



# Deconstructing family meals: Do family structure, gender and employment status influence the odds of having a family meal?



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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** We assessed the odds of having a family dinner by parental gender, family structure and parental employment.

**Methods:** This study used data from the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) (2006–2008). Multivariate analyses assessed the odds of two outcomes among parents: 1) eating at all with children and 2) having a family dinner.

**Results:** Single men had lower odds of eating at all with children and eating a family dinner in comparison to partnered/married males. Partnered/married women had increased odds of eating at all with children and eating a family dinner compared to their partnered/married male counterparts. While single women had increased odds of eating at all with children compared to partnered/married males, no difference was detected in the odds of having a family dinner. Among dual-headed households, women had lower odds of eating a family dinner when both parents were employed compared a dual-headed household with employed male/non-employed female. There were no differences among men regardless of their employment status or that of their partner/spouse.

**Conclusions:** Family structure, parental gender and employment status all influence the odds of having a family dinner. Future research on family meals should consider all of these factors to better understand trends and disparities across household compositions.

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## 1. Introduction

Family meals have been considered an “American tradition” since the 1960s (Larson, Branscomb, & Wiley, 2006) and have been recognized as the most significant parental influence on children's eating habits (Scaglioni, Arrizza, Vecchi, & Tedeschi, 2011; Videon & Manning, 2003). There are multiple pathways through which parents can influence their children's eating habits and weight status

during family meals including: feeding practices, modeling of healthy dietary attitudes and behavior, providing access to healthy food, establishing family routines and traditions related to food (Gable & Lutz, 2000; Kitzman-Ulrich et al., 2010; Levin & Kirby, 2012; Patrick & Nicklas, 2005; Schmeer, 2012).

The importance of family meals are also increasingly recognized in obesity prevention research as more frequent family meals are associated with lower obesity risk (Berge et al., 2015; Lee, Lee, & Park, 2015). Specifically, family meals have been associated with positive eating habits such as lower soda consumption, lower frequency of skipped breakfasts and higher intake of fruit, vegetables, and key macro- and micronutrients (Berge et al., 2015; Boles & Gunnarsdottir, 2015; Boutelle, Fulkerson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & French, 2007; Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, Story, Croll, & Perry, 2003). Moreover, family meals are inversely associated with adoption of negative habits and “risky behavior” among adolescents (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008; Musick & Meier, 2012) including disordered eating, drug and alcohol abuse, depression and suicide

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attempts (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, Fulkerson, & Story, 2008; Jones-Sanpei, Holmes, & Day, 2009; N.; Larson, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Story, 2007). Family meals during childhood and adolescence can have positive health implications across the life-course as they have been demonstrated to predict dietary habits and “social eating” in young adulthood (Larson et al., 2007). Overall, dietary habits and preferences established earlier in life are likely to continue throughout the life-course.

Time plays an important role in family meals and dietary behavior. Families are becoming “time poor” as a result of the demands on time caused by parents' jobs (Crouter, Head, McHale, & Tucker, 2004). Employed parents report time constraints as the main barrier to having regular family meals (Fulkerson et al., 2011). Having less time available for preparing meals has led families to either eat more prepared meals or eat out more often (Boutelle et al., 2007; Fiese & Schwartz, 2008; Hamrick, Andrews, Guthrie, Hopkins, & McClelland, 2011; Lytle et al., 2011; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2003). Research on family meals has predominantly focused on mothers and has yielded mixed findings on the role of maternal employment on family meals. Full-time maternal employment has been associated with less frequent family meals than among their part-time or non-employed counterparts (Barnett, Gareis, & Brennan, 2008; Bianchi, 2011; Hearst et al., 2012) or has been shown to have no association.<sup>10</sup> While women's time allocated to housework has declined, time allocated to children has increased for both employed and non-employed mothers since the 1960s (Bianchi, 2011), suggesting women are still reserving time for their children despite competing demands. Others argue that maternal employment does not affect the likelihood of having a family meal, but instead increases the likelihood of eating store bought or prepared dinners (McIntosh et al., 2010). Some of these discrepancies are likely due to various measures of employment.

Single parents, particularly employed single mothers, face additional stressors due to time constraints (Hearst et al., 2012) and are therefore less likely to have a family meal as they have less time and financial resources. This can partially be explained by the fact that women are disproportionately employed in low-wage occupations, juggle multiple jobs and have less flexible schedules (Blake et al., 2009). In addition, single-headed households are not only more likely to be female-headed but are also more likely to be below the poverty line (Jabs & Devine, 2006). On the other hand, two-parent households are better able to provide more support, resources and structured routines (including family meals) than other household compositions when one parent is employed less than full-time (Garasky, Stewart, Gundersen, Lohman, & Eisenmann, 2009; Jones-Sanpei et al., 2009).

Forty percent of children live in “nontraditional” families, therefore, there is a need to understand how variations in family structures may influence health (Stewart & Menning, 2009) and health behaviors including the frequency of family meals. Yet, there has been limited research on how time influences eating practices and how these behaviors vary across household composition (Hamrick et al., 2011; Jabs & Devine, 2006; Jones-Sanpei et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2015). Research is needed on the employment of both parents given demographic changes including the increase of women employed in the formal labor force. In addition to the rise in women's participation in the formal labor force, the levels of fathers' engagement in childrearing tasks and household duties have surged over the decades (Bianchi, Sayer, Milkie, & Robinson, 2012; Fernández, 2013). This new trend is motivating research on fathers' roles and influence on children's dietary habits and obesity risk which are currently understudied topics (Fraser et al., 2011).

There is growing recognition of fathers' influence on children's health and development (Yogman, Garfield & Committee on

*Psychosocial Aspects of Child Family Health*, 2016). Moreover, there is a burgeoning body of literature on fathers' engagement in specific child feeding practices, particularly of young children (Vollmer, Adamsons, Foster, & Mobley, 2015b, 2015a; Khandpur, Charles, Blaine, Blake, & Davison, 2016). In regards to the family meal, there are limited studies that include data on fathers and either examine the association between the frequency of a family meal and parental weight status and/or health behaviors, but they do not capture the father's participation in the meal itself (Berge et al., 2012; Chan & Sobal, 2011). In other words, there is a gap in our understanding of fathers' presence at family meals which can inform our understanding of how fathers participate in the broader family environment that can influence children's eating practices as well as their obesity risk. Moreover, there is a need for more research on fathers' roles in family meals given that there is no other activity that occurs with as much consistency and regularity as eating dinner as a family, in the US context (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008). This study attempts to address these limitations by using time-use data collected by the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) to better understand the current practice of family meals in the United States (US). In specific, the primary objectives of this study are: (1) determine if there is an association between family structure and the occurrence of a family dinner; (2) determine whether parental employment influences the frequency of a family dinner in two parent households and (3) determine whether the odds of having a family dinner varies by parental gender.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. American time use study (ATUS)

This study pools data from the 2006 to 2008 American Time Use Survey (ATUS) and the ATUS Eating and Health Module. The ATUS is the only federally funded and continuous time-use survey in the US (Reifschneider, Hamrick, & Lacey, 2011). ATUS provides a valid and reliable measure of time use over one 24 h period (Zick, Stevens, & Bryant, 2011). Respondents, 15 years of age or older, are selected from households that completed the final interview of the Current Population Survey. Interviews are conducted over the telephone. Respondents are asked detailed questions about their time use over a 24 h period beginning from 4 am on the previous day. For each activity indicated, respondents were asked to provide information on the duration and location of the activity, as well as whether anyone else was present during the activity.

This study is based on the Eating and Health (EH) Module implemented between 2006 and 2008. This module aimed to better understand the context in which Americans prepare and consume food (Hamrick et al., 2011). Weights were applied to the individual ATUS and EH Module respondent data to produce nationally representative estimates for an average day.

A total of 37,832 ATUS and EH Module interviews were completed between 2006 and 2008. This study focuses on the role of family structure, gender and employment on having a family dinner. Therefore, the sample was restricted to respondents who reported being a parent to at least one child under the age of 18 in their household. This resulted in a total sample of 14,704. To differentiate between parents who do and do not eat with their children, and whether these patterns vary by family structure and gender, the sample was further restricted to parents who reported eating at least 1 min between 4 pm and 9 pm on the diary day, yielding a sample of 8498 (Subsample 1). This timeframe has been used in previous research of family dinner using ATUS (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008; Wight, Price, Bianchi, & Hunt, 2009) as dinner is the meal families eat together most frequently (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008). In addition, to explore how employment status influenced

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