

# Childhood poverty and hunger deepen in Oregon

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Two recent Census Bureau reports highlight the growing distress facing working class and poor children in Oregon as a result of the 2007 recession.

The Census Bureau's American Community Survey, released last week, shows that while poverty levels for children have increased across the board in 2010, it has inordinately affected minorities. An earlier report by the Census Bureau ranked Oregon the state with the highest percentage of food stamp use in the nation. Only the District of Columbia had a higher percentage.

Child poverty as a whole rose in Oregon by 2.4 percent, to 21.6 percent—identical to the national level—or one out of five in 2010. For African American children, this figure rose 13.6 percentage points over the previous year. This represents a staggering 36 percent increase, bringing the total to 49.3 percent, or from one out of three to one out of two in poverty. Hispanic children experienced an increase of 6.2 percent to 35.7 percent. Native American child poverty level expanded from 35.1 percent to 41.0 percent. Asian children saw greater poverty with an increase from 14 percent to 15.9 percent.

According to the Census Bureau, the poverty level for a family of four is \$22,314. This derisory number is based on a 50-year-old “food-basket” model that has failed to keep pace with rising costs and does not address modern necessities, such as Internet access for job searches or student homework, or telephone service. Despite such a low income threshold, 120,000 additional Oregon residents fell into poverty from 2007 to 2010, according to the Oregon Center for Public Policy.

The study cites Oregon as among 10 states with higher childhood poverty rates. Others were Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi, states that have long had higher levels of poverty in general and, as well, have

right-to-work laws restricting unions. The AFL-CIO has historically pointed to those laws as restricting their ability to organize workers and achieve better pay for them. Also included in the 10 states, however, are Ohio, Wisconsin and Michigan, all industrial states with a long history of unionization.

Census data on school district poverty show two Portland-area districts as rising to the third- and fourth-highest poverty level among large school districts in the state. Reynolds and David Douglas, both at 27 percent in 2009, rose sharply to 32 percent and 31 percent, respectively. The largest school district in the state, Portland Public Schools, now stands at the highest poverty level since 2005, at 18 percent.

Oregon's official unemployment level has stubbornly clung to midway between 9 and 10 percent for most of this year after hitting a high of 11.6 percent in the second quarter of 2009. Unemployment—almost twice that of the low point in 2007—and underemployment have taken their toll, not just with increased poverty, but also with the attendant social miseries of homelessness and hunger.

Currently, approximately 2,000 workers are exhausting their unemployment benefits every month in the state, a figure that is forecast to climb sharply to 13,400 in January and 12,500 in February. This figure is disputed as too small by the National Employment Law Project, which predicts that 32,000 Oregon workers—along with 2 million workers nationally—will run out of benefits by January.

These conditions are what have driven Oregon to the top state in the nation for food stamp use. Data released by the Census Bureau earlier this month show almost 18 percent of the state's residents relied on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) last year. In 2010, 23 percent more residents relied on

the program at some point in the year than in 2009.

Oregon also holds the ill-starred distinction of being the state with the highest child food insecurity level in the nation. Based on US Department of Agriculture (USDA) findings, the food bank alliance Feeding America rated Oregon number one in childhood “food insecurity”. The USDA defines a household as food-insecure when family members are unable “to consistently access the adequate amount of nutritious food necessary for a healthy life.” According to the study, over 29 percent of children in this state are in situations where obtaining food regularly is a challenge. Arizona, Arkansas, Texas and Georgia are the next four states with high childhood food insecurity.

As of August of this year, more than 785,397 Oregonians were receiving food stamps. This represents an increase of more than 350,000 additional recipients since 2007. At the end of September, the Oregon Food Bank announced that it had, for the first time ever, distributed more than a million emergency food boxes in Oregon and southwest Washington in its fiscal year ending June 30.

Homelessness, according to a January 2011 one-night count, increased 29 percent over that of two years previously. Over the course of the night, 22,116 homeless people were identified. Joblessness and high rent were the two leading reasons cited for their loss of housing. Thirty percent of the homeless—6,686—were children, and 612 of those reported that they were unaccompanied by an adult.



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