

“Who Has Time to Cook?” How Family Resources Influence Food Preparation.

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Introduction

This study estimates how the amount of time an individual spends daily in preparing food correlates with individual and household characteristics, specifically, income, wage rates, marital status, employment status, employment status of other household adults, and the number of children in a household. This research was undertaken to support proposed modifications to the USDA’s Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), a guide to show Food Stamp recipients how low cost healthy meals can be purchased with Food Stamp benefits, to include some convenience and commercially prepared foods. Recent estimates of the time required to prepare foods according to current TFP recipes range from 80 minutes a day to 16 hours a week.

Methodology

The researchers use 2003-04 data from the American Time Use Survey and multivariate analysis to study how time allocated to food preparation differs between low-income and higher income households, men and women, and individuals working full-time (more than 35 hours /week), part-time (less than 35 hours/ week, but in the labor force), or those that are not employed. The time spent in food preparation is defined as the total minutes in a day spent in the following four activities:

- Preparing food and drinks, which includes cooking and in any way getting food and drink ready for consumption.
- Serving food and drinks, which includes activities like setting the table.
- Food and kitchen cleanup.
- Storing or putting away food and drinks.

Main Ideas

The researchers found a relationship between food preparation decisions and income, employment status, gender, and family composition as follows:

Women spend more time preparing food than men do regardless of income and marital status.

Among women, time spent preparing food in the home decreases with higher household income and more time working outside the home.

Single women spend less time preparing food than do married or partnered women whether they are working or not.



Among low- and middle-income women, time spent preparing food does not decrease significantly with higher wage rates.

Having more children who live in the household also increases the time a woman spends preparing food.

Household time resources significantly affect the amount of time allocated to preparing food. The researchers find that working full-time and being a single parent appear to affect the time allocated to preparing food more than an individual's earnings or household income do.

Conclusion

The study concludes that low-income households with two adults or those headed by a single parent who works less than 35 hours a week allocate enough time for food preparation. However, low-income women who work full-time spend just over 40 minutes per day on food preparation and may have difficulties meeting the 80 minutes per day meal preparation time requirement implied by the Thrifty Food Plan. These conclusions may support revisions to the TFP to include some healthful and nutritious convenience and commercially prepared foods.

Implications for Extension Programs

UF/IFAS Extension provides nutrition education to limited resource audiences via the Family Nutrition Program and the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program. Regardless of possible changes to the TFP, county extension faculty have both the expertise and the structure in place to provide these families with education related to resource management, meal planning and meal preparation. These efforts will assist them in optimizing their benefits from the Food Stamp Program and other federal nutrition assistance programs in order to prepare low cost, easy to prepare, nutritious meals for themselves and their families. Additionally, the results of this study indicate that low income women who work full-time may benefit the most from these educational efforts.

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