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Food Spending in Single-person Households

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The number of people in the United States who live alone has grown rapidly in the last 25 years. One-person households increased from 10.9 percent of all households in 1950 to 20.6 percent in 1976. The Census Bureau projects that over one-fourth of all U.S. households will consist of only a single person by 1990.

Purchases by one-person households are an increasingly important factor in the food system and their food purchasing patterns are distinctive in many ways. A clearer understanding of this

group's food expenditure behavior is valuable in understanding current retail food demand and in forecasting future demand.

Households Studied

This report is based on the diary portion of the Bureau of Labor Statistics' latest Consumer Expenditure Survey—a rich data source for studying household food purchase behavior. The survey households kept diaries of all food purchased for a 2-week period. For this study, the expenditures for 2 weeks were

averaged to obtain a weekly figure.

Not all respondents purchased a particular item during the survey period, so it is impossible to tell whether the household does not buy a commodity at all or simply did not buy it during the 2-week period. The averages reported in this article are for the entire sample group, not just for those buying the item.

The data analyzed are for July 1973 to June 1974. The data do not cover people living in institutional settings, such as college students in dorms or senior citizens in rest homes. One-person

Weekly Food Expenditures for Single and Multi-Person Households¹

	Single person households	Multi-person households	Multi-person households (per person)	Single person households	Multi-person households
	Dollars			Percent	
Total food	18.57	41.64	12.92	100.0	100.0
Food away from home	6.55	10.20	3.28	28.1	22.6
Food at home	12.01	31.45	9.64	71.9	77.4
Cereals and bakery products	1.41	3.78	1.13	13.0	12.8
Cereal and cereal products . . . . .	.36	1.07	.31	2.9	3.4
Bakery products	1.05	2.72	.82	10.2	9.4
Meats, poultry, fish, and eggs	4.44	12.36	3.82	33.3	36.4
Beef and veal	1.57	4.86	1.51	10.8	13.2
Pork	1.05	2.80	.87	7.3	8.4
Other meats . . . . .	.50	1.48	.45	4.1	4.7
Poultry . . . . .	.60	1.52	.47	4.3	4.6
Fish and seafood . . . . .	.34	.86	.27	2.5	2.6
Eggs . . . . .	.37	.83	.26	3.2	2.9
Dairy products	1.60	4.33	1.29	15.5	15.1
Fresh milk and cream . . . . .	.88	2.61	.76	9.3	9.5
Processed dairy products . . . . .	.72	1.72	.53	6.2	5.6
Fruits and vegetables	1.99	4.36	1.38	15.9	14.0
Fresh fruits . . . . .	.54	1.12	.36	4.6	3.7
Fresh vegetables . . . . .	.60	1.40	.44	4.5	4.5
Processed fruits . . . . .	.46	.85	.27	3.7	2.8
Processed vegetables . . . . .	.39	1.01	.31	3.1	3.1
Sugars and sweets . . . . .	.35	.92	.28	3.3	3.0
Fats and oils . . . . .	.37	.93	.29	2.9	3.0
Nonalcoholic beverages . . . . .	.94	2.24	.69	9.1	7.6
Other prepared foods . . . . .	.93	2.53	.76	8.2	8.2
Proportion of total households (%)	22.8	77.1			

¹Amounts and percentages may not sum to totals because of rounding.



households constituted 22.8 percent of total households in this survey, slightly above the 20.6 percent for 1976 reported by the Census Bureau.

Single-person households spent an average of 17.1 percent of their income on food; multi-person households spent 17.9 percent. Single-person households spent about 38 percent as much as multi-person families on food at home, but averaged 25 percent more on a per capita basis. Persons living alone made up a major component of the away-from-home market. The amount of money spent on meals away from home was twice the per capita level of multi-person households.

People living in single-person households are less than 8 percent of the total population. However, they account for 12 percent of total food expenditure, 10 percent of at-home food expenditures, and 16 percent of away-from-home food purchases. Thus, they constitute an important part of the food market, partic-

ularly the away-from-home market. In addition, their portion of the food market is growing rapidly.

However, single-person households are not a homogeneous group, and they do not exhibit similar food purchase behavior. Living alone is about the only thing they have in common. Obviously, the food purchases of a high-income, young bachelor and the purchases of an elderly widow living on a small pension will be markedly different.

Spending the Food Dollar

People living alone spent less than multi-person families for every category listed, on a household basis, but more on a per capita basis in all but one case.¹ In total, single-person households spent less than half as much as multi-person households on food. However, expendi-

¹The per capita figures were derived by dividing expenditure by family size for each multi-person household observation.

tures on a per capita basis were approximately 1-1/2 times that of the average multi-person household.

The average multi-person household includes children—which typically reduces the level of per capita food expenditure. The difference between the per capita expenditure of single and multi-person households was statistically significant for every food category except beef and veal.

Persons living alone spent a significantly smaller portion of their food dollar on meals at home than multi-person households and a much higher portion on dining out. They spent less on cereal and cereal products and more on bakery products. They also spent considerably less on beef and veal for use at home—probably because they dine out more frequently. The apparent differences between the two groups in at-home expenditures on poultry, fish, and seafood were not statistically significant. A slightly higher percentage of the at-home food budget of persons living alone went to processed dairy products. Their percentage allocation was also higher for fresh and processed fruits, and for nonalcoholic beverages.

More Information Coming

A forthcoming ESCS research report will examine the food expenditures of 12 types of one-person households. The food expenditures by single-person households will be analyzed by two income levels, three age groups, and sex.

These three factors yield the following types of one-person households: lower income women by each age grouping; lower income men by each age grouping; upper income women by each age grouping; and upper income men by each age grouping.

Each of these categories represents, in addition to the factors utilized, significantly different stages in one's life cycle, psychological outlook, social position, and even nutritional needs. For copies write to Food Economics, ESCS, USDA, 500 12th St., SW, Room 260, Washington, D.C. 20250. ■