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The Role of Time in Fast-Food Purchasing Behavior in the United States

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What Is the Issue?

Food away from home (FAFH) is an important part of a typical American's diet and continues to increase as a share of the food budget. Rising consumption of a particular kind of FAFH—fast food—has been blamed for American's expanding waistlines and poor diet quality. Previous studies have attributed this increase in purchases of fast foods to many factors, including budget and time constraints, demographic and health characteristics, and market-level forces, but no study has been able to rigorously address the effects of all of these variables on fast-food purchasing behavior. This study is the first to extensively examine the effects of time-use behaviors, prices, sociodemographic characteristics, labor force participation, and prices on fast-food purchasing patterns in the United States before and after the Great Recession. Because fast food accounts for a large share of U.S. food expenditures and calorie consumption, a better understanding of the motivation behind trends in fast-food purchasing behaviors may help inform policies designed to improve the diet quality of Americans. This research complements previous studies that used food expenditure and food intake data (but not time-use data) to analyze the effects of demographic characteristics, prices, and income on fast-food purchases and consumption.

What Did the Study Find?

Americans purchase fast food to save time. Those that purchase fast food on a given day spend less time eating and drinking as a primary (main) activity, sleeping, doing housework, and watching television than the average for the total population. The difference in sleep time is considerable—fast-food purchasers spent 23 fewer minutes sleeping on a given day over 2003-11 than the average for the total population. In addition to spending less time in primary eating and drinking, fast-food purchasers were more likely than the average person to report no primary eating/drinking on a given day. Fast-food purchasers spent about the same amount of time as others in “secondary” eating; that is, eating while engaged in another, primary activity. However, fast-food purchasers were more likely to eat while at work or while driving a vehicle than others. To the extent that eating quickly may not be ideal and that eating is done while one is engaged in activities that demand focus suggests that fast-food purchasers have different, and perhaps poorer, eating habits than others.

Effects of employment. On a given day in 2003-11, those who were employed were more likely to purchase fast food than those not employed. And those who were employed but on their day off were even more likely to purchase fast food than those employed and on a workday or those not employed.

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Effects of household characteristics. Consistent with findings in other studies, household composition, income, age, and education play an important role in fast-food purchasing behavior. Relative to married and unmarried couple households with no children, a single-person household had a higher probability of fast-food purchase by 1.4 percent on a given day in 2003-11. “Other” households with and without children, typically multigenerational households, had the same increased probability. Single-parent households, however, had an increase in the probability of fast-food purchase of 2.5 percent relative to married households. Married and unmarried couple households with children had the same probability of fast-food purchase as couple households without children. Households with higher incomes and households with higher education were also more likely than other households to purchase fast food.

Effects of the Great Recession and time spent eating out. During and after the Great Recession, the overall time that Americans spent eating out declined, which was associated with a drop in the share of the population who ate at sit-down restaurants. However, the share of the population that purchased fast food on a given day stayed fairly constant during and after the 2007-09 recession, seemingly unaffected by the economic downturn, while those employed were even more likely to purchase fast food than before the recession. In particular, employed single parents were 3.9 percent more likely to purchase fast food than others pre-recession and 5.2 percent more likely during and after the recession—a large increase in fast-food purchase behavior.

For the total population, there were small but statistically significant changes in time-use patterns during and after the recession—less time spent in paid work and in travel, more time spent in meal preparation and in watching television. However, time-use patterns of fast-food purchasers stayed fairly stable and exhibited less change than those of the total population.

How Was the Study Conducted?

The study used data on time use and demographic and other characteristics from the American Time Use Survey (ATUS). The ATUS is a continuous, nationally representative survey of time use by Americans that has been conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics since 2003. ATUS data enabled researchers to compare time-use patterns of those who purchased fast food with those of the total population and other subgroups. An advantage of using these data rather than food intake data (i.e., National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey) or expenditure data (i.e., Consumer Expenditure Survey) is that the ATUS provides detailed information on time use by Americans and offers a unique perspective on the relationships between fast-food purchasing behavior and time variables that have been previously unexplored in the literature. Information on secondary eating was derived from the 2006-08 ATUS Eating & Health Module.

Descriptive statistics on time and frequency of purchase were estimated for subpopulations (gender, employment status, and fast-food purchaser) between 2003 and 2011 and also before and after the onset of the Great Recession in December 2007. Researchers conducted multivariate analysis on the probability of fast-food purchase by household type (i.e., single person, single parent, couple no children, couple with children, other households no children, and other households with children).