



Memorandum

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TO: Oregon Progress Board
FROM: Michael Leachman
DATE: March 14, 2002
RE: Hunger Benchmark

Dear Progress Board members:

I am writing to urge that the hunger benchmark be measured using the Food Security Supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS). The US Census Bureau conducts this supplemental survey once annually.

The CPS measure does a better job of measuring hunger in Oregon than the Oregon Population Survey (OPS) for two major reasons:

1. Census Bureau goes to the homes of respondents who cannot be reached by telephone. As a result, the CPS sample is more representative and accurate than the Oregon Population Survey, a telephone-only survey. Households so poor that members go hungry often lack a working phone.
2. Households answering the CPS questions answer many more questions about the situation in their household, making their situation clearer. As currently designed, most respondents are asked only one question about hunger on the OPS.

When the hunger benchmark was originally adopted, the CPS was the measure used. Just prior to releasing its report to the Legislature a year ago, however, the Progress Board changed the measure to the OPS on the recommendation of staff. This change occurred without the input of the Interagency Coordinating Council on Hunger, the Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force, or anti-hunger advocates in the State. The Progress Board also issued a press release reporting that hunger appeared to be down, although no statistical justification for this claim existed.

We urge that the Board restore use of the CPS as the hunger benchmark measure. The proper form of that measure is the percentage of Oregon households that are "food insecure with hunger" based on a two-year average of the CPS data. Oregon's ranking relative to other states is not appropriate as a measure, in part because the error margins associated with all survey findings often make precise rankings difficult to determine. A two-year average should be used to assure that the survey's sample size is large enough to report accurate results.

The Census Bureau is about to release the CPS data for 2000. The latest currently available CPS data show that Oregon's hunger rate in 1998-99 was 6.3 percent. This compares to a national hunger rate in 1998-99 of 3.2 percent.

Oregon should seek a hunger rate that is lower than the national hunger rate by a statistically significant margin. We recommend that the Board set a 2005 goal of 3 percent, and a 2010 goal of zero percent. Oregon would have eight years to end hunger. In 1991 (see ORS 458.530(1)), the Legislature committed itself to ending food insecurity by 2000. Instead, Oregon has one of the nation's highest hunger rates. The State should re-commit itself to this laudable goal. I think most Oregonians agree that no one in our state should go hungry because they don't have money for food.

Finally, the 2001 Benchmark Performance Report, in the section on page 46 reporting progress under the hunger benchmark, contends that "Hunger is addressed in Oregon primarily through the work of the Oregon Food Bank Network." We urge that in future reports, the Board recognize that hunger is addressed primarily by economic policies and public assistance programs that help families survive through difficult times without resorting to charity. Charity is the last line of defense against hunger, not the primary one.

The Census Bureau releases a raw data file for public use after conducting each year's Food Security Supplement to the CPS. As I have some experience in downloading and analyzing this data, I am happy to offer my services to Progress Board staff in determining Oregon's hunger rate in the future. The US Department of Agriculture's Economic Research staff is also available for assistance. Mark Nord of USDA, who wrote the survey's technical documentation, is friendly and one of the nation's leading experts on this issue.

Thank you for your consideration.

