



E-FAN-04-006-2

June 2004

# Maternal Employment and Children's Nutrition

## Volume II, Other Nutrition-Related Outcomes

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### Abstract

The higher income of households with working mothers is related to lower participation in USDA's Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and School Breakfast and Food Stamp Programs. In contrast, children of working mothers are more likely to participate in the National School Lunch Program. This study analyzed differences in nutrition and nutrition-related outcomes among children whose mothers work full time, part time, and not at all (homemakers). This report focuses on indirect nutrition-related outcomes, including food program participation, children's eating patterns, household food acquisition and sufficiency, and children's physical activity and risk of overweight. Study results indicate that households with working mothers spend more on food and have higher levels of food sufficiency than households without working mothers. Working mothers, however, participate less in meal planning, shopping, and food preparation. The children of working mothers are more likely to skip morning meals, rely more on away-from-home food sources, spend more time watching TV and videos, and face significantly greater risk of overweight.

### Acknowledgments

Linda Truitt and Ellie Lee, Abt Associates Inc., contributed to this report.

**This report was prepared by Abt Associates Inc. under a research agreement from the Economic Research Service. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of ERS or USDA.**

# Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	1
<b>Chapter 1: Children's Eating Patterns</b> .....	3
Number of Eating Occasions .....	3
Frequency of Meal Skipping .....	6
Skipping the Morning Meal .....	6
Skipping the Midday and Evening Meals .....	9
Food Away from Home .....	9
Composition of Carry-out and Prepared Foods .....	14
Carry-out Foods .....	15
Prepared Entrees .....	15
<b>Chapter 2: Household Food Acquisition and Sufficiency</b> .....	18
Meal Planning, Food Purchasing, and Food Preparation .....	19
Participation in Meal Planning .....	19
Participation in Food Purchasing .....	22
Participation in Food Preparation .....	24
Household Food Expenditures .....	26
Food Sufficiency .....	30
<b>Chapter 3: Food Assistance Program Participation</b> .....	35
Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children .....	35
Food Stamp Program .....	40
School Breakfast Program .....	43
National School Lunch Program .....	49
Summary .....	54
<b>Chapter 4: Children's Physical Activity and Risk of Overweight</b> .....	56
Physical Activity Level .....	57
Body Mass Index and Risk of Overweight .....	62
Summary .....	64
<b>References</b> .....	65

# Executive Summary

Labor force participation among women in the United States has increased dramatically over the past three decades. A majority of women with children are now employed outside the home. At the same time, there is evidence from national surveys that children's diets are less healthful than they should be, and that children are becoming increasingly overweight. Economic theory suggests that families in which mothers work outside the home must trade off the advantages of greater income against the disadvantages of less time for home food production and supervision of children's activities. This tradeoff may result in positive, negative, or no net impacts on children's nutritional well-being. The loss of home production time and the gain in income were expected to work in opposite directions, with the net effect unknown.

Although considerable research has been done on the relationship between maternal employment and breastfeeding, few studies to date have investigated the relationships between mother's work status and other child nutrition outcomes. Using extant data from nationally representative samples of children and their mothers in the mid-1990s, this study was conducted to explore the relationships between maternal employment and direct and indirect measures of children's nutrition outcomes. Volume 1 of this study presents results of analyses of differences in direct nutrition outcomes among children age 0 to 17 years whose mothers work full-time, part-time, and not at all. It also reports on the role that USDA's Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) serves in meeting the nutrition needs of participating children, especially for those whose mothers are working. Measures of nutrition outcomes analyzed include the healthy eating index, food energy and selected nutrients, and consumption of soft drinks, added sugars, and fried potatoes.

This volume presents results of analyses of more indirect nutrition-related outcomes. Here we investigate children's eating patterns, household food acquisition and sufficiency, food program participation, and children's physical activity and risk of overweight. Major findings in this volume are:

- Income relative to poverty tends to be higher in households with working mothers. Consequently these households are less likely to participate in the means-tested food assistance programs, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, the Food Stamp Program, and the School Breakfast Program (SBP). (Although SBP is in principle available to children of all incomes, in practice it predominantly serves low-income children.) National School Lunch Program participation, in contrast, is higher among children of working mothers.
- The effects of greater income among households of working mothers is also seen in their greater expenditures on food per adult male equivalent; and their higher levels of food sufficiency. The effects of time pressures are seen in working mothers' reduced participation in meal planning, shopping, and food preparation; in the increased prevalence of morning meal skipping by teenage girls; and the heavier reliance on away-from-home food sources.
- This study also found that children of full-time working mothers spend more time watching TV and videos than children of homemakers. The frequency of engaging in vigorous exercise, however, does not differ across employment groups. Among 12- to

14-year olds, children with full-time working mothers are at significantly greater risk of overweight (Body Mass Index above the 85<sup>th</sup> percentile) than children whose mothers are homemakers.

- Unfortunately, available data on exercise level were self-reported and obtained only from older children (12 to 17 years). In addition, reliable data on weight status were not available for children under 12 years old. The possibility that maternal employment is related to the physical activity level and risk of overweight for younger children cannot be ruled out