



Food-Related Time Use: Changes and Demographic Differences

Tobenna D. Anekwe and Eliana Zeballos

What Is the Issue?

Examining the time-use patterns of the U.S. population can improve our understanding of Americans' nutrition and health because food-related time use can influence diet and nutrition and, thereby, health outcomes. An analysis of the time Americans spend in particular food-related activities, as well as other time demands (for context), may provide insight into why nutrition and health outcomes vary over time and across different segments of the population. This study analyzes food-related time-use patterns among Americans aged 15 and older and among various subgroups and how time use for food-related activities has changed over a decade. (From here on, "Americans" with no qualifying phrases refers to "Americans aged 15 and older.")

What Did the Study Find?

Patterns in food-related time use during 2014 to 2017 and among demographic subgroups reveal significant changes from the 2004 to 2007 period, including the following for an average day in 2014-17:

- Americans spent 64.0 minutes on eating and drinking as a "primary," or main, activity in 2014-17, down 4.5 percent from 67.0 minutes in 2004-07.
- In 2014-17, Americans overall spent 27.5 minutes on food preparation (51.4 minutes among those who actually performed the activity), 7.7 minutes on food-related cleanup (34.1 minutes among those who performed the activity), and 6.3 minutes on grocery shopping (46.0 minutes among those who performed the activity). Time spent on all of these food-related activities (prep, cleanup, and grocery shopping) increased since 2004-07. A few notable trends in food-related time use from 2004-07 to 2014-17.
 - Americans spent 17.5 percent more time preparing food. Almost every subgroup spent more time preparing food in 2014-17: women, men, Americans aged 15 to 17, 25 to 64, and 65 and older, all household types examined in this study, all races/ethnicities, and all levels of educational attainment. Only Americans aged 18 to 24 years spent less time in food prep.

ERS is a primary source of economic research and analysis from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, providing timely information on economic and policy issues related to agriculture, food, the environment, and rural America.

- Americans spent 36.4 percent more time purchasing non-grocery food (such as from a fast-food restaurant or pizza place). The share of Americans who purchased non-grocery food increased by 19.5 percent and their time spent making those purchases increased by 9.0 percent. By contrast, over the same period, the share of Americans who grocery shopped decreased by 1.4 percent, but their time spent grocery shopping increased by 6.5 percent.
- Americans overall spaced out their primary eating and drinking occasions significantly more in 2014-17 than in 2004-2007. Among individual subgroups, adults aged 25-64, couples without children, non-Hispanic Whites, and adults with a high school education or less also increased time between primary eating and drinking occasions significantly over the period.
- Based on data from the supplemental Eating and Health Module (EHM), which covers a slightly different time period (2014-16):
 - 24.6 percent of Americans had three primary eating and drinking events, corresponding to the traditional “three meals per day.” The largest share (38 percent) had two primary eating and drinking events, and 26.7 percent had only one event. Another 5.6 percent of Americans had four or more events, and 4.8 percent had no primary eating and drinking events.
 - Americans with food hardship (i.e., Americans who reported that they “sometimes” or “often” did not have enough to eat) spaced out their food and drink intake longer than did Americans without food hardship (i.e., people who reported that they had enough to eat).
 - When Americans engaged in secondary eating (eating while engaged in another “primary” activity), the primary activity they most commonly engaged in was watching television and movies (for 23.4 percent of respondents), followed by working their main job (22.8 percent).

How Was the Study Conducted?

This study uses data from the nationally representative American Time Use Survey (ATUS) for 2004-07 and 2014-17 and the supplemental EHM for 2014-16. The Bureau of Labor Statistics conducts the ATUS as well as the supplemental EHM, which was developed by USDA, Economic Research Service with funding partner USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, and technical-assistance partner National Cancer Institute. This study focuses primarily on the pooled 2014-17 ATUS to derive the most recent estimates possible, and the analysis is augmented by comparisons of 2014-17 data to 2004-07 data. The analysis is further augmented by using EHM data to examine food-related time use among specific U.S. subgroups defined by Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participation status, food hardship, and bodyweight status.