

Study finds 'family meal' ideal is stressful, impossible for many families

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A lack of transportation and limited finances make it difficult for mothers in poor families to provide their children with fresh produce. Credit: North Carolina State University

Magazines, television and other popular media increasingly urge families to return to the kitchen, stressing the importance of home-cooked meals and family dinners to physical health and family well-being. But new research findings from North Carolina State University show that home cooking and family meals place significant stresses on many families –

and are simply impossible for others.

"We wanted to understand the relationship between this ideal that is presented in popular culture and the realities that people live with when it comes to feeding their children," says Dr. Sarah Bowen, an associate professor of sociology at NC State and co-author of a paper on the ongoing study.

The researchers interviewed 150 female caregivers in families with children between the ages of 2 and 8, as well as conducting in-depth observations of 12 of these families for a total of 250 hours.

"We found that middle-class, working-class, and [poor families](#) faced some similar challenges," says Dr. Sinikka Elliott, an associate professor of sociology at NC State who co-authored the paper. "For example, mothers from all backgrounds reported difficulty in finding time to prepare [meals](#) that everyone in the family would be willing to eat."

In addition, middle-class mothers reported being torn between their desire to spend quality time with their children and the expectation that they needed to provide the children with a home-cooked meal.

But, while all families reported financial considerations as a factor in meal planning, finances affected family decisions in very different ways.

For example, middle-class mothers were concerned that they weren't able to give their kids the best possible meals because they couldn't afford to buy all organic foods.

Poor families, meanwhile, faced more severe restrictions. Their financial limitations made it more difficult for them to afford fresh produce, find transportation to grocery stores, or have access to the kitchen tools needed to prepare meals – such as sharp knives, stoves, or pots and pans.

"Poor mothers also skipped meals and stood in long lines at non-profit food pantries to provide food for their children," Bowen says.

"This idea of a home-cooked meal is appealing, but it's unrealistic for a lot of families," Bowen adds. "We as a society need to develop creative solutions to support families and help share the work of providing kids with healthy meals."

"There are a lot of ways we could do this, from community kitchens where families work together to arranging to-go meals from schools," Elliott says. "There is no one answer. But we hope this work inspires people to start thinking outside the [family](#) kitchen about broader things we as a society can do when it comes to food and health."

More information: The paper, "The Joy of Cooking?," is published online in *Contexts*.

Provided by North Carolina State University

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