

# Work Conditions and the Food Choice Coping Strategies of Employed Parents

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** How work conditions relate to parents' food choice coping strategies.

**Design:** Pilot telephone survey.

**Setting:** City in the northeastern United States (US).

**Participants:** Black, white, and Hispanic employed mothers (25) and fathers (25) randomly recruited from low-/moderate-income zip codes; 78% of those reached and eligible participated.

**Main Outcome Measures:** Sociodemographic characteristics; work conditions (hours, shift, job schedule, security, satisfaction, food access); food choice coping strategies (22 behavioral items for managing food in response to work and family demands (ie, food prepared at/away from home, missing meals, individualizing meals, speeding up, planning).

**Analysis:** Two-tailed chi-square and Fisher exact tests ( $P \leq .05$ , unless noted).

**Results:** Half or more of respondents often/sometimes used 12 of 22 food choice coping strategies. Long hours and nonstandard hours and schedules were positively associated among fathers with take-out meals, missed family meals, prepared entrees, and eating while working; and among mothers with restaurant meals, missed breakfast, and prepared entrees. Job security, satisfaction, and food access were also associated with gender-specific strategies.

**Conclusions and Implications:** Structural work conditions among parents such as job hours, schedule, satisfaction, and food access are associated with food choice coping strategies with importance for dietary quality. Findings have implications for worksite interventions but need examination in a larger sample.

**Key Words:** employment, parents, family, dietary behavior, low income, coping (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2009;41:365-370.)

## INTRODUCTION

Most parents in the United States (US) are employed, and work-family conflict may make competing demands on parents' time and energy.<sup>1-3</sup> Long work hours, inflexible work and family schedules, and spillover of work into home life leave many parents feeling short of time, tired, and stressed.<sup>4-6</sup> Food choice coping strategies, the behavioral mechanisms through which people actively conceptualize and manage food selection in response to work and family demands, are used by employed parents to manage stress

and fatigue, reduce meal time and effort, reduce food and eating expectations, and weigh food and eating against other family needs.<sup>7</sup> This study examined how work conditions are related to the food choice coping strategies of low- and moderate-income parents. Study findings will enhance understanding of social and temporal employment constraints on adults' food choices and may inform workplace interventions and policies.

Food preparation time has decreased.<sup>8</sup> Families are obtaining more food and meals away from home,<sup>9</sup> especially fast food<sup>10</sup> and take-out

food.<sup>11</sup> Meal skipping<sup>12</sup> and home use of convenience entrees has increased.<sup>13</sup> Although food consumption away from home has been closely tracked, the use of other food choice coping strategies by working parents and their relationship to employment has not been examined.

Food prepared outside the home has been shown to be lower in nutritional quality than food prepared at home.<sup>10</sup> Less healthful diets have been positively associated with work conditions such as low job status,<sup>14</sup> poor job conditions,<sup>15</sup> high workloads,<sup>16</sup> high work demands,<sup>17</sup> and low control at work.<sup>18</sup> Obesity and weight gain have been associated with long work hours,<sup>19</sup> high work demands,<sup>17</sup> and high job strain.<sup>20</sup> However, the behavioral mechanisms through which work conditions are related to dietary intake have not been examined.

## METHODS

This analysis was part of a pilot telephone survey designed to assess the

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**Table 1.** Characteristics of Respondents

	Fathers (n=25)	Mothers (n=25)
Age (y, mean)	36.8	38.5
Race/ethnicity		
White	8	9
African-American	10	9
Other	7	7
Latino	8	8
Total family income (\$)		
Less than 20,000	3	9
20,000 to 39,999	11	11
40,000 to 59,999	11	5
Family receives food assistance*	8	16
Highest educational level		
Some high school or high school graduate	10	6
Some college	9	13
College graduate	6	6
Family characteristics		
Married or living as married*	25	10
Spouse/partner employed <sup>a</sup>	13/25	7/10
Children ≤6 years at home	16	13
More than 2 children at home	5	6
Work Conditions		
Hours employed in average week		
Part-time or full-time	17	15
Usually ≥45h	8	10
Overtime often	8	6
Second job	6	2
Nonstandard work hours (evening and/or night)	7	8
Nonstandard schedule (weekday and/or weekend)	12	10
Varied weekly work schedule	9	8
Job satisfaction: dissatisfied	16	19
Job security: low	4	7
At job less than 1 year	6	10

\* $P \leq .05$  for 2-tailed chi-square test of gender difference; <sup>a</sup>Of those who have a spouse/partner.

efficacy of methods and measures for investigating relationships between work and family conditions, food choice coping strategies, and the dietary intake of employed parents. The authors present here associations between work conditions and the food choice coping strategies of low-income parents. Associations between coping strategies and dietary intake are reported elsewhere. The research protocol was reviewed by the Cornell University Institutional Review Board.

### Respondent Recruitment and Characteristics

Employed parents were randomly recruited for a telephone survey from

low- and moderate-income zip codes in an Upstate New York metropolitan area. Eligible respondents worked 20 or more hours a week and had a child 16 years old or younger at home and an annual family income below \$60,000 (median family income for the area was \$56,553). The authors recruited equal numbers of men and women as well as black, white, and Hispanic participants. Those completing 3 telephone interviews received \$50.

To reach the pilot sample size, trained interviewers attempted to contact 734 people by calling up to 8 times during the day, during the evening, and on weekends. Of these numbers, 241 (33%) were disconnected or incorrect numbers, the phone was never answered, or the person who

answered the phone was unable to answer the screening questions, and 28 (4%) people refused to be screened. Of the 465 (63%) who were reached and screened, 64 (14%) of parents were eligible, and they agreed to participate. Each parent provided verbal consent following a protocol approved by the University Institutional Review Board. Fifty (78%) participants completed all 3 interviews and were included in the analysis.

Twenty-five employed mothers and 25 employed fathers or guardians from 3 racial/ethnic groups participated in the study (Table 1). Mothers were more likely than fathers to be single and to receive food assistance ( $P \leq .05$ ) and to have lower incomes ( $P = .07$ ). Seventy-eight percent of parents had incomes below the area household median.<sup>21</sup> In a usual week, 16% of parents worked part-time, 48% full-time, and 36% overtime at service, clerical, and maintenance jobs. Over a third worked long hours and had nonstandard schedules. Job dissatisfaction was high. Seventy percent were overweight or obese according to self-reports of height and weight.

### Data Collection

In the first of three 45-minute telephone interviews, the investigators assessed sociodemographic and family characteristics, and work conditions using standard items (Table 1).<sup>22-25</sup> Twenty-four-hour dietary recalls were collected on 2 subsequent days (data reported elsewhere).

The food choice coping strategies used by working parents to integrate work and family demands were measured by 22 items in 5 categories, including: (1) food prepared at/away from home; (2) missing meals; (3) individualizing meals (family eats differently, separately, or together); (4) speeding up to save time; and (5) planning (Table 2). Six items assessed access at work (yes/no) to healthful, reasonably priced, good-tasting food, and to a microwave oven, refrigerator, and vending machines.

The conceptual model that guided this analysis and the measures of food choice coping strategies were developed through formative research, including development of candidate items through qualitative interviews<sup>7</sup>;

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