

# Do the children of employed mothers eat fewer 'family meals'?

**Charlie Owen**

**Understanding Society: 25 July 2013**



# Families, Food and Work

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Jointly funded by ESRC and Department of Health (was  
Food Standards Agency)



# Family meals

- Two public policy concerns
  - children's diets – obesity epidemic, 5 A Day
  - poor behaviour – from bad manners to rioting
- Family meals seen as a 'magic bullet'

## Family dinners 'make for healthier kids'

Eating together as a family leads to healthier children who are less likely to be overweight, according to a major review.



By **Stephen Adams**, Medical Correspondent

9:00PM BST 23 Apr 2012



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Nutritional scientists have found that children from homes where the family regularly gathers around the dinner table tend to eat more fruit and vegetables than those from homes where mealtimes are not a central focus of the day.

They are also less likely to be overweight or obese, as measured by body mass index (BMI).

Researchers at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, in the US, made their conclusions after analysing results from 68 separate academic studies.

They found those in families that regularly ate together reaped "numerous benefits ... including increased intake of fruits, vegetables, fibre, calcium-rich foods, and vitamins".

Journal of  
**EPIDEMIOLOGY &  
COMMUNITY HEALTH**

An international peer-reviewed journal for health professionals and researchers in all areas of epidemiology

*J Epidemiol Community Health* 2013;**67**:332-338 doi:10.1136/jech-2012-201604

**Research report**

**Family meals can help children reach their 5 A Day:  
a cross-sectional survey of children's dietary intake  
from London primary schools**

Meaghan S Christian, Charlotte E L Evans, Neil Hancock, Camilla Nykjaer, Janet E Cade

# Parents who failed to put their children to bed on time are accused of causing London riots

By LAURA CLARK

UPDATED: 07:29, 31 January 2012



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Parents who neglect basic duties such as preparing meals and enforcing bedtimes are breeding a feckless 'underclass' who cause mayhem on the nation's streets, it was claimed yesterday.

Charlie Taylor, the Government's behaviour tsar, criticised homes with 'little conversation' where children as young as eight are left to fend for themselves at mealtimes and play on the computer late into the night.

Many of these youngsters end up 'out on the streets' by their early teens, he said. Some of the rioters responsible for wreaking havoc during last summer's disturbances in cities around Britain came from homes where mothers and fathers fail to perform 'the most basic of parenting duties', he added.

# Dinner.

*Frequency of eating dinner with kids*

**Source** NSFH

**Text**

In the past 7 days, how many times have you eaten an evening meal together with your *[child/children]* and other family members who live with you?

**Options**

- 1 None
- 2 1 - 2 times
- 3 3 - 5 times
- 4 6 - 7 times

**Use**

Ask Dinner

Q.1 How many days last week did you eat breakfast or dinner with at least one of the children?

None

1 day

2 days

3 days

4 days

5 days

6 days

7 days/everyday

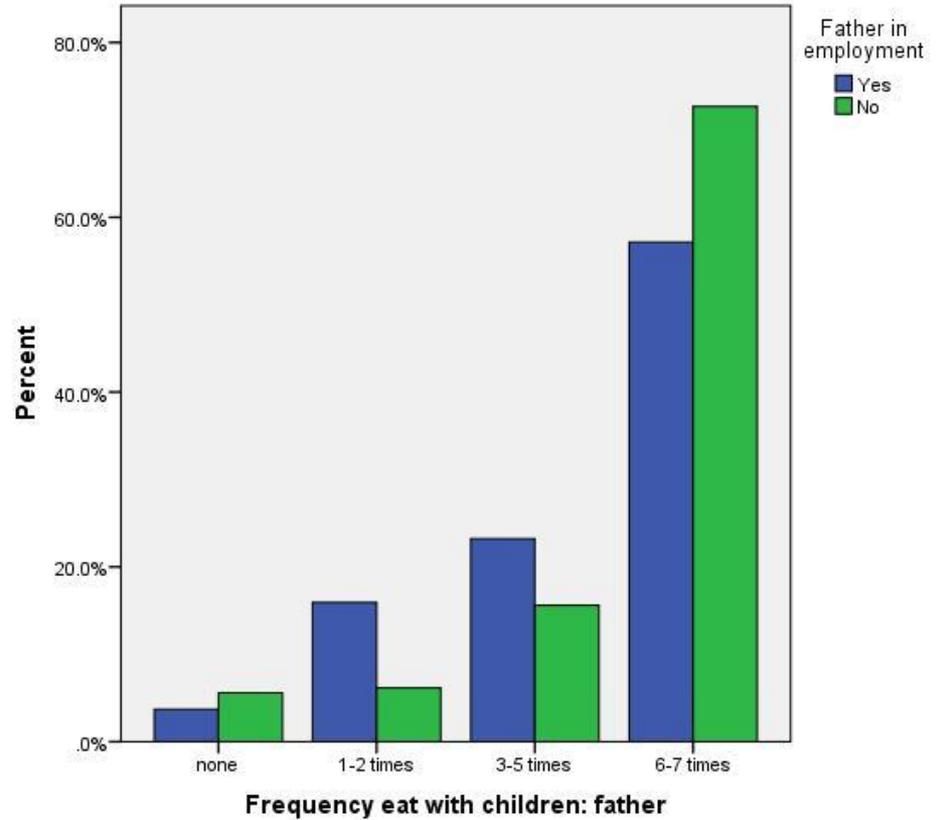
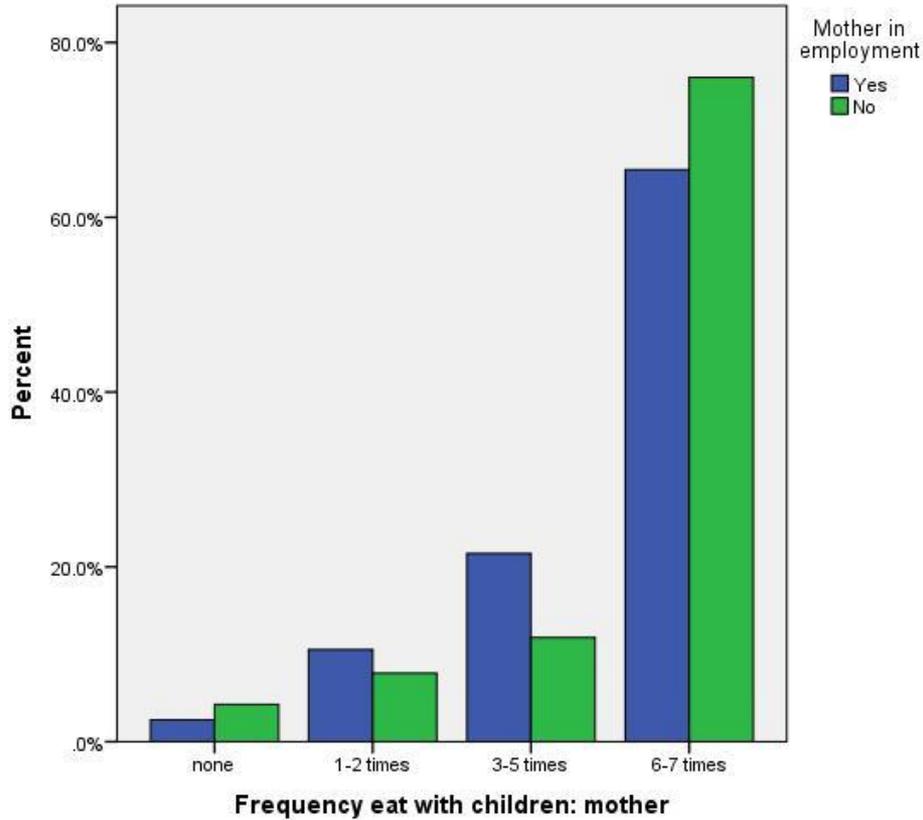
(Answers for breakfast and dinner recorded separately)

National Survey of Families and Households: Wave 1 (1987-1988)

	Mother	Percent	Father	Percent
none	230	4.1	203	4.6
1 - 2 times	502	9.0	608	13.7
3 - 5 times	993	17.8	982	22.2
6 - 7 times	3,867	69.2	2,635	59.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,592</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>4,428</b>	<b>100</b>

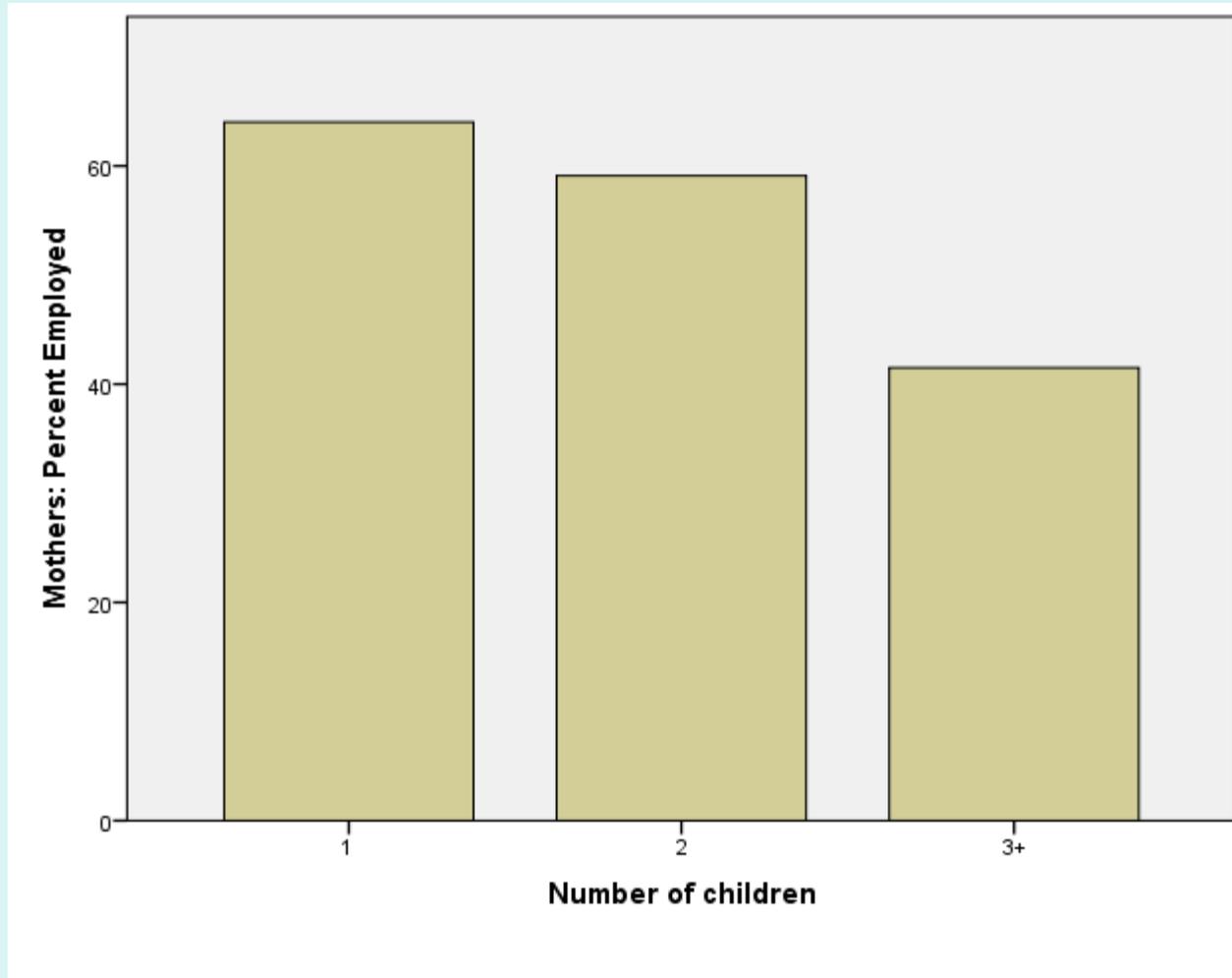
## Mothers and fathers: employment status

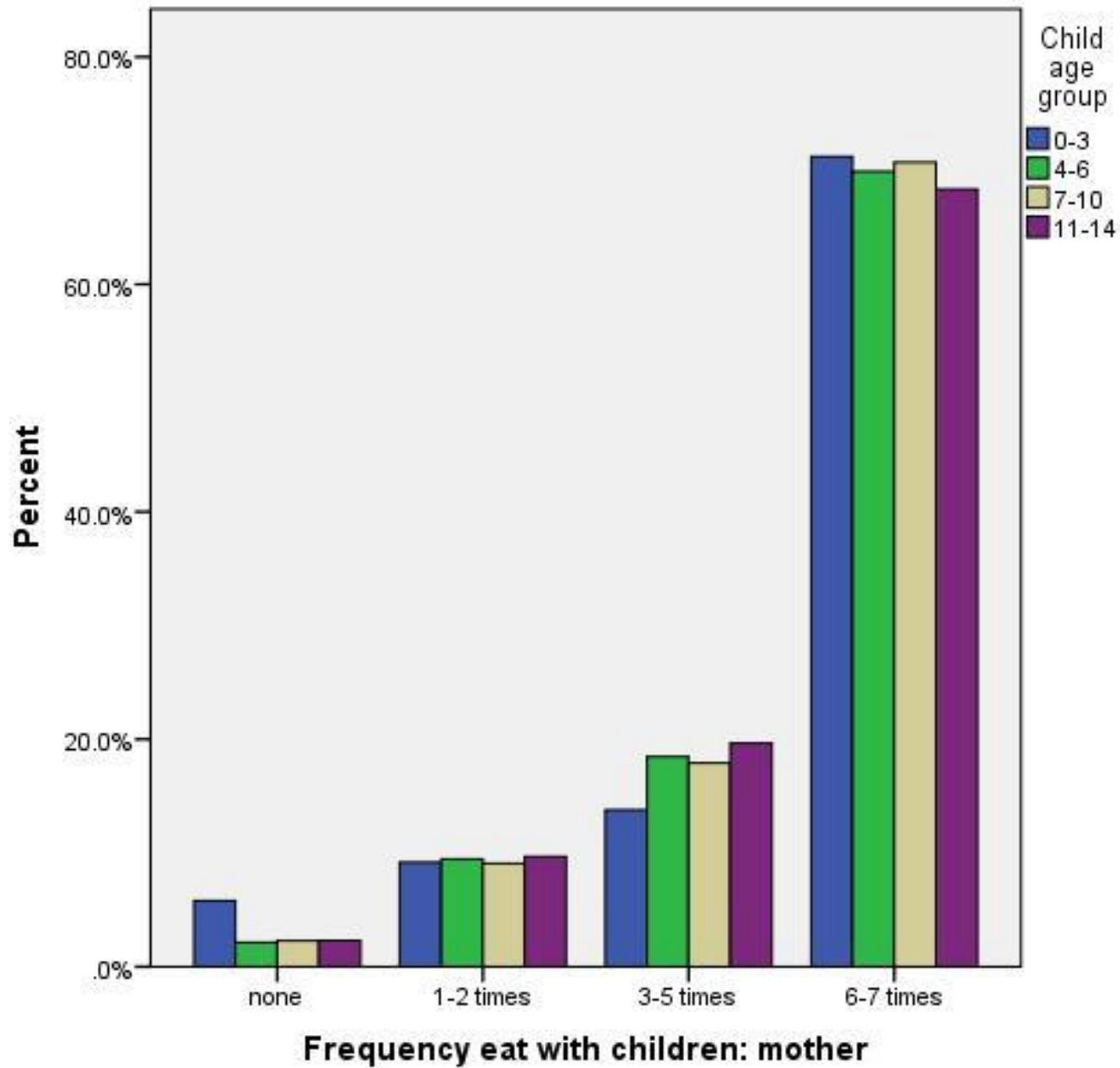
	Mother Employed			Father Employed		
	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
none	3.2%	5.4%	4.1%	4.4%	5.3%	4.5%
1-2	10.2%	7.2%	9.0%	15.1%	4.8%	13.7%
3-5	21.7%	12.0%	17.7%	23.4%	13.7%	22.3%
6-7	64.9%	75.4%	69.1%	57.0%	75.3%	59.5%
Total	3,292	2,258	5,550	3,810	587	4,397



# Mothers: Evening meal by number of children

	Number of children			Total
	1	2	3+	
none	6.0%	2.1%	3.0%	4.1%
1 - 2 times	7.9%	10.6%	8.2%	9.0%
3 - 5 times	18.5%	17.5%	15.9%	17.8%
6 - 7 times	67.6%	69.7%	72.9%	69.2%
Total	2,668	2,101	822	5,591





# Mother: Employment by number of children

		Mother in employment	
		Yes	No
Child age group	0-3	43.3%	56.7%
	4-6	54.0%	46.0%
	7-10	60.4%	39.6%
	11-14	66.7%	33.3%
Total		55.9%	44.1%

	Mother: married or living with partner		Total
	yes	no	
none	3.9%	4.8%	4.1%
1 - 2 times	9.4%	7.9%	9.0%
3 - 5 times	18.2%	16.4%	17.7%
6 - 7 times	68.6%	70.9%	69.2%
Total	4,132	1,383	5,515

# Do the children of employed mothers eat fewer family meals?

- **The answer would seem to be ‘yes’**
- **But it is not that simple:**
  - Number of children
  - Age of children
  - Hours of work
- **Ideology**
  - Family
  - Meal

# Millennium Cohort Study

**Sample of nearly 19,000 babies born between 1 September 2000 and 31 August 2001 in England and Wales**

- Who usually eats the evening meal with [Cohort child's name] on weekdays?

## MCS: 5 years & 7 years

Who eats weekday evening meal with Cohort Member	Wave 3		Wave 4	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
No one eats with child	248	1.7%	152	1.1%
Parent(s)/Guardian(s)	12,026	81.6%	11,637	84.4%
Brothers/sisters/other children living	11,403	77.4%	11,380	82.6%
Other relatives	823	5.6%	717	5.2%
Other unrelated adult (eg nanny)	142	1.0%	117	.8%
His/her friends	66	0.4%	51	.4%
Does not eat evening meal (exclusive)	-		5	.0%
Does not eat evening meal at home	-		28	.2%
Someone else (Please specify)	62	0.4%	42	.3%
Total	14,738	100%	13,781	100.0%

	Mother: paid work last week		Total
	Yes	No	
No one eats with child	1.9%	1.5%	1.7%
Parent(s)/Guardian(s)	80.0%	83.3%	81.6%
Brothers/sisters	74.0%	81.1%	77.4%
Other relatives	6.1%	5.0%	5.6%
Other unrelated adult	1.5%	0.3%	1.0%
His/her friends	0.6%	0.3%	0.4%
Someone else	0.7%	0.1%	0.4%
Total	7,684	7,050	14,734

# Some comparisons & weaknesses

- **US: frequency of ‘family meals’**
- **MCS: focus is on who eats evening meal with child**
- **Both retrospective reports by parents**
- **Neither study provides nutritional data.**

# National Diet and Nutrition Survey

- **Rolling programme of surveys**
- **Around 1,600 people interviewed per year**
- **Adults and children age 18 months and over**
- Offers detailed nutritional data
- Does not ask about 'meals' but 'eating occasions'
- Uses a 4 day diet diary

<b>Day</b> Thurs		<b>Date</b> 31st March		
<b>Time</b>	<b>Where? With Whom? TV on? At table?</b>	<b>Food/Drink description &amp; preparation</b>	<b>Brand Name</b>	<b>Portion size or quantity eaten</b>
<b>6am to 9am</b>				
6.30 am	Kitchen Alone No TV Standing	Filter coffee, decaffeinated milk (fresh, semi-skimmed) Sugar white	Douwe Egberts  Silterspoon	Mug A little 1 level tsp
7.30 am	Kitchen Partner TV on At table	Filter coffee with milk and sugar Cornflakes Milk (fresh, semi-skimmed) Toast, granary medium sliced Light spread Marmalade	As above Tesco's own  Hovis Flora Hartleys	As above 1b drowned 1 slice med spread 1 heaped tsp
<b>9am to 12 noon</b>				
10.15 am	Office desk Alone	Instant coffee, not decaffeinated Milk (fresh, whole) Sugar brown	Kenco	Mug A little 1 level tsp
11 am	Office desk Alone	Digestive biscuit – chocolate coated on one side	McVities	2

	Frequency	Percent
Alone	1,063	6.4
Family (incl. Relatives)	2,798	16.9
Friends	1,706	10.3
Parent(s)/Carer	4,344	26.3
Siblings	1,215	7.3
Parent(s)/Carer & Siblings	2,534	15.3
Carer & Other Children	258	1.6
Other	2,621	15.8
Total	16,539	100.0

	Frequency	Percent
6am to 8:59am	2,579	15.6
9am to 11:59am	2,891	17.5
12 noon to 1:59pm	2,834	17.1
2pm to 4:59pm	2,958	17.9
5pm to 7:59pm	3,811	23.0
8pm to 9:59pm	1,242	7.5
10pm to 5:59am	224	1.4
Total	16,539	100.0

# NDNS: proposed method

- **Take ‘evening’ as time slot**
- **Compare those eating with parents/carers versus others**
- **Categorise food into ‘core’ and ‘non-core’ types – Macdiarmid et al. (2009)**

# Conclusions

- **No perfect solution to defining family meals**
  - each dataset presents its own problems
- **Family meals are complex to define**
- **Relationship to mother's employment**
  - Need to consider multiple factors
- **Family meals are not a 'magic bullet'**
  - Need to consider social change

# The Lady

for elegant women with elegant minds



Monday, 13 May 2013

life > food

## DEATH OF THE DINING TABLE?

*Written by Katy Pearson*

The dining table could become a relic of the past as nearly a third of Brits now confess to eating there only a few times a year.

Research commissioned by shopping site [NetVoucherCodes.co.uk](http://NetVoucherCodes.co.uk), has revealed that just five per cent of people eat every meal at the table, compared with 13% of those who eat at least one meal a day there.

Almost a fifth of people (19%) said they eat one or two meals a week at the dining or kitchen table. Over a quarter, 26%, of those surveyed confessed to eating at the table no less than once or twice a month and nearly a third (30%) admitted to using it just a few times a year.

Four per cent said they never ate any meals at the table whilst three per cent said they didn't even own one.

A spokesperson from [NetVoucherCodes.co.uk](http://NetVoucherCodes.co.uk) said: "I was shocked to find that the number of people who regularly eat their meals at the dining table is relatively small.