

Members of the committee,

My name is Mark Edwards. I am a Professor of Sociology in the School of Public Policy at Oregon State University. I also serve on the Oregon Hunger Task Force, and serve as a steward for the Task Force's Research Committee.

Thank you for this opportunity to share reflections on the importance of social safety net programs, particularly regarding those that reduce food insecurity. I have been studying food insecurity in Oregon for the past 25 years and have monitored its rise and fall through at least three critical periods.

Critical Period 1: At the beginning of this century, Oregon had a higher rate of food insecurity than the national average. By investing in public programs, especially federal safety net programs, Oregon legislators and leaders succeeded in reducing food insecurity while other states became less secure.

Critical Period 2: Ten years later, in the aftermath of the Great Recession, food insecurity rose everywhere. However, Oregon achieved an unprecedented steep decline in food insecurity leading up to COVID. The Oregon Department of Human Services distinguished itself among all states with the highest SNAP enrollment rate among eligible households. That means they did a stellar job making sure that those who needed and were eligible for help, actually got it. They did not do this alone. A unique quality of Oregon has been its collaborative approach to addressing food insecurity, with the Oregon Hunger Task Force bringing together state agencies, elected leaders, and nonprofit organizations.

The effects of this collaborative work were evident as we hit **Critical Period #3**. As the pandemic struck, Oregon had just reached a point of historically low food insecurity. Shocked by the rapid rise in unemployment rates, many of us predicted a virtual tsunami of food insecurity. I generally refrain from predicting the future, but I warned of a doubling of insecurity in Oregon based on the surge in unemployment claims. Food insecurity is always about twice as high for those who are unemployed, as well as for renters, single parents, and populations struggling with poverty.

However, what I had not accounted for was the unprecedented investment in the social safety net during the pandemic. As a result, while I had predicted a surge of many hundreds of thousands of food-insecure households, the data eventually revealed that the rise in food insecurity was relatively modest, not much different from increases seen at other times. I confirmed these findings with researchers around the country, and our consensus view is that the social safety net did exactly what it should do. It cushioned the fall, protected many people, and got us through a crisis.

I cannot predict what new economic or medical crises will come our way again, but they will come. We are now facing yet a **fourth Critical Period**, where the safety net itself is under threat. In the past, leadership in Oregon helped us do the opposite – rather than cut, it stitched, wove, sewed, and improved. I hope this generation of leaders will do the same.

Thank you.

- 1) https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/sites/liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/files/opal2021_oregonfoodinsecurityupdatesseptember.pdf
- 2) https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/sites/liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/files/2024-11/Oregon_Food_Insecurity_Rates_2021-2023_november_2024.pdf

Mark Edwards
Professor of Sociology
Oregon State University
medwards@oregonstate.edu

March 13, 2025