Who’s Cooking? Habits of modern-day Americans

Family & Community Health

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This blog was originally posted on the Cambridge University Press Journals Blog. The blog post was written to accompany the May Nutrition Society Paper of the Month from Public Health Nutrition that is entitled “Prevalence and patterns of cooking dinner at home in the USA: National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) 2007-2008”. You can read the original blog post here.

Many people – mothers, writers, teachers, politicians – advocate cooking as a means to better health. Medical professionals too understand the importance of cooking for health. Yet we know very little about the cooking habits of Americans, in particular the cooking habits of different communities across our diverse nation. Strategies to improve health and prevent obesity assume that people have the motivation and ability to gather fresh ingredients and turn them into a delicious meal. For most of us though, these seemingly simple tasks are quite complex. From making a grocery list, to budgeting, to watching the kids while something is boiling on the stove, regularly making the time and space to cook is not an easy task. If we want to impact cooking habits, we must first know whether modern-day Americans are choosing to cook and then understand the factors driving those choices.

We examined national data from 2007 and 2008 that asked 10,149 Americans how frequently they cook dinner at home. On the whole, half of all Americans cook dinner 6 or 7 nights a week, though this varies across different populations. Poorer, less educated households tended to either cook dinner all the time or not at all, while wealthier, more educated households tended to be in the middle, sometimes cooking and sometimes not.

It is encouraging that many Americans with lower income and less education cook regularly because these same communities are at the highest risk for poor health. Of course, these findings make sense when considering the effort and money it takes to get a kitchen up and running, and keep it going. Wealthier families can afford to occasionally not use everything in their refrigerators and pantries, whereas for poorer families, once food is purchased, there is no choice but to put it to good use.

For most people, food is a means for enjoyment, expression and culture, and cultural norms have a significant effect on people's cooking patterns regardless of other factors. African Americans and US-born Hispanics were less likely to cook dinner at home, even when accounting for income and education level. Foreign-born Hispanics, on the other hand, cooked the most of any group. This suggests that those who acculturate into marginalized segments of American society may decrease their frequency of cooking at home.

Family structure also plays an important role. Those living with a partner/spouse or children tended to cook more than their single or childless counterparts. This is not surprising given that cooking and feeding others are inherently social behaviors driven by a desire to provide both emotional and material stability; thus those living in social environments should be more likely to cook.

What are the implications of these findings? We know that home-cooked food is generally healthier than food prepared outside the home, so if many Americans are already cooking, then we have a ready pathway to improve people's diets. Yet our research suggests that cooking may mean different things to different people. For some, finding time to cook may be a challenge. For others, it may be money that gets in the way.

Identifying cooking as a means to greater health is only the first step. We must now work with individuals, families, and communities to better understand why they do or do not cook at home, and then design effective, sustainable, and scalable strategies to improve cooking habits across our diverse population.

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