

## **Fully employed, but hungry**

More in Oregon face hard choices

By Sally Ruth Bourrie, Globe Correspondent, 12/17/2000

PORTLAND, Ore. - In a state known for its lush landscapes and laid-back quality of life, many residents wonder where their next meal will come from.

Oregon has the nation's highest rate of hunger, according to the US Department of Agriculture, and one of the highest rates of "food insecurity."

The hungry aren't on the streets, though they may be living in their cars. They are overwhelmingly white, and when both parents are present in a family, one often stays home with the children. Three-quarters of hungry households have full-time jobs, but in Oregon it's not hard to earn more than poverty-level wages and still lack food.

State officials suspect the conditions derive from a combination of elements both unique to Oregon and typical elsewhere. Oregon may even be a bellwether, suggesting problems down the road for the rest of the country.

The state got a jump on welfare reform by implementing its own program in 1994, and may be displaying problems earlier than elsewhere. There are also high housing costs, a wide and increasing gap between rich and poor, and an economy where low-paying service jobs have replaced some unskilled and better-paying manufacturing and union work.

Chris and Colette White and their three children rent an \$800-a-month, two-bedroom house in southeast Portland. Chris earns \$1,850 a month managing a telemarketing room. With food stamps, vouchers from the federal Women, Infants, and Children Nutrition program, known as WIC, plus church and family help, they make ends meet.

Colette stays home with the children for personal and financial reasons - day care costs \$300-plus per child per month. But their delicate financial equilibrium can be upset by something as simple as a visit to the dentist.

"We really don't have much of a nest egg," said Colette. "Every time we bring ourselves over that ledge, something sets us back."

Food stamps are a "godsend," they say, but their food generally runs out before the end of the month. "Hamburger is one of the biggest scams in the world," said Chris, who does much of the cooking and shopping and watches food prices daily. "A chicken could be \$3 one day and \$7 the next."

The WIC program provides milk, juice, peanut butter, cereal, eggs, and other food to ensure children's health. The Whites always have plenty of cereal, which may, along with peanut butter, be their main meal at the end of the month.

In many ways they exemplify what's going on in Oregon. From 1978 to 1998, the proportion of Oregon jobs paying less than \$25,000 increased from 30 percent to 35 percent. A 1999 study by the Northwest Policy Center at the University of Washington calculated Oregon's livable wage at \$34,000 for a family of three; the federal poverty standard is \$17,050 for a family of four. Housing costs have risen twice as fast as income since the mid-1980s.

"When you have people that have relatively low income and very high housing prices, they may be choosing between food insecurity and housing insecurity," said Jim Neely, deputy administrator of Oregon's Adult and Family Services Division.

To determine "food insecurity," the USDA created an annual questionnaire added to the Census Bureau's household survey. There are 18 questions relating to food to determine such things as whether households ran out of money for food and whether people skipped meals because they couldn't afford them.

In the USDA report issued in September, covering 1996-98, 12.6 percent of Oregon households were classified as "food insecure," meaning that families can barely meet their food needs. That was the seventh-highest rank in the nation.

The more severe category, "food insecurity with hunger," applied to 5.8 percent of Oregon households. That earned the state the top ranking for households in which nutritional needs are not being met, and parents and children may be skipping meals for financial reasons.

Ironically, Oregon is nowhere near the top in terms of poverty. The overall economy is prosperous, the minimum wage of \$6.50 is one of the highest in the nation, and the state was 19th highest in household income during the period.

By comparison, Massachusetts had the sixth-highest household income, and ranked 49th in both hunger categories, with about 400,000 Bay State residents experiencing some level of hunger.

Oregon's problems are surprising in light of the high-tech boom in the heavily populated Willamette Valley. It has turned Portland into a mini-Seattle, though more easygoing, where cellphones and PDAs are used more to track children's soccer schedules than the next IPO.

But people like Clyde Bishop aren't benefiting from the new economy. Instead, they are suffering from the loss of good-paying manufacturing, timber, and fishing positions that don't require a college education.

Bishop, 40, was supporting his wife, Kathleen, 39, and two children with his \$22,000-a-year job as a production line mechanic. But after he was laid off in August with 6,000 others from semi-truck manufacturer Freightliner, their savings were decimated, their credit cards maxed out. It was the third layoff for Bishop since he moved to Oregon four years ago.

While Clyde searches for work and trains to be a welder, the Bishops are scrounging for bottle deposits to make ends meet, living on canned goods, hamburger, hot dogs, and macaroni and cheese.

The situation is no better away from the cities. In largely rural Benton County south of Portland, the cost of living is 112 percent of the national average. Home to Oregon State University at Corvallis, Benton is the nation's 12th-most-educated county. But jobs are scarce, pay is low, and public transportation spotty at best.

Linda Boyce, 47, of tiny Philomath near Corvallis, quit nursing school for a second husband who left her destitute and abused. Monthly expenses for Boyce and her two children total \$1,223. Her Social Security widow-and-survivor benefits from her first husband provide \$1,248 a month, too high to qualify for aid beyond heat assistance and health insurance.

Boyce gets a ride to the Oregon Food Bank once a month. The food she gets there usually lasts a week and provides her with such meals as tuna casserole, a vegetable, and juice. After that, the meals get "odd," she said, mixing whatever's left in canned goods with the extra rice the Food Bank usually has for those who request it.

"Believe me," she said, "Martha Stewart wouldn't be impressed - but I wasn't going to invite her for dinner." From then on, meals center around the Food Bank's extra rice and beans. And when that runs out, said Boyce, "I've got friends; I'm one of the lucky ones."

The battle between Oregon's hunger activists and the state is loud and ongoing, though the general public is little aware of it. Caseloads for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, today's version of welfare, declined from 44,600 in 1994 to the current 15,500. The question, say activists, is whether the need has dropped an equal amount.

"Welfare reform is backwards," said Patti Whitney-Wise, executive director of the Oregon Hunger Task Force. "We focus so heavily on pushing people into work that we've reduced opportunities for education and training."

"Poor people can't change the economic structure," said Kim Thomas, public policy manager at the Oregon Food Bank. "These are issues that it takes a broader movement to change, and we haven't seen that happening yet."

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