



CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE

A Voice for Washington's Children, Youth & Families

Hungry in Washington: New USDA Data Shows Some Improvement in Hunger and Food Insecurity in Washington State

November 2004

Hunger and food insecurity data released on November 19 show a slight improvement for Washington State. After eight years as a top-five state for hunger and food insecurity, Washington State has dropped to a tie for the rank of ten. The percentage of households experiencing hunger or food insecurity declined as well.

This hunger data comes from the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which once a year releases findings from the annual survey of food security in America. This survey is conducted by the Census Bureau using its Census Population Survey sample.

Nationally, the 2003 survey results show an increase from 11.1% to 11.2% in the percentage of total of households which are financially stretched to the point where they cannot be certain that all household members will not go hungry. The rate of food insecurity with hunger remained the same as in the prior year at 3.5%.

"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 "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.

In Washington, fewer households experienced hunger or food insecurity than in the past eight years, giving the state hunger and food insecurity rates that are statistically the same as national averages. However, while this does mark an improvement, Washington still has a higher rate of hunger than 37 of the 51 states, including the District of Columbia.

Nearly 100,000 households in Washington are food insecure and hungry

In 2002, 290,000 Washington households were food insecure. In 2003, this number dropped to 275,000, or 11.6% of total households. Between 2002 and 2003, the percentage of households that were food insecure with hunger dropped from 4.4% to 3.9%, or 92,456 households

Increased participation in federal food programs is likely contributing to Washington's improved numbers. Between 2001 and mid-2004, 173,000 more individuals in Washington received food stamps, a 59% increase. The state's slowly improving economy may be contributing to lower hunger and food insecurity rates as well. On the other hand, recent reports of decreased giving and increased demand for emergency food, suggest that the massive efforts in each Washington community to raise food and funds to feed the needy cannot continue forever.

The following table shows national and Washington rates of food insecurity with hunger for various three-year periods since the survey began: USDA averages the data over three years to insure more statistical reliability.

	United States	Washington
1996-98	3.7%	4.7%
		Ranking: 4
1997-1998	3.1%	4.7%
		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: 10

Key Findings:

1. Eighteen states have a higher food insecurity rate than Washington; only 13 states have a higher rate of hunger. A higher percentage of food insecure families in Washington are likely to also be hungry than at the national level.
2. Nationally, rates of hunger and food insecurity are much higher among African American and Hispanic households. 6.8% of African American households and 5.4% of Hispanic households experience food insecurity with hunger. There is no comparable data for Washington State; however, it is likely that the trend would remain true here.
3. Children are also more likely to be food insecure than the population at large (18.2%) but less likely to be hungry (0.6%). Nationally, more than one-third of children in female headed, single parent, households were food insecure; 1.8% were hungry. Western states had the highest rate of food insecurity among children, 19.8%.
4. Families with income below 130% of the federal poverty level experience food insecurity with hunger at a much higher rate than the general population -- 11.3% are hungry compared to 3.5% overall. Western states have the highest rate of hunger among low-income families, 12.3%.
5. The Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), used by USDA to set food stamp benefit levels, is shown to be significantly out of touch with the reality of food costs. In the western states, families surveyed (food secure and food insecure) reported spending \$40 per week per person on food, 131% of the TFP level. Overall, food secure households spent 129% of the TFP per person per week; food insecure households spent 96%.
6. The report also provides valuable information on utilization of food assistance programs by families. Only 18.3% of hungry families with income below 130% of the federal poverty level (the eligibility level for food stamps) had received food stamps in the prior 30 days. 70% of food insecure families visited a food pantry in the previous year.

Summary Recommendations:

1. With nine years of survey data, USDA and the Census Bureau have confirmed again and again that there is a significant problem with hunger and food insecurity in Washington State. The Act for Hungry Families, approved by the State Legislature in 2004, was a significant starting point in improving access to key safety net programs for children and families, including the Basic Food Program and the School Lunch Program. There is much more work to do, however, to insure that all children have access to the nutritious meals that they need.
2. The federal nutrition programs provide many of the tools needed to assist families in their homes, children at school and at play, elders and others to access the nutrition assistance they need to live healthy and active lives. Support for expansion and strengthening of these programs, including measures to improve program quality, is an essential element in addressing hunger in Washington.
3. The roots of hunger, however, lie in family economic instability. When families must chose between heating and eating, quality of life suffers. Fair wages, child care and health care access, affordable housing and the Earned Income Tax Credit are all building blocks in family financial security. A long-term solution to hunger in Washington must go beyond the food safety net to insure an economic environment that supports families, and a broad range of supports for both families working and poor, and those who are not in the workforce due to disability or age.

Household Food Security in the United States, 2003, Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews and Steven Carlson, USDA Economic Research Service, November 2004.
<http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/fanrr42/>.

For more information on this report, contact Linda Stone: linda@childrensalliance.org.

For more information about efforts in Washington to address hunger and support opportunity for everyone, contact the Children's Alliance at www.childrensalliance.org.