easier for mutual aid groups to form and solicit and distribute funds. The ability to share mutual aid fund posts and create

spaces for folks to request needed funds has allowed mutual aid to flourish in a way that hasn't been seen before.

There are 27 mutual aid groups in Oregon, according to Mutual Aid Hub. These include groups like Equitable Giving Circle, who provides food from BIPOC farmers to around 450 families. As executive director, [AJ McCreary told MSNBC](#), "I've been on the needing end of things. And you don't run around telling people about needs if they aren't real. If you're saying you have this need, it's because you have a need. Your need for assistance, care, support, life, dignity – it's all there. We believe there's this really amazing thing about trusting people about their needs. Because when they don't have that need anymore, they will tell you: I'm OK. After being taken care of for a while, they're able to breathe and take care of themselves and others."

What government can do now

There are actions that the government can take to better address the continuing problems exacerbated by the pandemic. Some of these recommendations are bills currently being pushed through federal and state bills and some are changes that need to be made but do not yet have associated bills:

- *Administer programs through mutual aid networks.* A large number of people are receiving direct aid and information on services available to them through mutual aid networks. They are able to engage with these networks, even if they might not engage with government agencies directly. Using these avenues could get more resources to
- *Provide funding to mutual aid networks.* Support mutual aid networks in providing direct service in the form of funding.
- *Acknowledge and address disparities for Oregonians.*
- *Expand eviction moratoriums to the end of the federal emergency.* The eviction moratorium has been extended to July 2021, but renters need assurance that they still have a place to live through the end of the federal emergency declaration.
- *Forgive rent through the end of the federal emergency.* As helpful as a moratorium is for renters, suspending their rent for now and expecting them to pay back all rent after the moratorium creates a snowball effect, especially in the face of economic hardship.
- *Give more payments directly to Oregonians.* Stimulus payments, while somewhat useful, have been insufficient, especially for those facing food and housing insecurity. We know that money given directly to low-income folks results in large amounts of economic activity.
- *Roll back fear-based policies targeting communities of color and Queer communities.*
- *Create safer communities for Black, Indigenous and People of Color.*
- *Protect the rights of immigrant Oregonians.*

Conclusion

We came into this project knowing that this pandemic has made things worse for Oregonians experiencing poverty and food insecurity. And we knew that the inequities that exist in our communities, thanks in large part to systemic oppressions, would make this pandemic and the general instability around it disproportionately damaging to those who have been marginalized. This was easily confirmed by the data and what we heard from communities.

What we did not know was that this pandemic didn't just have the impact that we thought it would. It has exposed the faults in our system in ways we have never seen before. Government response has not been enough and, in the case of those already experiencing the brunt of systemic oppression, it could never be safe enough to access. Mutual aid networks and community-based organizations have been more nimble, making changes to services and quickly providing individuals with resources. Communities and individuals have taken care of each other when the larger systems around us could not.