



# Hungry in Washington

## November 2008

### Executive Summary

A new report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture on food security is sounding an early alarm about growing hunger in Washington households as the state and nation enter a recession. The survey's data were gathered in 2007, before the state's economy had taken a serious downturn, and yet they show significant food insecurity and hunger<sup>1</sup> in Washington, particularly in the state's rural counties.

Filling in the picture of hunger in Washington, a state survey provides information on the rate of food security for each county for the first time. Results indicate significantly higher rates of food insecurity in rural counties, particularly those with large farm worker populations and communities dependent on resource-based industries such as timber and fisheries. The counties with lower percentages of food security compared to the state as a whole include: Adams, Pacific, Asotin, Klickitat, Yakima, Okanogan, Franklin and Chelan.

While Washington's ranking among the states for food insecurity and hunger continued to be relatively low in 2007, food insecurity affected 255,000 households—as if the entire Tri-Cities population were unsure where their next meal was coming from. Among these households, 90,000 met the definition for hunger (“very low food insecurity”). The Children's Alliance estimates that approximately 300,000 children across the state live in households that struggle to put food on the table on a regular basis.

*“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.*

At both the national and state level, food insecurity disproportionately affects families of color. Hispanic households in Washington are nearly four times as likely to be food insecure as white families. Native American and African American households also experience rates of food insecurity well over twice as high as white

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<sup>1</sup> USDA terms: “food insecurity” which refers to households that, due to a shortage of resources, are struggling with or at risk for hunger and can't purchase an adequate, healthy diet. “Very low food security” used to be called “food insecurity with hunger.” In this report, we also use the less technical terms “at risk for hunger” and “hunger.”

households. On the other hand, the bulk of households affected by food insecurity in Washington are white.

Rising fuel and food prices, increased unemployment and the mortgage crisis, all point to much higher rates of hunger in 2008. 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.

## **Background**

Each November the Children's Alliance publishes an analysis of the results of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Household Food Security Survey, outlining the impact of food insecurity and hunger on Washington families. This year we have the addition of valuable Department of Health Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) survey data collected in 2007 through interviews with over 24,000 families across Washington. The BRFSS survey utilized the six core food security questions from the USDA survey.

*Hungry in Washington* presents national data from the USDA 2007 survey, including food insecurity prevalence for Washington and the state's ranking for food insecurity. In addition, the BRFSS survey provides us with county-by-county rates of food security, that is, the percentage of households in each county who answered either zero or one of the core food security questions positively. Households who answered two or more of the question positively are classified food insecure. USDA also establishes national and state rates of very low food insecurity (formerly called food insecurity with hunger), however the sample size of the BRFSS survey did not allow us to establish these rates by county.

## **Food Security in the United States and Washington State in 2007**

In 2007, 11.1 percent of American households experienced food insecurity. This rate is relatively unchanged over the past several years after peaking at 11.9 percent in 2004. Households with substantially higher rates of food insecurity than the national average include:

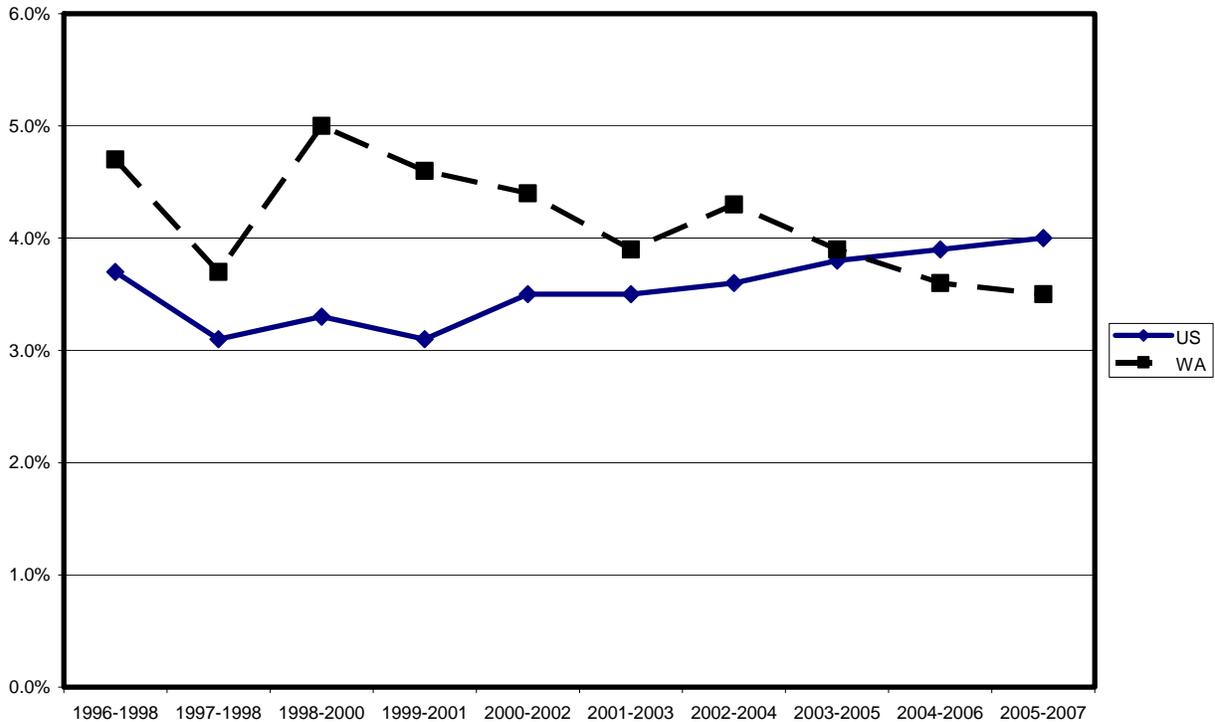
- households with incomes below the official poverty line (37.7 percent)
- households with children, headed by single women (30.2 percent) or single men (18.0 percent),
- African-American households (22.2 percent), and
- Hispanic households (20.1 percent)

The rate of hunger (very low food security) for 2007 in the U.S. was 4.1 percent. This is the highest rate of national hunger since the survey began in 1995, however the increase over 2006 was only 0.1 percent.

Washington State was in the top five states for very low food insecurity for the first eight years of the USDA survey. In the last few years, Washington's rates of food

insecurity and very low food insecurity have dropped significantly. In 2007, 10.1 percent of Washington households were food insecure and 3.5 percent were hungry.

**Very Low Food Insecurity in the U.S. and WA, 1996-2007**



Washington’s rankings for food insecurity and hunger were virtually unchanged from 2006 to 2007: 32<sup>nd</sup> for food insecurity and 33<sup>rd</sup> for very low food security. State food insecurity differences 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 Food Stamps and summer meal programs for children.

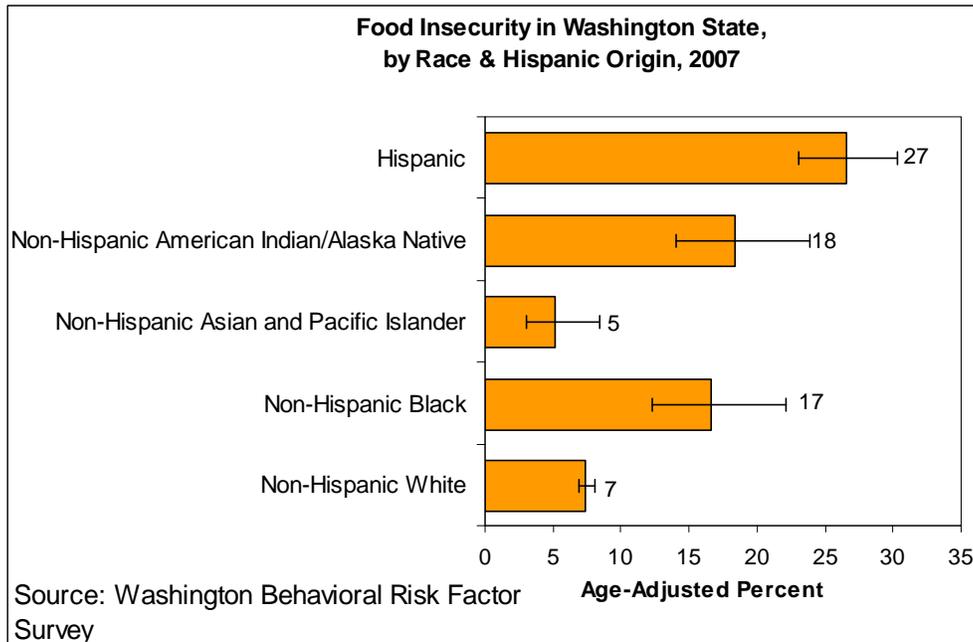
### **Food Security Across Washington**

The addition of the BRFSS data for 2007 provides us with county-level prevalence of food security for the first time. The chart in Appendix A shows county levels of food security. Rates of food insecurity vary from 20 percent in Adams County to 1 percent in Garfield County. Most high-food-insecurity counties are all rural and a number represent areas where timber, fisheries, and agriculture fuel the local economy, areas requiring plentiful, low-wage workers, or areas affected by changing resource-based industries.

### **Race and Food Insecurity**

Although most households affected by food insecurity in Washington are white, disproportionate rates of food insecurity in households of color point to additional

barriers to access. Prevalence of food insecurity in white households is 7 percent, and for Asian and Pacific Islander households 5 percent. Among Native American, Latino and African American households, food insecurity is much higher. Food insecurity among Latino households is nearly 4 times higher than for white households.

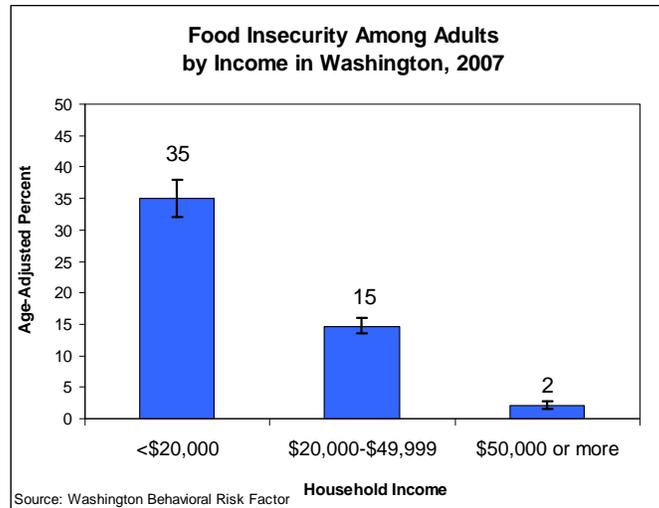


Rates of food insecurity in the Hispanic population in Washington appear to be greater than the national average for this group. In 2007, 20.7 percent of Hispanics experienced food insecurity nationally while the rate in Washington was 27 percent. On the other hand, rates of food insecurity among African American households appear to be lower than the national level of 22 percent. Because the Asian Pacific Islander category is not disaggregated, it is of limited value in learning about specific immigrant groups.

### Food Insecurity and Income

As the following chart shows, food insecurity and poverty are closely linked but not identical. The highest levels of food insecurity occur in the lowest income group, but the existence of higher rates of food insecurity than the state average in the \$20,000 – 49,000 income group shows that hunger reaches middle income families as well. As the current recession deepens, many more families may be affected by food insecurity.

Additional state policy change, like the recent increase in the gross income limit for the Basic Food Program, may be needed to extend needed food assistance to families with income that may be above the official poverty level but is below the amount needed to sustain a family in Washington’s economy.



## Recommendations

Both the USDA and BRFSS surveys were conducted in 2007, prior to the current economic downturn. In the interim, unemployment has skyrocketed along with fuel and food costs. Immediate federal and state action is needed to address hunger and food insecurity as the economic downturn continues:

- Congress must pass a second stimulus package immediately – and include increased benefits for the food stamp program (Basic Food Program in Washington) that will be immediately invested into local economies. In addition, Child Nutrition Act reauthorization provides a key opportunity to strengthen programs that provide meals to kids in child care and in school, afterschool and in the summertime.
- Key state institutions need help to maintain their capacity: School districts reduce nutrition programs in tight budget times, and public health is already suffering an emergency from a lack of stable funding. Most major health departments across the state are considering discontinuing or reducing the size of WIC programs –yet WIC saves \$3 in Medicaid costs for every \$1 invested.
- The Washington State Legislature must continue strategic investment in nutrition programs to expand access to more children during the school year and in the summertime. Only 12 percent of students participating in subsidized meals programs during the school year have access to community meals in the summertime. Legislative efforts to eliminate the co-pay for some low-income students for school lunch stop at 3<sup>rd</sup> grade although hunger does not. All low-income students need free school meals.
- The private sector food safety net cannot backfill reductions in federal and state spending and is not designed as an ongoing nutrition support. Current state investments to assist local food banks are essential and should not be reduced or eliminated in the 2009-11 state budget.

- The Basic Food Program is our number one defense against hunger. In October 2008, 12,000 new households applied for and received benefits through this entitlement program. As economic times continue to tighten, Basic Food provides essential help for purchasing food and provides local communities with an economic boost. Washington must continue to encourage participation in Basic Food by providing clear information on eligibility and application process; simplifying application, verification and reapplication processes; reducing the number of times families must travel to state offices to obtain assistance, and extending certification periods for as many recipients as possible. Every possible effort must be made to insure access to eligible families and to maximize benefits.

**For more information, please contact:**

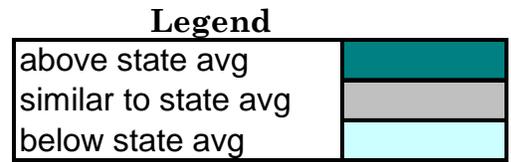
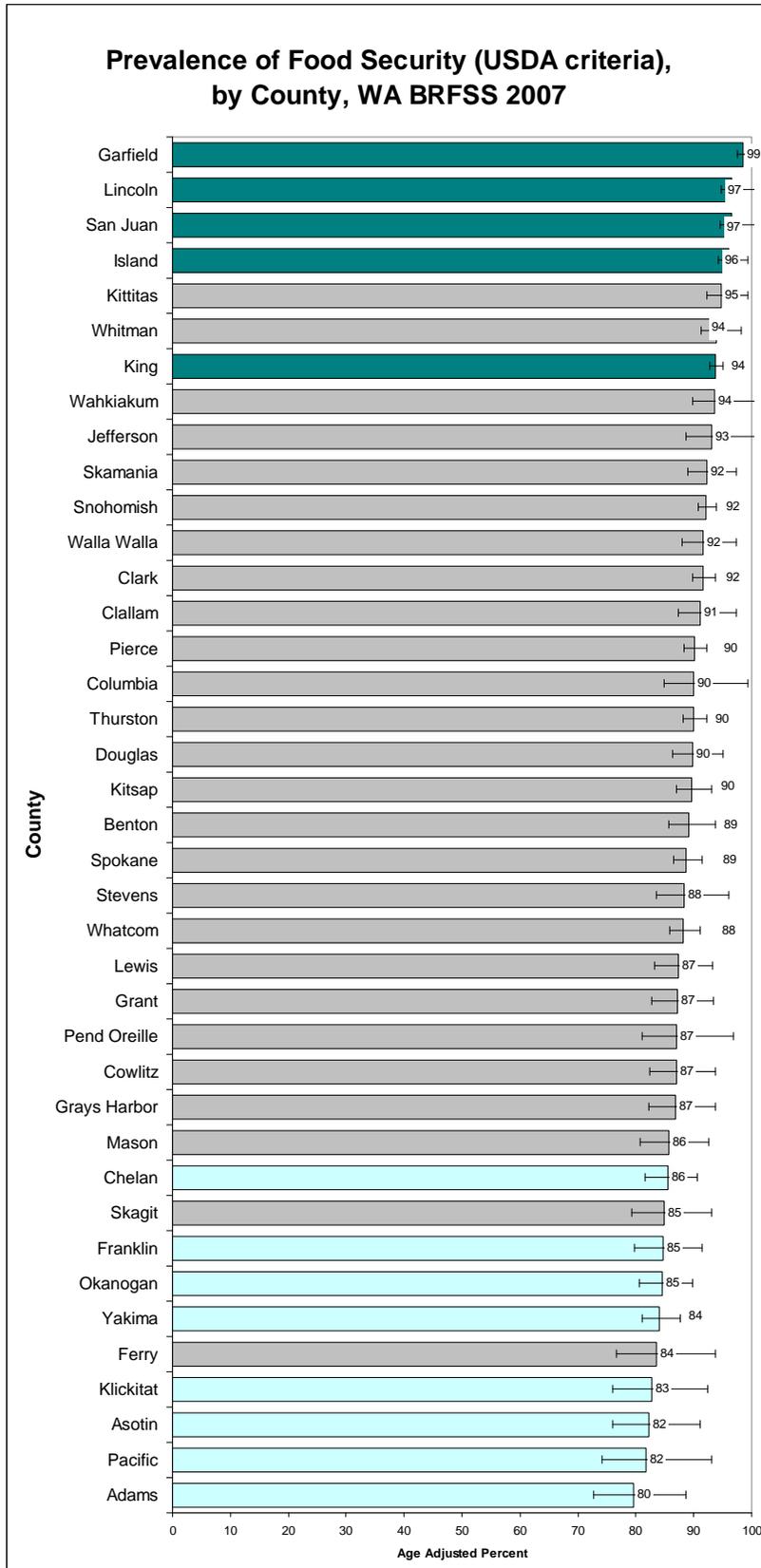
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The Children's Alliance would like to thank Gail Brandt, Linda Gunnells and Marilyn Sitaker of the Washington State Department of Health Chronic Disease Prevention Unit for help in gathering, analyzing and interpreting BRFSS data for this report.

# Appendix A

## Food Security in Washington Counties, 2007



This chart shows levels of food security in 2007 by county. Note that the counties at the bottom of the chart are areas where **food insecurity** is the highest.