IT’S DINNERTIME:
A Report on Low-Income Families’ Efforts to Plan, Shop for and Cook Healthy Meals
Assumptions are rampant about the dining habits of low-income Americans, including that they are frequent consumers of fast food and that they do not eat together often as a family or prioritize healthy eating. Through It’s Dinnertime: A Report on Low-Income Families’ Efforts to Plan, Shop for, and Cook Healthy Meals, we learn that low-income families are cooking dinner at home, mostly from scratch, and are highly interested in making healthy meals.

A gap exists, however, between the healthy eating aspirations of low-income Americans and their ability to consistently prepare nourishing meals for their families. The perceived cost of healthy items is a barrier, which can be overcome through the adoption of strategic shopping and cooking skills, such as those taught by Share Our Strength’s Cooking Matters®.

To gain insights into the cooking and shopping habits of low-income Americans, Share Our Strength enlisted APCO Insight to conduct a national survey of 1,500 low to middle-income families in the United States. The results are eye-opening.

Eight in 10 families make dinner at home at least five times a week. Most of the time, low-income families are cooking dinners at home from scratch. They are using easy-to-prepare packaged foods on other nights.

Low-income families want to make healthy meals, and believe eating healthy is realistic for them, but are struggling to do so. Eighty-five percent of respondents say that eating healthy meals is important to their families, and 78% are interested in learning more about cooking healthy meals that taste good. But there’s a gap between what people aspire to and what they’re able to accomplish: Only 53% of families are accomplishing eating healthy meals at home most days in a typical week.

Families view cost as the primary barrier to healthy eating. Although families are largely satisfied with the variety (61%) and quality (64%) of healthy grocery items available to them, only 30% are satisfied with price.

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Time is a barrier for some, especially families where the food decision maker works full time. This demographic has a significantly lower average number of healthy or made-from-scratch dinners in a typical week.

In a typical week, a low-income family...
A better understanding of the health benefits of frozen and canned fruits and vegetables could put more healthy options within reach for low-income families. Eighty-five percent of families skip healthy purchases at the grocery store because of price and fresh produce is passed over most often. Fresh produce is rated extremely healthy by 81% of respondents, but that rating drops down to 32% when it comes to frozen fruits and vegetables and 12% with canned fruits and vegetables.

Practical information and simple strategies, especially around planning meals and food budgeting, can help low-income families get healthy meals on the table more often. Low-income families that regularly plan meals, write grocery lists and budget for food make healthy meals from scratch more often (5+ times a week) than those who don’t. Unfortunately, 55% of families don’t regularly plan meals before going to the store, and 34% don’t regularly use a written grocery list.

Low-income families are eager for tips and educational tools that will make preparing healthy meals easier and more affordable. One in 2 families are extremely interested in learning more about cooking healthy meals, and 2 in 3 families are interested in how to better budget their money for meals.

Share Our Strength’s Cooking Matters helps families plan, shop for and cook healthy meals with documented success. After Cooking Matters for Adults, the average graduate plans meals ahead of time 55% more often and shops with a grocery list 50% more often. At the grocery store, a Cooking Matters graduate compares prices 38% more often. Graduates are able to make their food money last longer, running out of food 20% less often.

“WE COOK HEALTHY MEALS ON A DAILY BASIS. I JUST WISH IT WAS CHEAPER.” — Survey Respondent

85% of low-income parents say that eating healthy meals is important to their families.
ABOUT COOKING MATTERS

Cooking Matters is helping end childhood hunger by inspiring families to make healthy, affordable food choices. Our programs teach parents and caregivers with limited food budgets to shop for and cook healthy meals.

Cooking Matters is a campaign of Share Our Strength, an organization working to end hunger and poverty.

For more information, visit CookingMatters.org