

Time Poverty Thresholds

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Presentation at the 29th annual International Association for Time Use Research conference
Washington, DC, October 17-19, 2007

The American Time-Use Survey (ATUS) measures the amounts of time people spend engaging in market work, unpaid work, personal care, and leisure. Data are currently available for 2003-06. In addition, data from the Food & Eating Module for 2006 that have been developed by the Economic Research Service (ERS) will be available within the next several months. The Module data, together with the base ATUS data, will be valuable to research on food assistance; grocery shopping behavior; and obesity.

To answer the question on whether food assistance recipients are more time poor than non-recipients, however, a measure of time pressure is needed. Are some segments of the population more time poor than others, such as working individuals versus non-working individuals and single versus non-single parents, and does their relative ability to buy time affect their well-being? Does time poverty affect individuals' meal preparation, eating behavior, activity level/exercise behavior, and BMI (body mass index) and do they have adequate time to pursue educational opportunities and apply for food stamps? These are all important questions for food assistance programs. Time poverty thresholds will be also useful in obesity research for analyzing BMIs across all income levels.

We are currently developing thresholds of time poverty by family composition and income level—just as the income poverty thresholds are defined—looking to the literature on time pressure and to standard measures of well-being such as the Orshansky income poverty thresholds. Concepts such as the absolute number of adult hours available to a family, the nature of nonmarket activities (necessary time activities such as sleeping and eating; committed time activities such as child care; discretionary time activities; and the ability to perform certain activities simultaneously), and time flexibility will be used. Also used will be the concept of buying time. We are focusing on identifying and estimating average discretionary time for various household types by demographic characteristics of the ATUS respondent.

Once time poverty thresholds have been developed, estimates can be made on the number of households or persons in time poverty, and in particular, the extent of time poverty across low-income households. These estimates along with the Module data will offer a unique opportunity to answer important research questions in the areas of time constraints and food assistance programs, and time constraints and obesity.

Websites

ERS website on Food, Nutrition, and Time Use: www.ers.usda.gov/emphases/healthy/atus/

BLS website on ATUS: www.bls.gov/tus/

References

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