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Background

For over half a century, the USDA has made available to the public estimates of costs associated with raising children in America, including those specifically related to food expenditures. These estimates are intended to provide critical information needed to develop guidelines for state child support and foster care programs, as well as educational programs geared to families. The estimates are also useful for researchers and other stakeholders interested in understanding the allocation of financial resources within a household and how they change over time and are influenced by factors such as family structure and location of residence. The most recent report on this topic was published in August 2014 and is the topic of this “Reports from the Agencies.” It is noteworthy that although we focus here on expenditures related to food, those related to housing, transportation, clothing, health care, and child care/education are also described in this publication, which is considered to be the most comprehensive source of information on household expenditures related to children available at the national level.

Methods Summary

Data used to determine estimated expenditures on children were gleaned from the interview portion of the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ 2005–2006 Consumer Expenditure Survey, which sampled a total of 11,800 husband-wife and 3350 single-parent households, respectively, with at least 1 child between birth and age 17 y. Most single-parent households were headed by a woman. Food expenses included those related to food and nonalcoholic beverages purchased at grocery, convenience, and specialty stores and included purchases made under the auspices of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). In addition, costs associated with dining at restaurants and schools were eligible for inclusion in the estimates. Although this survey was

conducted between 2005 and 2006, costs were updated to reflect 2013 dollars.

Multivariate analyses were used to estimate household and child-specific expenditures, controlling for income level, family size, and age of the younger child; and households with 2 children were selected as the standard. In addition, estimates were categorized on the basis of income level and region. For husband-wife families, 3 income groups were identified, whereas for single-parent families only 2 income groups were considered. To reflect the fact that a family’s spending patterns can differ by its children’s ages, child age was split into 6 groups.

Major Findings Related to Food Expenditures

There were several major themes related to the results of the food component of this study. These are summarized below.

- Families with greater household income spend more money feeding their children than do lower-income families. For instance, the estimated expenditures allotted to feeding a child from birth to 17 y of age are \$32,340 and \$49,590 for husband-wife households with annual incomes of <\$61,530 and >\$106,540, respectively. This trend was similar for single-parent families.
- Relatively speaking, feeding children represents one of the largest expenses incurred by today’s families. For husband-wife households, food is the second largest expense (18% of total expenditures) for a child for families in the lowest income group and the third largest expense (16% of total expenditures) in middle-income groups. This trend was also observed for single-parent families.
- Children’s food-related expenses increase with age. On both absolute and relative scales, families spend more to feed their children as they grow older. Current estimates point to costs between \$1210 and \$1980 annually to feed a 1-y-old, whereas this estimate increases to between \$2210 and \$3310 at 16 y of age. This finding should not be surprising, because older children must consume more food than younger children to meet their basic nutritional needs.
- Expenses related to feeding American children are highest in the urban Northeast and lowest in rural areas. Whereas estimates suggest that feeding a child from birth until he or she is 17 y old costs ~\$36,000 in rural areas of the United States, this number exceeds \$51,000 in metropolitan regions of northeastern states (e.g., Connecticut, Maine).
- Current costs associated with feeding children are relatively less than they were in 1960. Due to advances in agricultural practices over the past 50 y, today’s families spend a lower percentage of their household income

on feeding children. Roughly speaking and adjusting for the changing dollar, middle-income, husband-wife families spent 24% (\$47,654) of their income on children's food in 1960, whereas today's comparable families spend 14% (\$39,254) between birth and 17 y of age.

For More Information

A free online version of this report can be found at http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/sites/default/files/expenditures_on_children_by_families/crc2013.pdf. Information related to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Consumer Expenditure Surveys is available at <http://www.bls.gov/cex/home.htm>.