

Family Meals

Headline

More than six out of ten foreign-born adolescents ages 12 to 17 ate with their families six to seven days a week in 2003, compared with four out of ten adolescents who are native-born with native-born parents. ([See Figure 1](#))

Importance

Family meals can be an important opportunity to develop strong parent-child relationships and family connectedness.¹ As children grow older and become more independent during adolescence, however, they tend to spend less time with the family and eat more meals away from the home. Teens cite reasons such as a desire for autonomy, conflicting schedules, a dislike of the food served, and dissatisfaction with family relations, while parents cite conflicting schedules and being busy.²

Like other forms of parental involvement, research shows a positive relationship between frequent family dinners and positive teen behavioral outcomes. Teens who regularly have meals with their family are less likely to get into fights, think about suicide, smoke, drink, use drugs, and are more likely to have later initiation of sexual activity, and better academic performance than teens who do not.^{3,4} Even after controlling for family connectedness⁵, more frequent family meals have been found to be associated with less substance use, fewer depressive symptoms, and less suicide involvement, and with better grades.⁶

Eating with parents is also an important factor for the nutrition and eating habits of adolescents, with research showing that family meals and parental presence at meals is associated with higher intake of fruits, vegetables, and dairy products.⁷ In addition, family mealtimes may influence whether an adolescent develops disordered eating. One study found that adolescents who reported frequent and structured family meals and a positive atmosphere at family meals were less likely to have disordered eating habits, with the association being stronger for girls.⁸

Trends

In 2003, 42 percent of adolescents ages 12 to 17 ate a meal as a family six to seven days a week, 27 percent ate a meal as a family four to five days a week, and 31 percent ate meals as a family zero to three days a week. ([See Table 1](#)) Trend data are not available.

Among children ages 6 to 11, 56 percent ate a meal as a family six to seven days a week, 25 percent ate a meal as a family 4 to 5 days a week, and 20 percent ate a meal as a family zero to three days a week. ([See Table 2](#)) Trend data are not available.

Differences by Race/Ethnicity

Hispanic adolescents ages 12 to 17 are more likely than non-Hispanic white and non-Hispanic black adolescents to eat meals six to seven days a week together with their families. ([See Figure 2](#)) In 2003, 54 percent of Hispanic adolescents ate meals six to seven days a week with their family, compared with 40 percent of non-Hispanic black adolescents and 39 percent of non-Hispanic white adolescents.

Among children ages 6 to 11, Hispanic children are also more likely than non-Hispanic white and non-Hispanic black children to eat family meals six to seven days a week. In 2003, 66 percent of Hispanic children in this age group ate meals six to seven days a week with their family, compared with 50 percent of non-Hispanic black children and 53 percent of non-Hispanic white children. ([See Table 2](#))

Differences by Nativity

Foreign-born adolescents are more likely than native born adolescents with native born parents to eat family meals together regularly (62 percent versus 40 percent, respectively, in 2003). ([See Figure 1](#))

Differences by Age

Older adolescents are less likely than younger adolescents and children to eat meals six to seven days a week with their family. In 2003, 36 percent of adolescents ages 15 to 17 ate six to seven meals a week with their family, compared with 48 percent of adolescents ages 12 to 14 and 56 percent of children ages 6 to 11. ([See Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#))

Differences by Poverty Level

Adolescents living at less than 100 percent of the poverty level are more likely than others to eat meals six to seven days a week together as a family. Fifty-five percent of those living at 100 percent of the poverty level ate meals six to seven days a week together, compared with 44 percent of those living at 100 to 200 percent of the poverty level and 37 percent of those living at 200 percent or more of the poverty level. ([See Figure 3](#))

Differences by Parental Education

Adolescents whose parents have less than a high school degree are more likely than those with parents who have a high school degree or more than a high school degree to eat meals six to seven days a week with their family (61 percent versus 46 percent and 39 percent, respectively, in 2003). ([See Table 1](#))

State and Local Estimates

None available

International Estimates

None available

National Goals

None

Definition

This indicator is based on the question, “During the past week, on how many days did all the family members who live in the household eat a meal together?”

Data Source

Child Trends’ original analyses of data from the 2003 National Survey of Children’s Health

Raw Data Source

National Survey of Children’s Health
<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/about/major/slaits/nsch.htm>

Next Update

2008

¹ U.S. Council of Economic Advisors. (2000). “Teens and their parents in the 21st century: an examination of trends in teen behavior and the role of parental involvement”. Council of Economic Advisors White Paper. Accessed 8/20/05. http://clinton3.nara.gov/WH/EOP/CEA/html/Teens_Paper_Final.pdf

² Neumark-Sztainer D, Story M, Ackard D, et al. (2000). “The “family meal”: Views of adolescents.” *Journal of Nutrition Education*, 32:329-34.

³ U.S. Council of Economic Advisors. (2000).

⁴ National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. (2003). “The Importance of Family Dinners.” Available at http://www.casacolumbia.org/Absolutenm/articlefiles/Family_Dinners_9_03_03.pdf.

⁵ Family connectedness was measured by the following questions: “How much do you feel your [mother, father] cares about you?” and “Do you feel you can talk to your [mother, father] about your problems?”

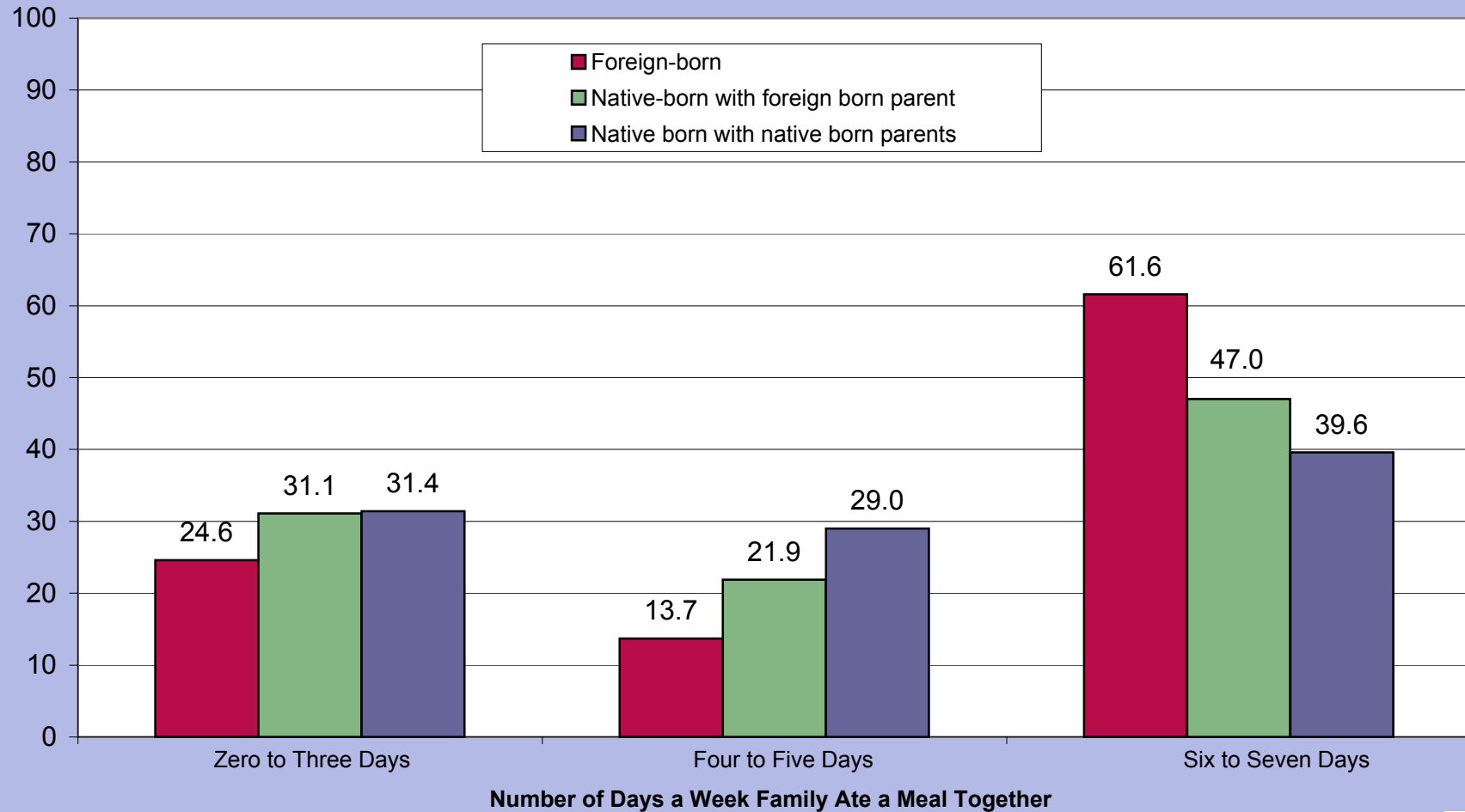
⁶ Eisenberg, Marla E., Neumark-Sztainer, Dianne, and Linda H. Bearinger. (2004). “Correlations Between Family Meals and Psychological Well-being Among Adolescents.” *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 158(8).

⁷ Videon, Tami M., and Manning, Carolyn, K. (2003). “Influences on Adolescent Eating Patterns: The Importance of Family Meals.” *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 32:365-373.

⁸ Neumark-Sztainer, Dianne, Wall, Melanie, Story, Mary, Fulkerson, Jayne A. (2004). "Are Family Meal Patterns Associated with Disordered Eating Behaviors Among Adolescents?" *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 35(5):350-359.

Figure 1

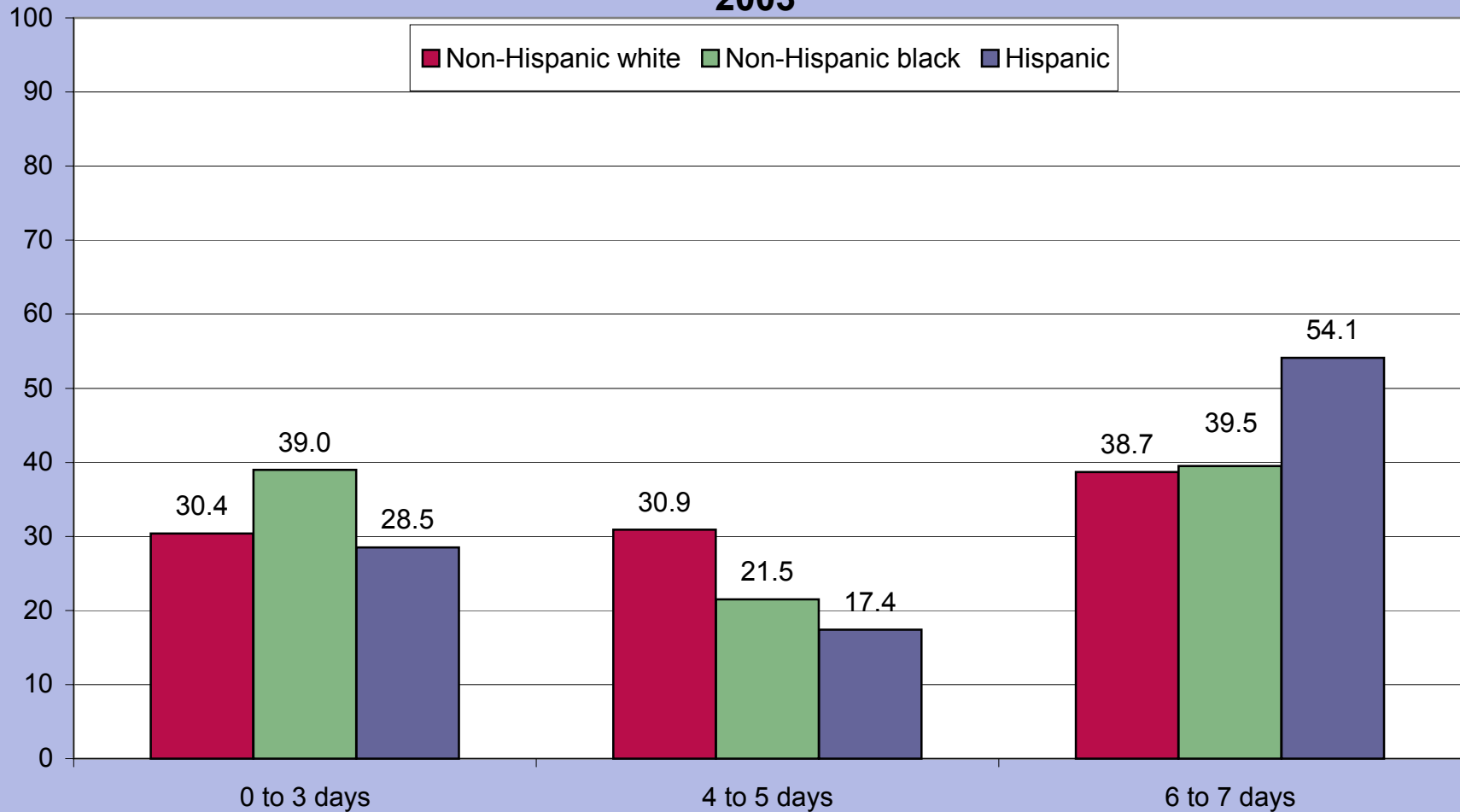
Percentage of Adolescents Ages 12 to 17 who Ate Meals with Their Family, by Nativity and Number of Days Meals Eaten Together, 2003



Source: Child Trends' original analyses of data from the 2003 National Survey of Children's Health.

Figure 2

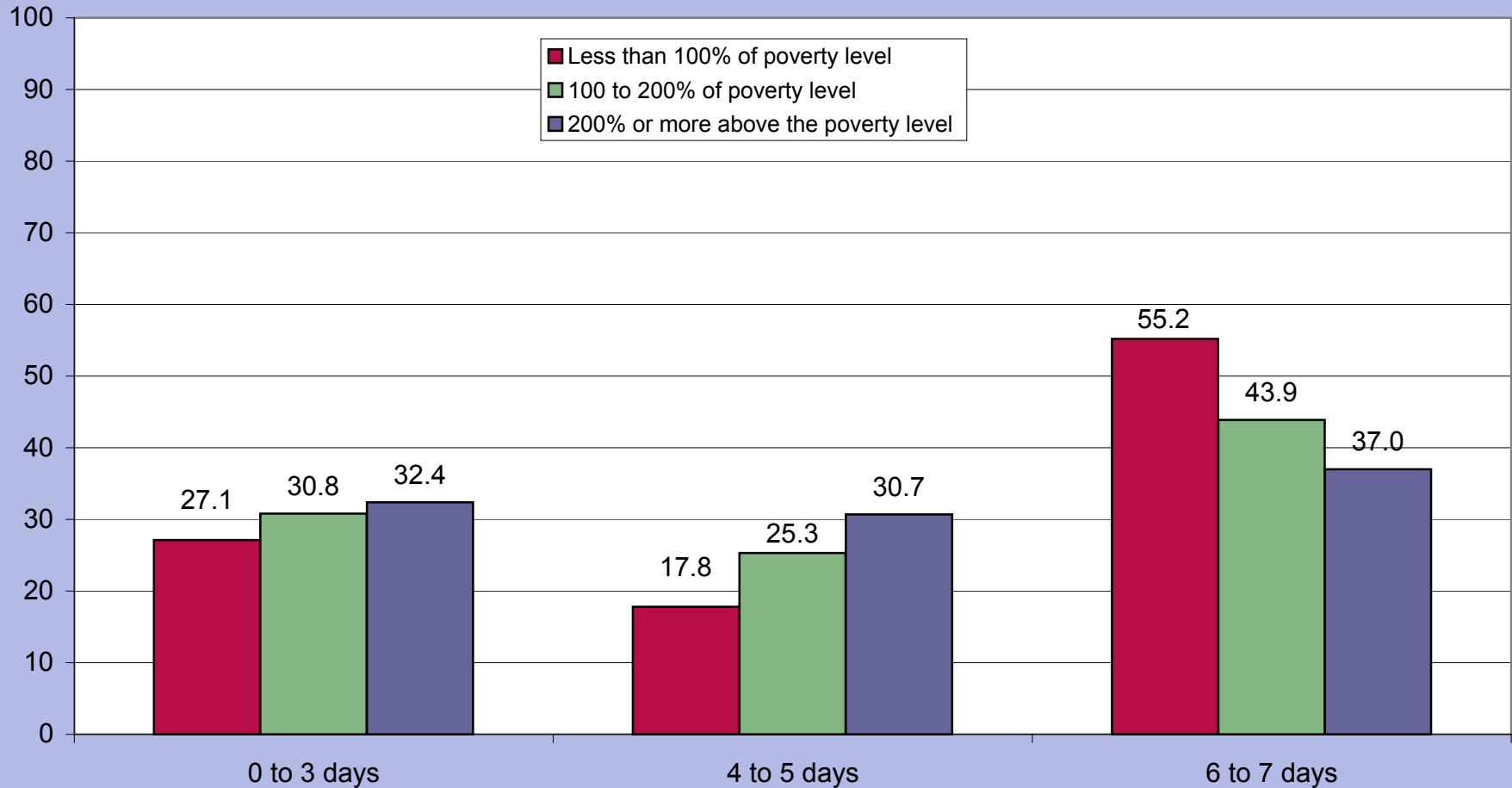
Percentage of Adolescents Ages 12 to 17 who Ate Meals with Their Family, by Race/Ethnicity and Number of Days Meals Eaten Together, 2003



Source: Child Trends' original analyses of data from the 2003 National Survey of Children's Health.

Figure 3

Percentage of Adolescents Ages 12 to 17 who Ate Meals with Their Family, by Poverty Level and Number of Days Meals Eaten Together, 2003



Source: Child Trends' original analyses of data from the 2003 National Survey of Children's Health.



Table 1

Percentage of Adolescents Ages 12 to 17 who Ate Meals with Their Family, by Number of Days Meals Eaten Together, 2003

	0 to 3 days	4 to 5 days	6 to 7 days
Ages 12-17			
Total	30.8	27.0	42.2
Gender			
Male	30.0	27.1	42.9
Female	31.7	26.8	41.5
Age			
12 to 14	26.3	26.1	47.6
15 to 17	35.8	28.0	36.3
Race/Ethnicity			
Non-Hispanic white	30.4	30.9	38.7
Non-Hispanic black	39.0	21.5	39.5
Hispanic	28.5	17.4	54.1
Other	22.2	23.8	54.0
Geographic location			
MSA area	31.7	26.6	41.7
Non-MSA area	27.7	27.1	45.3
Poverty level			
Less than 100% of poverty level	27.1	17.8	55.2
100 to 200% of poverty level	30.8	25.3	43.9
200% or more above the poverty level	32.4	30.7	37.0
Family Structure			
Two biological/adoptive parents	30.2	28.9	40.9
One biological parent/one stepparent	32.6	26.6	40.8
Single mother	32.1	24.1	43.9
Parental Education			
Less than a high school degree	24.5	15.0	60.5
High school degree	30.5	23.2	46.3
More than a high school degree	31.6	29.9	38.5
Nativity			
Foreign-born	24.6	13.7	61.6
Native-born with foreign born parent	31.1	21.9	47.0
Native born with native born parents	31.4	29.0	39.6

Source: Child Trends' original analyses of data from the 2003 National Survey of Children's Health.



Table 2

Percentage of Children Ages 6 to 11 who Ate Meals with Their Family, by Number of Days Meals Eaten Together, 2003

	0 to 3 days	4 to 5 days	6 to 7 days
Ages 6-11			
Total	19.9	24.5	55.5
Male	19.6	23.9	56.6
Female	20.3	25.3	54.4
Race/Ethnicity			
Non-Hispanic white	19.0	28.5	52.6
Non-Hispanic black	27.5	22.1	50.4
Hispanic	19.2	15.1	65.7
Other	16.3	21.2	62.5
Geographic location			
MSA area	20.2	24.4	55.3
Non-MSA area	18.9	23.9	57.2
Poverty level			
Less than 100% of poverty level	18.3	16.1	65.6
100 to 200% of poverty level	20.1	20.7	59.2
200% or more above the poverty level	20.5	29.7	49.9
Family Structure			
Two biological/adoptive parents	20.6	25.7	53.7
One biological parent/one stepparent	19.6	27.1	53.2
Single mother	19.6	21.0	59.4
Parental Education			
Less than a high school degree	19.6	12.1	68.3
High school degree	19.3	21.1	59.7
More than a high school degree	20.2	27.5	52.3
Nativity			
Foreign-born	15.8	13.5	70.7
Native-born with foreign born parent	22.2	17.1	60.7
Native born with native born parents	20.0	27.3	52.7

Source: Child Trends' original analyses of data from the 2003 National Survey of Children's Health.

