

As Oregon's economy "recovers," hundreds of thousands go hungry

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A record number of poor and working-class residents in the state of Oregon relied on emergency food boxes from hunger-relief centers during the previous 12 months, according to a recent report released by the non-profit Oregon Food Bank (OFB).

During the 2003-2004 fiscal year—a year, it should be noted, that has been described by the Bush administration as one in which the economy was “rebounding”—the state’s network of non-profit pantries, warehouses and local food bank affiliates distributed a record 721,000 food boxes, an 11 percent increase from the previous fiscal year.

One food box is intended to provide basic nutritional staples for one week to a family. The OFB estimates that some 850,000 people in Oregon and Clark County, Washington, immediately north of the Columbia River, which marks the state boundary, ate from a food box during this period, a figure that is equal to *nearly a quarter* of Oregon’s population of 3.5 million.

This figure doesn’t include the thousands of people, in both urban and rural areas, who rely on soup kitchens that are run by non-profit groups, shelters, churches and senior centers. The report indicates that 160 such kitchens and shelters provided 4.2 million meals, while 367 other agencies served more than 120,000 people at senior centers and other programs for low-income residents.

The OFB estimates that it served an average of 185,000 people per month from 2003 to 2004, an average increase of 20,000 more people per month from the previous year. The figure of 721,000 food boxes, an 11 percent increase from 2002-2003, represents a 103 percent increase since the fiscal year 1996-97.

The beginning of the sharp and steady rise in food box distribution by the Oregon Food Bank coincides

precisely, and not surprisingly, with former President Bill Clinton’s “welfare reform” act in 1996.

The report also does not measure another symptom of social malaise, the number of school children who qualify for free lunches and breakfasts at public schools. In previous years, it has not been difficult to find school districts in which nearly *half* the students qualify for such assistance.

Taken together, the evidence provides an appalling snapshot of the conditions faced by hundreds of thousands of working class people. It not only gives the lie to the notion of an economic “recovery” in a state that recently had the highest unemployment in the nation, but it also is at odds with the Norman Rockwell image of tourism and “economic development” officials seek to convey in marketing programs—that of a state plentiful in agricultural bounty and culinary delights.

“The emergency food system is straining to serve more people for a longer period of time,” according to Rachel Bristol, executive director of the Oregon Food Bank, in a press release. “Pantry hours are often limited, especially in rural areas. Most pantries rely on the time and energy of volunteers, many of whom are senior citizens who have worked at the pantry for years.”

Who are these people? A survey conducted by the OFB sheds some light on this question.

During a two-week period in April 2004, the OFB surveyed 3,761 households that received an emergency food box. The surveys came back from more than 100 pantries throughout Oregon and Clark County, Wash. This survey found that:

* Contrary to what is perhaps the conventional wisdom, food relief agencies are not being overrun by people who do not have jobs. Forty-three percent of the

households at one or more members working, and 54 percent of those families with children had at least one adult working.

* Many of those coming in for help with meals face multiple, practical barriers to finding employment. Twenty-eight percent of the households with a member seeking work did not have a telephone; 27 percent did not have a car; only a third of the respondents and their spouses or partners had some education beyond high school, a reflection of the state's soaring tuitions.

* More than half, 54 percent, of the surveyed households said they were receiving Food Stamps at the time, and 95 percent of those said they ran out of their allotment within the first three weeks of the month. The average monthly allotment per person is \$81.

* Seventy-two of the respondents said they "worried about where their next meal would come from at least sometimes." More than a third, 34 percent, of the households with children said they had skipped or cut the size of their children's meals because they lacked money to buy food.

* Even though about 43 percent of the food recipient households said they had at least one member of the family working, 80 percent fall under the 2004 Federal Poverty Level and 63 percent live below 75 percent of the poverty level. The median annual income for all households surveyed was \$8,000, compared with \$42,429 for the rest of Oregon.

The OFB attributes the increase in what it calls "hunger insecurity" to several factors: soaring housing costs, unemployment and job stagnation, and the growing income gap between rich and poor.

In Oregon, this gap grew four times faster than it did nationally. From 1979 to 2002, according to a separate study cited by the OFB, the average family incomes of the richest 1 percent grew 91 percent while the poorest fifth declined by 13 percent. (A more detailed account of that study will be published in the coming weeks by the *World Socialist Web Site*.)

The OFB is a non-profit, charitable organization, the hub of a statewide network of more than 870 hunger-relief agencies serving Oregon and Clark County in Washington. Its mission statement, observing that "no one should be hungry," calls for eliminating "hunger and its root causes." The introduction states that "it is outrageous that hundreds of thousands of Oregonians

rely on food pantries to eat."

However, the reader of the OFB's analysis will search in vain for any mention of "root causes" in the report. The solution, according to the OFB, "is not more charity" but "wages, employee benefits, and public supports that add up to more than the cost of covering basic needs." This ignores the political reality that both big-business parties are entirely opposed to such reformist policies and the wider reality that capitalism is the "root cause" of the suffering that the OFB study reveals.



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