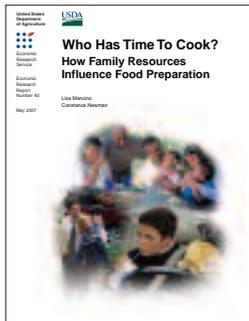


# ERS Report Summary

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*This is a summary  
of an ERS report.*

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## Who Has Time To Cook?

### How Family Resources Influence Food Preparation

Lisa Mancino and Constance Newman

USDA uses the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) to show Food Stamp Program participants how low-cost, healthy meals can be purchased with monthly food stamp benefits. When the TFP was first created in 1975, most families had a nonworking adult in the home who was likely to prepare meals from scratch. Today, however, an increasing number of low-income families have either a single working parent or two working parents. These households may spend less time preparing meals than was typical in the past. Recent efforts have been made to incorporate more convenient and commercially prepared foods into the TFP market basket. This research supports those efforts by showing how differences in family time resources can affect food preparation decisions.

#### *What Is the Issue?*

There is little information on how time resources influence time spent in preparing food. Thus, to understand if and how time use decisions vary with both time and monetary resources, this study estimates how the amount of time an individual spends daily in preparing food correlates with individual and household characteristics. Does the time allocated to preparing food vary systematically with income, wage rates, marital status, employment status, employment status of other household adults, and the number of children in a household?

#### *What Did the Project Find?*

Our study shows that characteristics, such as income, employment status, gender, and family composition, clearly affect food preparation decisions. This relationship is weakest among men, stronger among women, and strongest of all among full-time workers and single parents. The relationship between personal characteristics and how much time men spend preparing food, especially low-income men, was unclear. Our results for men also contradict the hypothesis that lower household earnings mean more time preparing food. For both full-time employed and nonworking men, those with lower household income spend less time preparing food than do men in households with higher incomes.

Regardless of income and marital status, women spend more time preparing food than men do. Among women, time spent preparing food in the home falls with higher household income and more time working outside the home. Our estimates suggest that nonworking women spend just over 70 minutes per day preparing food, whereas women who work part-time spend 53-56 minutes per day and full-time working women spend 38-46 minutes per day preparing food.

Single women spend less time preparing food than do married or partnered women whether they are working or not. Single working women spend about 15 minutes less per day preparing food than do married or partnered working women. Single nonworking women spend approximately 30 minutes less per day cooking than do nonworking women who are married or have partners.

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Among low- and middle-income women, time spent preparing food does not decrease significantly with higher wage rates. Among higher income women, however, an increase in weekly earnings of \$100 would translate into 9 fewer minutes spent in preparing food per day.

Having more children who live in the household also increases the time a woman spends preparing food, suggesting that, among women, household time resources significantly affect the amount of time allocated to preparing food. In fact, working full-time and being a single parent appear to affect the time allocated to preparing food more than an individual's earnings or household income do.

Estimates of the time needed to follow recipes from the TFP range from 80 minutes a day to 16 hours a week. We find that many low-income households—those with two adults or those headed by a single parent that works less than 35 hours a week—allocate enough time for food preparation. However, our estimates also say that low-income women who work full-time spend just over 40 minutes per day and thus may have difficulties meeting the past plan's implied time requirements.

### ***How Was the Project Conducted?***

We use 2003-04 data from the American Time Use Survey and multivariate analysis to explore how time allocated to preparing food differs between low-income and higher income households. A household is defined as low-income if total income equals 130 percent of the poverty line or less. We also run separate estimates based on gender and whether an individual works full-time (more than 35 hours in week), part-time (less than 35 hours a week, but in the labor force), or is not employed. The dependent variable, time spent in food preparation, is the total minutes in a day spent in the following four activities:

- Preparing food and drinks, which includes cooking and in any way getting food and drink ready for consumption.
- Serving food and drinks, which includes activities like setting the table.
- Food and kitchen cleanup.
- Storing or putting away food and drinks.

We use a Tobit model because food preparation time in a single day is zero for many individuals. To account for the sample design, we use sampling weights to obtain representative parameter estimates and specify strata and clustering variables to increase their efficiency.