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Female-Headed Households Spend Less on Food

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Households headed by single mothers spend less money, but a greater share of their income, on food than do two-parent households. The lower spending is due primarily to their lower income and education levels—more so than to the absence of a male partner. This, however, does not necessarily imply that these households have lower food consumption or nutrition.

The dramatic growth in the number of single-parent households—particularly those headed by a female—has drawn the interest of food marketers and government officials, who are trying to determine if female-headed households have different food spending patterns than other households, and what factors might influence their food spending decisions. Their interest is spurred by the fact that between 1970 and 1988, the number of female-headed households more than doubled from 3.4 million to 8.1 million—a growth from 12 percent to 24 percent of all family groups with children under age 18.

An increasing proportion of U.S. children are raised in female-headed households—an estimated 60 percent of all children born today will spend some of their child-

hood in a single-parent household, most often one headed by a woman.

Nearly a Third of All Female-Headed Households Are Poor

Government officials are interested in learning more about female-headed households for several reasons, including their high poverty rates. Nearly 50 percent of all households in poverty in 1986 were headed by women.

Female-headed households are more likely to be poor than are two-parent households. The Census Bureau estimated that, in 1988, one of every three female-headed households had annual incomes below the poverty threshold (\$9,435 for a family of three, and \$14,305 for a family of five).

Female-headed households are heavily represented among the welfare and food assistance population. In 1988, single mothers headed nearly half of all households receiving food stamps. And,



Female-headed households in the study spent an average of \$89.37 per person per month on food, compared with \$105.31 by two-parent households.

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an estimated one-third of the participants in the Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC) lived in households with no adult male present. Policymakers, therefore, are looking at the food spending patterns of female-headed households in order to develop more effective food assistance programs.

Single-Parent Households Spend Less on Food

Previous Government studies have indicated that, on average, households headed by a single parent spend less per person for food than do other households. For example, one study found that single-mother households spent on average \$76.48 per person per month for food in 1988, or about 76 percent of what two-parent households spent (table 1).

Another study compared food expenditures of all single-parent households (mostly single mothers, although the sample also included single fathers) with two-parent households, and found similar—although smaller—differences. Single-parent households spent on average \$85.25 per person per month for food during 1984-1986, or about 90 percent of what two-parent households spent.

When these single-parent households were separated into poor and nonpoor households, the poor spent less for food. Nonpoor single-parent households, however, actually spent more for food per person than did two-parent households.

Women May Have Different Preferences for Food

Female-headed households may allocate their incomes differently than do two-parent households because there is no male head to influence food consumption patterns or spending decisions.

For example, an earlier study by USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) found that women in households with a male head consumed significantly larger shares of dietary fat from red meats than did women in households without a male head—even independent of differences in income and education (see "Diet/Health Concerns About Fat Intake" *FoodReview*, Vol. 14, Issue 1, January-March 1991, pp. 16-20). Such difference may have been due to the influence of the male head on household food choices.

Also, women may have different preferences than men in the income allocated to food. Food spending in female-headed households would reflect this difference, along with other factors that may vary, such as how they allocate their time.

Income and Education Determine Food Expenditures

Because few studies have been able to reconcile the effects of dif-

ferences in household characteristics when examining food expenditures, ERS conducted its own analysis. Using data from the U.S. Department of Labor's 1988 Continuing Consumer Expenditures Survey (see box), the study took into account differences in income, education, household composition, full-time work, race, season, and region, and measured their effects on food spending.

Our findings agree with earlier studies that female-headed households spend less per person for food than other households. Female-headed households in the study spent an average of \$89.37 per person per month on food, compared with \$105.31 by two-parent households (table 2). Female-headed households spent \$59.41 on food for home consumption and \$29.95 on food away from home (that is, food prepared in restaurants, fast food places, and other foodservice establishments). In comparison, two-parent households spent \$67.28 on food for home consumption and \$38.03 on food prepared away from home.

Table 1
When Buying Food, Two-Parent Households Outspent Single-Parent Households

Study period	Per capita household food expenditures			
	Two parents	Single parents ¹		
		Total	Poor ²	Nonpoor
Dollars per person per month				
Study 1 (1984-86):				
Total food	94.50	85.25	63.58	103.50
Food at home	68.42	64.58	56.58	71.42
Food away from home	26.00	20.58	7.00	32.08
Study 2 (1988):				
Total food	100.79	76.48	NA	NA
Food at home	64.61	53.13	NA	NA
Food away from home	36.18	23.36	NA	NA

NA = Not applicable. ¹In the first study, single parents include single fathers; in the second study, single parents include only single mothers. ²The 1986 poverty threshold for a four-person household with two children under age 18 was \$11,113, and was \$8,829 for a three-person household with two children under age 18.

Lower incomes and education levels were primarily responsible for the lower food expenditures. Female-headed households had lower incomes and higher poverty rates than did two-parent households. Nearly half of the female-headed households in the study had incomes below poverty levels, compared with less than one-tenth of the two-parent households.

The absence of an adult male income earner among female-headed households was a major factor behind their lower household income. Not only did working women tend to receive lower wages than working men, but only 22 percent of the female-headed households reported having another income earner present in the household—and this was probably a child worker since there was no partner present.

Another reason for the lower income of female-headed households was that those women tended to have less formal education. For example, 20 percent of the women in female-headed households had not completed high school, while only 12 percent of the women in two-parent households lacked a high school diploma. Education is strongly related to earnings and, therefore, to food expenditures.

Education also influenced food spending separately from its effect on household income. Households in which the female head had not completed high school spent less per person per month on food than did similar households in which the female head had completed high school. It has been suggested that individuals with more education tend to be more informed and adventurous in their food selection. They may also be better informed about food safety and nutrition issues, and thus demand higher quality food and food service.

In general, fewer household members, different household composition (such as a larger propor-

Data Drawn From Continuing Consumer Expenditures Survey

To determine how food spending patterns vary between female-headed and two-parent households with children, we examined data from the diary portion of the 1988 Continuing Consumer Expenditures Survey, done by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. In the survey, households kept a diary of their food expenditures for 2 consecutive weeks. Approximately 5,000 households were sampled across a 12-month period.

This study is based on data for urban households that provided complete data on food expenditures (2 weeks of data) and had at least one child under age 18. Because of their small numbers, households with extended families, households headed by single fathers, and households living in college housing were excluded from the study.

The final sample consisted of 1,140 households, of which 204 (18 percent) were headed by single women—"female-headed households." The remaining 936 households were headed by a married couple—"two-parent households."

It should be noted that the Continuing Consumer Expenditures Survey collects information about food expenditures—not food consumption. These data include only the value of foods and beverages purchased during the 2-week period—whether eaten or not—and not items used out of the household's own inventories.

To analyze food spending patterns in greater detail, ex-

penditures for food consumed at home were divided into 14 categories. The beef group excludes canned beef. Pork includes all cuts of pork, bacon, ham, and sausages. Poultry includes chicken, cornish hens, turkey, and duck. Other meats include frankfurters, lunch meats, lamb, mutton, goat, and game. Eggs include fresh, powdered, and egg substitutes. Fats and oils include nondairy cream substitutes and peanut butter. Bakery and cereal foods include bread, cookies, crackers, pasta, and rice. Sugars and sweets include sugar, candy and gum, jam, jelly, preserves, fruit butter, syrup, fudge mix, icing, prepared sweets, and artificial sweeteners. Nonalcoholic beverages exclude milk and fruit or vegetable juices. Miscellaneous prepared foods include frozen prepared foods, canned and packaged soup, chips, nuts, condiments and seasonings, olives and pickles, sauce and gravy, salad, dessert, and baby food.

Food prepared away from home could not be separated into categories. All specific food categories discussed in this article refer to food consumed at home.

More technical information behind the findings reported in this article—on the analysis, methodology, and data sources—is available. Just call toll-free from the United States or Canada 1-800-999-6779 and ask for *Food Spending by Female-Headed Households*, TB-1806, by E. Frazao, USDA, ERS, July 1992. (Callers elsewhere, please dial 703-834-0125.)



Differences in which foods are purchased and how much is spent is mainly attributed to differences in household characteristics between female-headed and two-parent households.

tion of preschoolers and a lower proportion of adults in the household), and the preponderance of black households in the group—all characteristics commonly associated with lower food expenditures—also contributed to the lower per person food expenditures of female-headed households.

Overall, female-headed households tend to have fewer members, so they may be less able to take advantage of the savings associated with purchasing larger food packages or buying in bulk.

Full-Time Work Has No Net Effect on Total Food Expenditures

Women in female-headed and two-parent households were similar in age and, interestingly, labor force participation (table 2). However, women in female-headed households tended to work longer hours, and were more likely than their married counterparts to work full-time.

Table 2

Income and Education Behind the Lower Food Spending by Female-Headed Households

Household characteristics	Unit per household	Female-headed households	Two-parent households
Households	Number	204	936
Household size	"	3.03	4.05
Monthly income per household	Dollars	1,404.54	3,415.06
Per capita	"	515.20	888.25
Monthly food stamps per household	"	63.41	6.21
Per capita	"	19.77	1.32
Monthly food expenditures per household	"	253.07	411.78
Per capita	"	89.37	105.31
Food at home	"	59.41	67.28
Food away from home	"	29.95	38.03
Households with other earner present	Percent	22	98
Households in poverty	"	47	9
Households receiving food stamps	"	36	3
Characteristics of female head:			
Age:	Years	34.63	34.66
Race:			
Black:	Percent	25	7
Education:			
Completed high school	"	79	88
Completed college	"	10	21
Employed	"	74	76
Full time	"	55	46
Time worked:			
Weeks	Number	40.06	33.92
Hours per week	"	31.14	32.42

This may affect food expenditures, if women who work full-time try to reduce their time in the kitchen and seek help from higher-cost, more convenient sources of food.

In the study, households in which the female head worked full-time tended to spend more for food away from home and less on food at home. Although food away from home typically is considered to be more expensive than food for home consumption, the advent of lower priced fast food fare and the proliferation of relatively more ex-

pensive ready-to-eat frozen meals and fully prepared dishes in grocery stores have shrunk the cost differences. Thus, full-time work alone (holding income constant) had little net impact on total food expenditures.

Spending Patterns Differ Among Food Groups

The largest expenditures among foods for at-home consumption were for bakery and cereal products, milk and dairy products, and miscellaneous prepared foods (fig.

1). These three categories represent over 40 percent of spending on food for at-home consumption for both female-headed and two-parent households.

Female-headed households spent less per person than did two-parent households for each of these three food categories—as well as for most other categories.

Many households, however, did not purchase certain foods for at-home consumption during the survey period. Although most households purchased bakery and cereal products and milk and dairy products, only about half of female-headed households purchased poultry, and less than 40 percent bought fish and seafood (fig. 1). In fact, fewer female-headed households purchased from most food categories than did two-parent households. Economies of scale in food purchasing and preparation may make it easier for larger households to consume a greater variety of foods.

Food expenditures differed somewhat when only households that actually purchased from a food category during the survey period were considered (fig. 2). Among households that purchased beef, for example, female-headed households spent more per person on beef than did two-parent households. However, average expenditures for beef for home consumption were lower among female-headed households as a whole because fewer female-headed households purchased beef (65 percent) than did two-parent households (79 percent) (fig. 2).

Because so many of the households did not purchase from many of the food categories during the survey period, we were interested in determining whether households that purchased from a food category differed in characteristics from households that did not purchase from those food categories. More specifically, we wanted to de-

termine whether having a single female as the head of the household affected whether a food item was purchased during the survey period and, if so, how much was spent on that item.

As with total food expenditures, differences in both which foods are purchased and how much is spent can be mainly attributed to differences in household characteristics between female-headed and two-

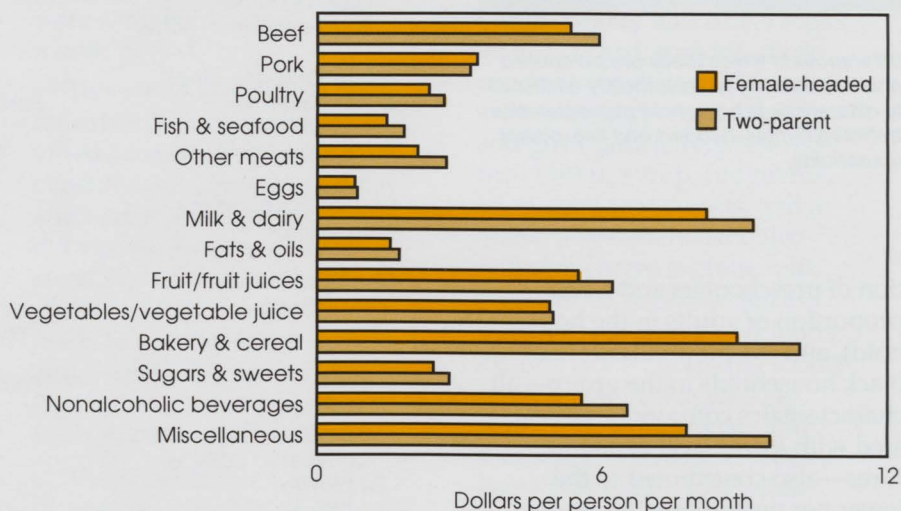
parent households, such as income, education, household size, and race.

For example, higher income households were more likely to purchase fish and seafood, fruit and fruit juices, and miscellaneous prepared foods for consumption at home. Higher income households were also more likely to purchase food prepared away from home. These same households also tend-

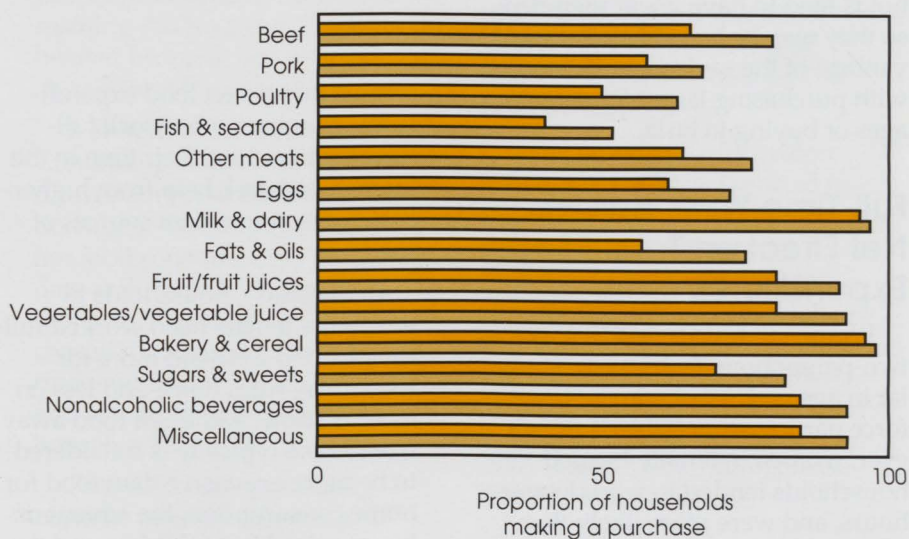
Figure 1

How Food Spending Adds Up for Female-Headed and Two-Parent Households

Female-Headed Households Spent Less on Almost Every Major Food Group...



...Partly Because They Were Less Likely To Buy Most Food Items



ed to spend more on the items they bought.

Full-time work, region of residence, and time of year also affected which foods were purchased and how much was spent. For example, everything else being equal, households in which the female head worked full-time were less likely to purchase beef, pork, fish and seafood, fats and oils, fruit and fruit juices, and nonalcoholic beverages for home consumption than were households in which the female head did not work full-time. Among households purchasing vegetables and vegetable juices and bakery and cereal goods for home consumption, those in which the female head worked full-time spent less.

Interestingly, households in which the female head worked full-time were not more likely than those in which the female head did not work full-time to purchase food away from home. Perhaps the many convenient foods available for at-home consumption, such as prepared frozen meals, compete with the convenience and cost of food away from home.

Whether the household was headed by a single female or by two parents influenced only a few purchasing and spending decisions, independent of other variables. Female-headed households were less likely to purchase fats and oils, fruit and fruit juices, and other meats for consumption at home. Among those purchasing other meats, female-headed households spent less than did two-parent households. Among households purchasing food prepared away from home, female-headed households spent less.

Nutrition Not Necessarily Lower

The finding that female-headed households spent less per capita on food does not necessarily imply that they had lower food consumption or nutrition.

Since the data refer to expenditures and not consumption, lower food expenditures may result from purchasing less food, more of cheaper foods, less of costlier foods (such as convenience foods or more expensive food away from home), or a combination of these.

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Evidence suggests that lower income households are more efficient food shoppers and obtain more nutrients per dollar's worth of food than are those with higher incomes. For example, according to data from USDA's 1977-78 Nationwide Food Consumption Survey, households with incomes below \$5,000 obtained more calories, protein, and calcium per dollar's worth of food used at home than did households with incomes of \$20,000 and above.

More research is needed on the relationship between food expenditures and the quantity and nutritional quality of the foods purchased. With this information, researchers could investigate how differences in food expenditures translate into actual intakes of food and nutrients for the two types of households.

For further details, see *Food Spending by Female-Headed Households*, TB-1806, by E. Frazao, USDA, ERS, July 1992. ■

Figure 2

Among Those Purchasing Each Food Group, Female-Headed Households Actually Spent More on Several Major Food Groups

