

Collecting Data on Eating Patterns, Obesity Risk and Food Access: The Food and Eating Module

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The American Time Use Survey (ATUS) collects information on how Americans spend their time. Sponsored by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, the ATUS is a continuous, monthly survey that started in January 2003. Estimates from the Survey show the range of detailed activities performed daily, how much time is spent in each activity, and how time is allocated by demographic group, labor force status, and weekday versus weekend.

Decisions individuals make on how they use their 24 hours a day have short-run and long-run implications for income and earnings, health, and other aspects of well-being. The Food Economics Division of Economic Research Service (ERS) is particularly interested in understanding individuals' time use patterns as they are related to eating patterns, grocery shopping, and meal preparation, as well as understanding whether the time constraints that food assistance program participants face are the same or are different than those faced by other households.

In October 2005, the Food & Eating Module was added to the ATUS. Because the ATUS only collects time diary information on the respondent's primary activity, researchers at the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (ERS) knew that all eating occurrences would not be reported. As a consequence, the Module contains questions on eating as a secondary activity, that is, eating while engaged in other activities, such as while watching TV or while driving. In addition, the Module includes questions on height and weight, which can be used to compute the Body Mass Index (BMI); participation in the Food Stamp Program and school meals program; grocery shopping and meal preparation; and household income. The Module was developed by ERS and is funded by ERS and the National Institutes of Health, National Cancer Institute.

The data from the Module questions, along with the ATUS time diary, labor force, and demographic information, will offer a unique opportunity to answer important research questions in the research areas of:

- Eating patterns, nutrition, and obesity
 - Are certain patterns of eating or of time use associated with obesity?
 - How does meal preparation time affect other indicators of well-being?
- Food assistance programs
 - Are food assistance recipients more time pressured than other low-income individuals?
 - What are the time benefits of school meals?
- Grocery shopping and meal preparation
 - Are grocery shopping and meal preparation times different across different types of households?
 - What are the travel times to grocery shopping for various demographic and geographic groups?

October, November, and December 2005 were the dress rehearsal months for the Module. The 2006 Food & Eating Module data are scheduled to be released in Fall 2007, and BLS will distribute the data on its website along with the 2006 ATUS data. The Module is scheduled to run through December 2007.

Websites

ERS website on Food, Nutrition, and Time Use: www.ers.usda.gov/emphases/healthy/atus/

BLS website on ATUS: www.bls.gov/tus/

Endnote

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