

Summary Findings: 2006

American eating and drinking patterns: 2006

On an average day in 2006, Americans age 15 and older spent 67 minutes eating and drinking as a “primary,” or main, activity, and 16 minutes eating and 42 minutes drinking (except plain water) as a secondary activity—that is, eating while engaged in another activity considered primary by the individual. Eight percent of the population spent 4.5 hours or more a day on eating/drinking as either a primary or secondary activity. About 9 percent of Americans’ secondary eating and drinking occurred while driving a vehicle, walking, or biking. Secondary eating or drinking was most frequently accompanied by socializing, relaxing, and leisure, which includes watching television.

Time spent eating and drinking

On an average day in 2006, the total time that Americans spent on eating and drinking—both as primary and secondary activities—and on activities related to eating and drinking was about 127 minutes (2.1 hours), adjusting for overlap of secondary eating and secondary drinking. Because secondary eating and drinking activities may overlap, total time estimates are less than the sum of estimates for individual activities. All comparisons are statistically significant.

Men and women spent about the same amount of time on primary and secondary eating/drinking. Four percent of the American population did not engage in any primary eating/drinking on an average day. However, this group spent more time on secondary eating or drinking than the total population—an average of 35 minutes on secondary eating and 107 minutes (1.8 hours) on secondary drinking.

“Constant grazers” are defined here as those who spend at least 4.5 hours a day (about twice the average time) on primary or secondary eating or drinking activities. This group makes up 8 percent of the population. Constant grazers spent the majority of eating time on secondary drinking—an average of 6.3 hours.

Individuals age 65 and older spent more time on primary eating and drinking (an average of 81 minutes per day), and less time on secondary eating and drinking than younger age groups. Time spent on primary eating was lower in October, November, and December than in other quarters of the year, but time spent on secondary eating and drinking was higher in that quarter in 2006.

Over the course of a day, about 22 percent of the population was engaged in some eating or drinking activity at some time between 7 a.m. and 10 a.m. Between 12 p.m. and 1 p.m., 42 percent of Americans were eating and/or drinking. The share of Americans engaged in eating or drinking activities during the evening peaked between 6 p.m. and 7 p.m., at 40 percent.

About two-thirds of Americans’ primary eating/drinking activities were with family or others. Forty-two percent of secondary eating and drinking occurrences were specifically with family or others, but one-third occurred alone. The remaining 25 percent of secondary eating/drinking was done during paid work or while grooming or performing other personal activities (information was not collected as to whether the respondent was alone or with anyone).

Estimating total time eating and drinking

There are three major considerations in estimating the total time spent on eating and drinking. First, as the data are collected, if a respondent reports both secondary eating and secondary drinking during a primary activity, it is not known whether secondary eating and secondary drinking occurs at the same time. ERS developed a method of estimating total time spent on secondary eating and drinking to account for this overlap. An alternative approach is to use a range of total time. ERS also recommends analyzing primary and secondary time use components separately. Most secondary eating is done without secondary drinking

and vice versa; in only 20 percent of the cases were both secondary eating and secondary drinking reported during the same primary activity.

Second, when summing any primary activity and any secondary activity, there is a concern that the intensity of the activities may be different. Consequently, the sum may overstate the total time spent on eating and drinking. Third, due to the constraints of a 24-hour day, primary and secondary activities should not be summed since this would result in a day longer than 24 hours. See Documentation.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)/Food Stamp Program participants

Among low-income households, individuals in households participating in the Food Stamp Program (FSP) spent more time grocery shopping and preparing food than individuals in low-income nonparticipating households. The time engaged in housework and primary child care was also about the same for the two groups.

Respondents in FSP-participating households were less likely to report excellent or very good general health, and more likely to report good, fair, or poor health. Indeed, 15 percent of individuals in FSP households reported poor general health, whereas only 4 percent of the total population considered their general health status as poor.

Grocery shopping and meal preparation

Based on self-reports, 54 percent of men were not the usual person responsible for grocery shopping in the household and 58 percent said they were not usual person responsible for meal preparation; over two-thirds of women said they were the usual person responsible for both tasks. In addition, men were more likely than women to respond that these tasks were split equally.

Among the usual grocery shoppers in the household for all persons age 15 and older, men spent an average of 6 minutes a day grocery shopping, compared with 9 minutes for women. Looking only at men who actually grocery shopped, the average time was 37 minutes (noting that grocery shopping is not a daily activity). All women averaged 9 minutes a day grocery shopping, and among only those women who actually shopped, they spent an average of 45 minutes.

Of those who split grocery shopping equally with other household members, men still averaged 6 minutes a day on the task, and women, 8 minutes. Among only those who grocery shopped, men spent 40 minutes and women 46 minutes.

Among the usual meal preparers, men spent an average of 30 minutes a day preparing meals, and women, 55 minutes. Of those who split meal preparation equally with other household members, men spent an average of 25 minutes a day, and women, 34 minutes.

Body Mass Index

In 2006, time spent by Americans on eating and drinking did not vary by Body Mass Index (BMI)—underweight, normal weight, overweight, and obese. However, the average times spent by Americans working for pay, sleeping, watching television, and participating in sports and exercise varied considerably by BMI levels. Individuals who are overweight or obese spent more time watching television and less time participating in sports and exercise than did those of normal weight. The overweight group spent the most time engaged in paid work activities and had the lowest average times sleeping. The underweight group spent a greater amount of time sleeping than the other groups.

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