



Time Pressures on Employed Parents Affect Families' Diets

Research by [Dr. Carol Devine](#) and colleagues in the Division of Nutritional Sciences and Department of Human Development at Cornell University provides rich new insights into how the working conditions of parents in low-income families affect family food choices.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, most U.S. parents are employed, and weekly work hours have increased among two-earner couples, single mothers, the poor, and members of racial/ethnic minorities. Among low-income families, there have been increases in low-paying service-sector jobs, irregular work hours, and the need to work overtime or more than one job.

“Long work hours and irregular schedules mean more time away from family, less time for household food work, difficulty in maintaining a regular meal pattern and less opportunity to participate in family meals,” noted Devine. “These conditions as well as the lack of access to healthy foods prompt many parents to use such coping strategies as eating takeout meals, skipping meals and serving prepared entrees,”

Food prepared outside the home has been shown to be lower in nutritional quality than food prepared at home. These meals are disproportionately high in calories, fat, salt, and sugar, and lower in fruits and vegetables and other healthful foods. Diets composed of many meals prepared outside the home may lead to weight gain and obesity. And because parents play a critical role in determining the diets of their children, the pressures on parents' food choices have great impact on the nutrition and health status of their children.

In three studies, Devine and co-researchers looked more closely at how work conditions affect what

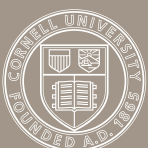


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and how low- and moderate-income parents feed their families, and how mothers and fathers differ in their family food choices and their feelings about them.

Work Conditions Impact Food Choices

In one study, the researchers conducted a telephone survey of a random group of 25 mothers and 25 fathers in an upstate New York city who had low to moderate incomes, worked 20 or more hours a week, and had one or more children age 16 or younger at home. Participants were black, white, and Hispanic.



The study found that fathers and mothers used somewhat different coping strategies. Fathers who worked long hours or had irregular schedules were more likely to buy take-out meals, miss family meals, purchase prepared entrées, and eat while working. Employed mothers with similar working conditions were more likely to purchase restaurant meals or prepared entrées and miss breakfast.

More than half of the participants ate one or more fast-food meals and one or more take-out meals a week. Mothers more often than fathers ate in the car. The meal most frequently missed was breakfast, but almost half of the parents missed some family meals because of their jobs. One bright note: two-thirds said they often ate the main meal with the whole family.

Some parents plan and/or prepare meals ahead of time to ease pressure on work days and to feed their families more healthful diets. Parents in couples with only one employed spouse or who work part-time were most able and most likely to do this.

About a quarter of the mothers and fathers said they did not have access to healthful, reasonably priced, and/or good-tasting food at or near work.

Job security, job satisfaction, and longevity on the job also affected how employed parents fed themselves and their families. Fathers with low job satisfaction were less likely to bring food from home to work. Mothers with low job security more often prepared quick family meals, such as convenience entrées.

In two other studies, Devine and co-researchers conducted in-depth, qualitative interviews with low-income parents to learn more about how work and family roles affect parents' food choices. Sixty-nine low-wage black, white, and Latino parents were interviewed. Thirty-five were mothers and 34 were fathers. Forty-six percent of the mothers and 15 percent of the fathers were single parents. All had one or more children 16 or younger living with them and worked at least half-time in service, clerical, retail, and production jobs.

Work-Family Spillover

The first study looked at how low-income parents experienced and explained their food choices in relation to their work and family roles. Devine and her colleagues examined participants' experience of work-family spillover, described as the feelings, attitudes and behaviors that spill over between work and family as

parents attempt to integrate the two roles. The interviews explored work conditions, family circumstances, eating and food preparation routines, and parents' food choice coping strategies - the ways in which they conceptualized and managed food choices in response to the combined demands of work and family.

Examples of negative spillover from work dominated the interviews. Participants reported that competing work-family demands and overload from the combined roles were daily stressors which had significant influence on their food choices. Job conditions such as overtime, irregular schedules, travel on the job, long commutes, low pay, and lack of job security were portrayed as sources of stress and negative spillover from work to home. Parents who reported the greatest struggles with work affecting family life included single parents with young children, those who traveled long distances to work and married couples when one partner's work schedule interfered with helping at home or sitting down with the family for meals.

A few parents reported positive spillover from their work to family life, attributed to factors such as job flexibility, a positive work climate, job satisfaction, and the availability of free or low-cost food at work. They also had regular help from partners, brought meals to work, lived closer to work, and had adequate family income to buy healthful foods at work.

Mothers and fathers had somewhat different interpretations of spillover. The working mothers said that making compromises in feeding their families conflicted with their expectations for themselves as mothers. The fathers said they missed eating meals with their families, especially those who worked early morning hours, late shifts, or lots of overtime. They particularly missed the family time, not so much the food itself or preparing meals.

The study grouped the food choice coping strategies the parents used to manage competing demands into five categories. These were: 1) Managing feelings of stress and fatigue (treating with food, parallel eating, or eating better on some days than others); 2) reducing time and effort for food (skipping meals, simplifying or speeding up, multi-tasking, planning ahead, getting help); 3) Redefining meanings and reducing expectations (for example redefining family meal as going to a pizza place); 4) Setting priorities and making tradeoffs (for instance nutrition and family meals vs. quick meals); and 5) changing work and family conditions for example limiting outside activities to make more time for family meals.

The study found that most of the strategies that the parents used were aimed at managing feelings of stress and reducing expectations rather than addressing the sources of the problem. These strategies did not reduce the daily stress from spillover and role overload, and some even exacerbated feelings of stress. Serving quick meals, for instance, can be a source of stress when it is not consistent with a mother's food and eating ideals. Only a few parents reported that they had reduced work-family conflict by changing their work conditions.

Two strategies were commonplace – eating quick meals and treating with food. Other family food choice strategies devalued and reduced expectations for family meals. Although these strategies might reduce stress for working parents, they can have negative impacts on nutrition and health due to the increased consumption of less healthy foods.

Gender Roles and Satisfaction with Coping Strategies

Building on their analysis of work-family spillover, Devine and her colleagues further examined the interviews to better understand how gender roles influenced parents' experiences of work-family spillover and food choices. In most households one adult held the primary food role; in this study mothers were twice as likely as fathers to hold this role, reflecting traditional gender roles.

The findings reveal some similarities and many differences between how mothers and fathers evaluated their ability to integrate family and work demands and manage family food responsibilities. Both mothers and fathers noted negative work conditions such as stressful jobs, few breaks, long work hours, shifts that didn't accommodate family meals, and disliking a job or co-workers. Food-choice coping strategies reported by both mothers and fathers included simplifying meals, multi-tasking, planning ahead, and speeding up preparation times. Changes in household food roles were also noted as a strategy that helped balance work-family demands.

Following is a brief summary of the differences in mothers and fathers evaluations of their food strategies:

Seeking stability and balance When they could achieve work-family balance because of flexible work and family schedules, mothers expressed satisfaction. Fathers, on the other hand, expressed satisfaction when they had a schedule that allowed them to participate in regular family meals.

Getting and giving help Satisfied mothers typically were the main food preparer, liked to cook, and expected and received food preparation help. Mothers with young children and limited help expressed more difficulties. Fathers were satisfied when they had a partner who took primary food responsibility and prepared regular family meals.

Family conditions: lifestyle, family size and relationships All but two of the satisfied mothers had older children. Dissatisfied mothers had demanding family circumstances such as young children, more than two children, or were single parents. Fathers who had stable work and family schedules were most likely to be satisfied with how they integrated work and family life. Fathers' satisfaction was also associated with having a partner who was available to take charge of food preparation.

Work conditions: flexibility and regularity Mothers identified flexible work schedules, short commutes, and jobs that allowed them to be home in the afternoon and evenings as key supports in balancing multiple work and family demands. Satisfied fathers had full-time jobs, consistent schedules that allowed regular family meals and jobs they liked, among other things.

Food choice coping strategies: skipping, treating, and trading off Mothers described using more food-choice coping strategies than fathers. Mothers depended on skills and multiple trade-offs to balance competing demands. Strategies used by satisfied mothers included getting help with meals, planning ahead, and treating with food such as going out for a meal. Dissatisfied mothers treated with food and asked for help, but also skipped meals and sometimes traded off family nutrition to save time and energy.

Family-adaptive strategies: changing jobs and changing attitudes Satisfied mothers described changes they had made to reduce work and family demands, such as changing jobs and schedules and reducing the number of family evening and weekend activities. Dissatisfied mothers reported having made few adaptations but many talked about wanting to make changes such as getting a better job. The strategies of satisfied fathers were more focused on attitude changes to reduce conflict such as keeping work issues at work and adapting to changes in household food roles.

Although both mothers and fathers reported feeling rushed, stressed, and tired, most mothers were trying to fulfill food roles at home and most fathers were trying to be good providers while helping out and participating in family

meals. Only mothers reported feeling guilty how competing demands had influenced their food coping strategies.

Goals for balancing work-family demands varied by gender. Mothers sought a flexible work schedule and balance, while fathers sought schedule stability. The study highlights the interplay: flexible work schedules for mothers can allow them to set up family food routines that make schedule stability possible for the rest of the family. Overwhelmed mothers and overburdened fathers felt they could not achieve the goals of balance and stability, but instead coped by adjusting their expectations downward.

The findings indicate a difference in the use and evaluations of food-choice coping strategies related to gender-specific economic and social conditions and highlight the influence of workplace policies and practices on employee's food choice strategies and satisfaction.

The results of these studies have implications for nutrition and health professionals, for employers, and for food assistance policy. The studies highlight the impact of work environment and family circumstances on people's food choices and provide rich detail on how these factors potentially interact. The results suggest that strategies to address the public health crisis of overweight and obesity would include fostering work place policies and practices that make the preparation and consumption of healthy meals more feasible for low-wage parents.

What Employers Can Do

- Offer flexible work hours and shifts that accommodate working parents' schedules;
- Provide regular, consistent work schedules;
- Make regular breaks available to all employees;
- Ensure that overtime is optional;
- Provide employees with regular breaks for meals;
- Provide healthy low-cost choices in cafeterias and vending machines;
- Provide healthy take-home meals; and
- Place vegetable and fruit mini-markets in the workplace.

What Individuals Can Do

- Negotiate a work schedule that accommodates family meal preparation and optimizes coordination with other family members;
- Reduce commute time to work if possible;

- Find a job that allows one parent to be home in the afternoon and evening;
- Share household food roles, such as shopping and cooking, with a partner, family members, or neighbors;
- Make more time for family meals by reducing afterschool and evening activities outside the home;
- Learn how to plan and cook quick healthy meals;
- Engage children in meal preparation as part of family time;
- Plan/cook meals ahead; and
- Pack lunches from home.

Resources for More Information

Cornell NutritionWorks, a website for nutrition professionals:

<http://www.nutritionworks.cornell.edu>

CDC LEAN Works! A free web-based workplace obesity prevention program that offers interactive tools and evidence-based resources:

<http://www.cdc.gov/leanworks/index.html>

CDC Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity:

<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpao/index.html>

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