

Finding Food Security in Portland, Oregon

A Qualitative Study among SNAP Recipients



Partners *for a*
Hunger-Free Oregon

Ending hunger before it begins.

"...food affects all aspects of our life...we don't recognize it is taking a toll on these other aspects of our life until we have a discussion."

Food insecurity continues to persist and increase in Oregon leaving many struggling to find enough to eat every month.

This report documents the interconnected factors that impact food security and recommendations for ensuring all Oregonians have access to the food they need.

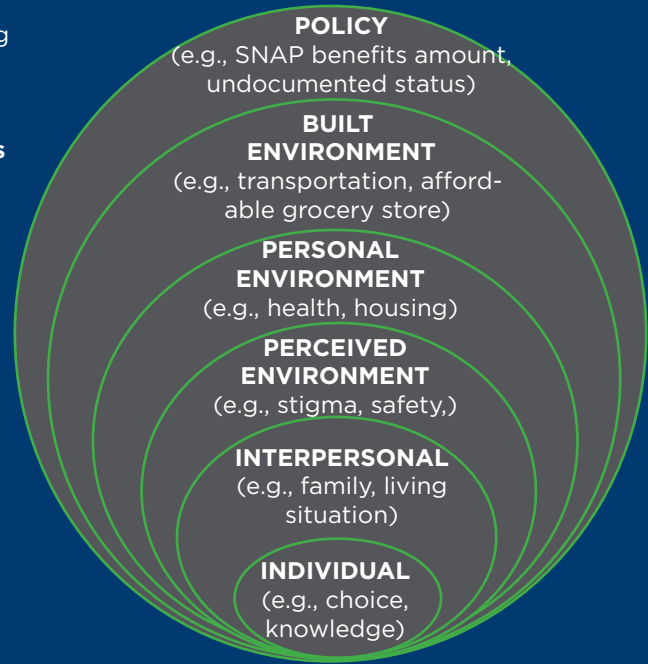


“It was the end of the month, I had some money on me but not a lot. Just had two or three dollars so we ended up going to Wendy’s and I got those value nuggets. **As long as they [the children] eat, I’m cool. I’ll worry about me later. But I got them something to eat. I’m starving myself, but I let them eat.** I ended up going to my grandma’s and eating. But it’s hard. It’s hard.”

Eight focus groups were conducted in Portland, Oregon during spring and summer 2016 with 67 Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients from communities that disproportionately experience food insecurity. Two research questions guided the study: **What prevents SNAP participants from becoming food secure? How do SNAP participants obtain food security?**

Findings were organized using a **social ecological model** to better understand the focus group data. The model includes six factors—individual, interpersonal, perceived environment, personal environment, built environment and policy—and 29 sub-factors that affect participants’ food security status. The key finding in this study is this: **food insecurity is influenced by multi-level, interconnected factors presented in the social ecological model.**

Food security is therefore found when aspects of individuals’ lives discussed in the model—such as housing, employment, living in a safe neighborhood, having a social support network—are **stabilized.**



In-depth interviews were conducted with two focus group participants to better understand their lives.

These case studies show how factors across the model influence the food security status of two specific individuals.

LAURA is a young, single mother of a sixteen month-old. She is currently couch-surfing, a housing situation that impacts her food security status since **other people routinely eat the food that she buys and there is little room to store her food. She shops once per month** when she receives a ride to a grocery store as she does not have her own transportation and the stores near her are too expensive. **She runs out of SNAP by the middle of the month** then depends on family members to help her out. She’s aware of other food resources but it’s hard for her to access those resources and difficult to carry food back on public transportation. Laura is **frustrated** because she has to ask her family for assistance. Laura shared that at the end of each month **she feels broke and hopeless to find enough food to eat.** She is currently taking steps, with the help of a nonprofit, to find her own housing and hopes this will improve her situation.

LOIS is an adult woman over 60 years old. **Lois became homeless years ago when she could not find work in her field.** She obtained temporary housing through a non-profit employment program and then secured permanent subsidized housing in Portland. Lois utilizes multiple services to obtain food security. **She uses SNAP benefits to buy food at the beginning of the month then her Social Security to cover food costs once her SNAP benefits run out.** She knows about additional food resources, like a food pantry and weekly meal in her building, but she does not use them since they don’t provide food she can eat as a diabetic and residents ostracize her because of her history of homelessness. She has **health conditions and limited mobility**, but she has resources so they do not negatively affect her food security status. She receives transportation from Neighborhood House to grocery stores once a week. And she is provided with a caregiver who assists her with cleaning and cooking. Lois says she is content with her current situation and that **she almost always feels she has enough to eat.**

INDIVIDUAL.

“The most helpful [food resource]...SNAP, of course. Every now and then **when I need the food pantry...church** is awesome. They really give us a lot. Whole turkey. Oh, and I left the school out...they have food. Even Portland Community College has a **second floor of free food for the students** if you show your ID.”

Participants described combining services by using additional food resources when their SNAP benefits ran out to have enough to eat all month.

INTERPERSONAL.

“Food stamps help with food. But also **friends and relatives are a big help. They know we arrived recently and bring us something every time they can. This is a big help... Food stamps are helping us while we get on our feet. It will take some time to get a job and learn the language.**”

Participants discussed how they rely on their social support network—friends, family and community—for food after SNAP benefits run out.

This is a snapshot focus group participants’ views of factors that affect their food security status. See the full report for comprehensive findings.

PERCEIVED ENVIRONMENT.

“The milk at my corner store is \$5.99 for a gallon of milk. And it is three in the morning and my daughter wants a bottle... I live in a terrible neighborhood and there are a lot of shootings in my neighborhood so I have to worry about that. Is someone going to get shot or stabbed? **A lot of bad stuff going on in my neighborhood so we worry about that. I would rather go to the corner store. I can take different cuts to get through. But if someone pulls up next to me and starts shooting, then what? I can walk because I can run away and take back streets to get back home instead of being in a car stuck at a stop light.**”

Participants described how the safety of their neighborhood and the proximity of a grocery store affects where they shop for food and ultimately their food security status.

PERSONAL ENVIRONMENT.

“...if I’m paying \$1,000 on a place, I’m not going to have **enough for food...I might have for a couple of weeks, but that’s about it. And then I still have to pay the electric bill and all this. So after you do your rent and then after you do your utilities, whatever is left for food is what you’ve got** and you have to figure out how to implement that for the month or week.”

Participants described their financial situation and housing as essential for finding food security. Working full-time on stagnant wages with rising rents means spending much of their income on housing, leaving little funds to spend on food when their SNAP benefits ran out.

BUILT ENVIRONMENT.

“And now where I live, I have a car now, but the nearest store is Safeway and it is super expensive. **I would do anything to get to Winco, but when I didn’t have a car, it would have been a struggle. I would have had to walk. There’s no bus to that one. I would have to walk with my daughter and her stroller, and we can’t shop how we needed because we have nowhere to put the groceries.**”

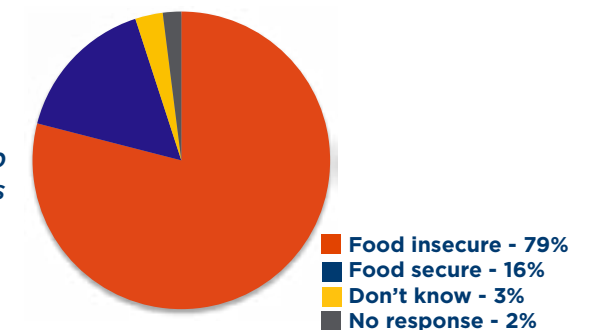
Participants reported that reliable transportation to an affordable grocery store supports food security.

POLICY.

“They need to watch how things are getting more expensive and food stamps should be raised based on that. One thing that cost \$2 last month, costs \$2.50 this month. Next month, it will go up to \$3, yet our food stamp benefits stay the same. They really need to look at the rising cost of food every month.”

Participants felt that the SNAP benefit amount they received was not enough to cover their food expenses and expressed running out of SNAP benefits by the middle of the month. They described food insecurity as a chronic problem: every month they are scrambling to try to find enough food to eat.

Food security status of focus group participants





KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Interventions addressing factors at multiple levels of the social ecological model are most effective at improving rates of food security (Glanz et al., 2008). See the full report for more recommendations.

INDIVIDUAL

- Ensure SNAP participants have access to affordable housing, healthcare and employment opportunities that provide financial security and living wage jobs.

INTERPERSONAL

- Improve translation services to ensure access to basic necessities for non-English speaking SNAP recipients.

PERCEIVED ENVIRONMENT

- Reduce the stigma of access food programs and increase empathy for SNAP participants when they access needed resources.
- Locate affordable grocery stores within walking distance of large concentrations of SNAP recipients.

PERSONAL ENVIRONMENT

- Ensure SNAP participants have access to affordable housing, healthcare, and employment opportunities that provide financial security and living wage jobs.

BUILT ENVIRONMENT

- Ensure SNAP participants have reliable and accessible transportation to affordable grocery stores that is feasible to use while transporting children.

POLICY

- Increase the benefit amount of SNAP to align with the USDA Low Cost Food Plan to adequately supplement the cost of a healthy diet.
- Provide education opportunities to SNAP participants, including ensuring all SNAP recipients receive information on SNAP-Ed resources, particularly on the most requested topics such as thrifty shopping, healthy cooking and gardening.

“In the beginning of the year, I ran out of food and I didn’t know what to do. I ran out of food stamps, and I went to the food pantry. I kind of felt ashamed. So when I went home I was grateful I had food, but it was a feeling I didn’t like. And I went home and started crying because I didn’t like feeling that vulnerable or that struggle to where I had to ask someone. It’s not a shameful thing, but at that time I felt like it was. It was new to me...I just felt really shameful and sad and I just was like, it was a low point.”

READ THE FULL REPORT AT
[OREGONHUNGER.ORG/
FINDINGFOODSECURITY](https://oregonhunger.org/findingfoodsecurity)



Partners for a
Hunger-Free Oregon

Ending hunger before it begins.



Project consultant and author of full report:
Nicole Cerra, MA, MPH, Central City Concern

Graphic design and author of executive
summary: Simone Crowe and Chloe Eberhardt

Analysis team: Chloe Eberhardt, Partners for
a Hunger-Free Oregon, Rai McKenzie, Central
City Concern, Kimberly Porter, Black Parent
Initiative, San Sunowen, CareOregon.

Glanz, Karen, Barbara K. Rimer, K. Viswanath.
***Health Behavior and Health Education:
Theory, Research, and Practice***, San Francisco:
JosseyHBass, 2008.