

Hunger deepens in the Northwest US

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The Northwest corner of the United States—the states of Washington and Oregon—has the highest percentage of hunger and unemployment in the nation. Recent data shows this situation worsening.

Figures from the Oregon Food Bank's latest report on hunger show that demand on its services has risen 10 percent in the last year and 82 percent since 1996. Growing by almost 75,000 in the last year, the number of children, elderly, unemployed or working poor forced to rely on emergency food boxes now stands at 780,000. Children account for 40 percent of those needing emergency food.

In Portland, the increase in emergency food requests grew 12 percent, while requests in rural Yamhill and Jackson counties jumped by 20 percent over last year. Suburban Hillsboro, a center for the high-tech electronic industry as well as agricultural production, saw demand triple in the last three years.

Washington State residents requiring food assistance numbered 1.2 million between July 2001 and July 2002. This figure represents one out of every five residents—the same as Oregon—and an increase of 13 percent over the previous year. Boeing has recently laid off 30,000 workers, with another 5,000 layoffs planned for next year. In western Washington, where the majority of the population lives, the cost of living is rising at the second highest rate in the country, 65 percent in the last five years.

Both Oregon and Washington have registered the highest hunger rates nationally for several years. According to a US Department of Agriculture study for 1999-2001, 5.8 percent of Oregon households said they experienced hunger at least once in the previous year. Washington's hunger rate was tied with Utah's at 4.6 percent. About 25 percent of that number reported being chronically, frequently hungry. Oregon and Washington emerged as high hunger states with the first national survey by the Census Bureau in 1995.

Opponents of this ranking pointed to Oregon's and Washington's moderate poverty levels and average per-capita income in an effort to question the accuracy of the study. The *Oregonian* newspaper ran a front-page article last May emphasizing that sampling errors could place Oregon as low as 13th. It also downplayed the federal definition of hunger as "substantially removed from the...distended bellies of Third World hunger." A subsequent study, performed by ECONorthwest, reinforced the high ranking and cited three factors underlying the high hunger rate:

* The high cost of housing: According to Michael Leachman of the Oregon Center for Public Policy, in the decade from 1990 to 2000, median Oregon rents jumped from \$408 to \$620 a month. Data from the 2000 Census showed that 19.3 percent of Oregon renters spend more than 50 percent of their income on rent, with 40 percent of renters spending over 30 percent. In Washington, 17.8 percent spent half their income on rent. The minimum "housing" wage required to afford a two-bedroom apartment was set at \$14.83-an-hour for Oregon and \$14.77-an-hour for Washington.

* A high unemployment rate: Oregon's unemployment rate last month stood at 8 percent, while Washington had a 7.6 percent unemployment rate. Generally, the unemployment rates for both states have stayed about 2 points above the national average. An Oregon Employment Department survey on September 13 found 100,000 workers receiving unemployment benefits. In 2000, that number was 34,000.

* The study cited mobility as another key factor in fostering hunger. Between 1999 and 2000, 21 percent of Oregon residents moved within or into the state. For Washington the figure was 20.2 percent. Nationally the median was 16.1 percent. Relocation can isolate the mover by severing the support of friends or family. Some of the mobility is the result of seasonal

employment, with rural workers relocating after the harvest to seek new jobs.

The growth of inequality during the late 1980s and 1990s in Oregon has been particularly striking: four times the national average. The income of the richest fifth increased by 34 percent, while the poorest fifth saw their income drop 6 percent. In real numbers, that represents a gain of \$39,798 for the upper fifth, while the lower fifth lost \$2,067.

The 1980s also marked the beginning of the restructuring of the regional economy that saw many of the higher paid manufacturing jobs wiped out and replaced with low-paid service-economy jobs. In the lumber and wood products industry, mergers and automation and then the advent of wood substitutes resulted in the loss of many jobs. Overfishing and tighter federal regulations led to a decline in the salmon industry in the early 1990s, and then the groundfishing industry in the latter part of the decade. Big consumers of electricity like the aluminum industry closed their doors when the wholesale cost of electricity skyrocketed on the West Coast in 2000.

In all these articles, reports and studies, what is left unstated by the media, politicians and endless consultants is the scandal of the very existence of hunger in a region with a huge agricultural sector. The Northwest produces and exports a wide variety of farm products, but the production of food under the capitalist profit system has nothing to do with feeding the poor, as these studies on hunger show.



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