



CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE

A Voice for Washington's Children, Youth & Families



Hungry in Washington November 2010

More than 367,000 households in Washington struggled to put food on the table in 2009, according to the most recent report on food security in America released November 15, 2010 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service.

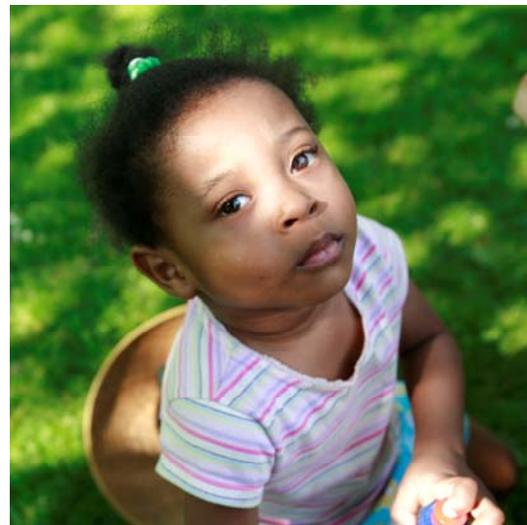
Estimated Washington households who are food insecure rose dramatically from 288,000 in 2008 to 367,000 in 2009, a 27 percent increase. **152,200 households met the definition for hunger (“very low food security”), up 40,200 or 36 percent.**

Rates of hunger are higher in households with children. Nationally, 23.2 percent of American children live in households that experience food insecurity. The Children's Alliance estimates that more than 400,000 children in Washington live in food insecure households.

Washington's ranking among the states for food insecurity for the 2006-08 period is 17 out of 50, up significantly from 34th last year. **And, the state's ranking for hunger (very low food security) rose from 28th last year to 13th 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.



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

The 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.



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Background

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

Hungry in Washington presents national data from the USDA 2009 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 2009

In 2009, 14.7 percent of American households experienced food insecurity, up only slightly from 14.6 percent in 2008, 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 (43 percent)
- households with children, headed by single women (37 percent) or single men (28 percent)
- African-American households (25 percent)
- Latino households (27 percent)

The rate of hunger (very low food security) for 2009 in the U.S. was 5.7 percent, also the highest rate of national hunger since the survey began in 1995.

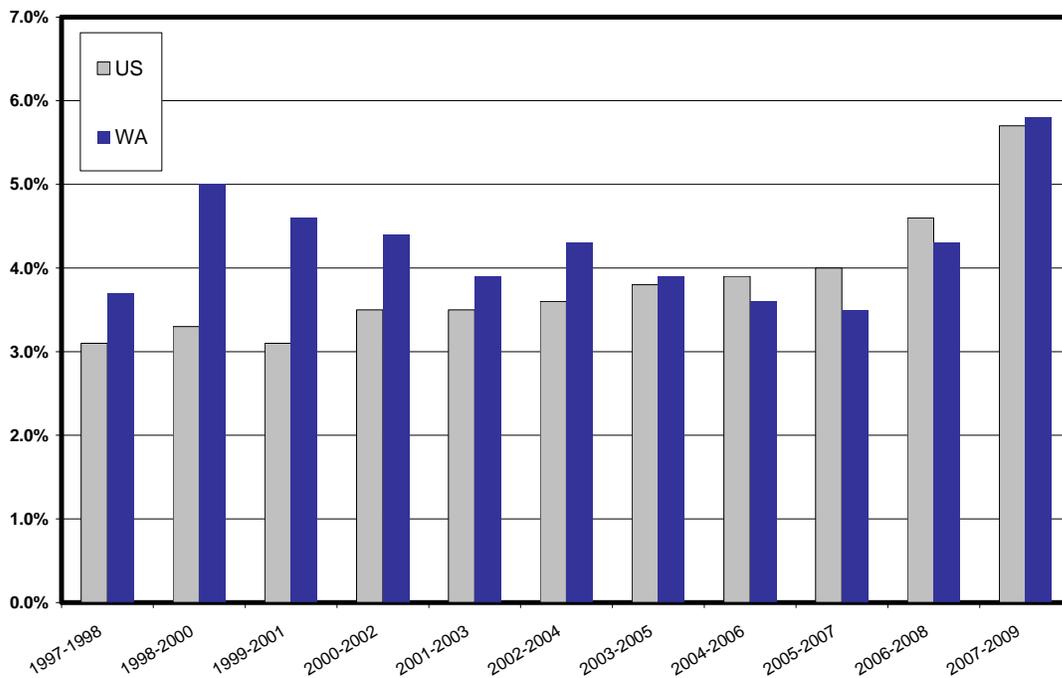
Trends in Food Security

Washington State was in the top five states for hunger for the first eight years of the USDA survey. After several years with relatively low levels, hunger began to rise again in the 2006-08 period. According to the latest USDA report, hunger in Washington increased steeply in the 2007-09 period to 5.7 percent, higher than the last peak in 1997-2000, indicating the severity of the current economic downturn that has yet to show significant signs of recovery for low-income Americans. **In other words, the state experienced its highest rate of hunger since the survey began in 1995.**



After several years of fairly low rankings among the states, **Washington is now 17th in food security and 13th in hunger** (very low food security). State food insecurity differences are attributable to a number of factors according to USDA. These include varying levels of low wages, high housing costs, residential instability (moving frequently), and a high tax burden on low-income households. Other contributing factors are relatively low rates of participation in federal food programs including food stamps and summer meal programs for children.

Very Low Food Security in the U.S. and WA, 1997-2009



Conclusion

Economic conditions in Washington in 2009 drove food insecurity and hunger rates to all-time highs, putting increased pressure on public and private sources of food assistance. While Basic Food (food stamps) participation grew exponentially between 2008 and 2010, USDA found that 32 percent of food insecure households that were income-eligible for Basic Food did not participate. Nearly 30 percent of income-eligible households with school-aged children did not participate in the subsidized school lunch program as well. Strikingly, only 23.5 percent of food insecure households nationally had visited a food bank in the last year.



While rising hunger is likely to accompany tough economic times, the above data indicates that about one-third of food insecure families are not receiving available food assistance. Despite dramatic increases in program participation, there is a continued need to reach out to families who are experiencing hunger without accessing available resources.

Recommendations

The 2009 survey reflects steep increases in food insecurity and hunger in Washington. Immediate federal and state action is needed to address hunger and food insecurity as the economic downturn continues:

- Ironically, in tough times outreach and information services that link families to available resources are often on the chopping block. As the USDA report reminds us, however, there is a continued need to provide information and application assistance in ways that reach vulnerable populations.
- Congress should immediately pass Child Nutrition Reauthorization legislation and should not fund new investments in this area by cutting the food stamp program. Currently Congress is holding its 2010 “Lame Duck” session. S 3307 has been approved by the Senate and awaits House action; unfortunately, the bill includes a \$2.2 billion cut to food stamp benefits, beginning in 2013. **Before the end of the Lame Duck session, Congress should approve a child nutrition bill and find an alternate offset to any proposed food stamp cut.**
- The stakes are very high for hungry families in the state’s budget crisis as well. The Department of Social and Health Services has proposed a February 2011 elimination of the 11 year-old program that provides food assistance to legal immigrants who are not eligible for federal food stamps. **If the elimination takes place, over 31,000 people will be affected, 47 percent of whom are children.**
- Additional cutbacks in essential anti-hunger programs being considered either immediately or in the next biennium include reducing lifeline funding to community food banks whose demand will increase due to the full-range of state budget reductions, decreasing support for farm-to-school programs which are leading the charge to improve the nutritional quality of school meals, and cutting crucial state



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investments in school and summer meal programs that fill a critical gap for low-income families.

- The Basic Food Program (food stamps) is our number one defense against hunger. Changes in local Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) offices over the past several years have resulted in improved program accuracy. These have also allowed the offices to handle dramatically increased levels of applications for assistance quickly despite major staffing reductions. USDA recently awarded Washington two \$3 million bonuses for exceptional program administration. **Now is not the time to back off of program streamlining that reduces program errors and gets key benefits to needy families quickly.**
- Finally, the Farm Bill is due for reauthorization by Congress in 2012. The last two farm bills have brought about have resulted in improved access for low-income families and seniors to the food stamp program. Farm Bill 2012 should continue this trend and reject current calls to unrealistically complicate the program by limiting food choice and rolling back positive changes.

Access the full USDA report:

<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR108/ERR108.pdf>

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