



It's never been cheaper, but home cooking has fallen off the menu

Our love affair with processed food is behind an obesity epidemic and it is a problem that even money cannot solve

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Despite the efforts of the nation's favourite TV chefs, from Delia to Jamie, Nigella to Nadiya, home cooking has been in decline for decades, even though it is getting cheaper.

The cost of ingredients has fallen considerably more than that of ready-to-eat meals, according to a study by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, but that has not encouraged people to cook from scratch.

The findings go to the heart of the obesity debate and suggest that trying to price consumers out of eating processed food will have little effect.

The study, "A structural analysis of the decline of home-cooked food", which was due to be presented at this month's now cancelled Royal Economic Society annual conference, suggests that a big increase in the number of women entering the workplace between 1980 and 2000 is the main reason.

In the UK, almost two-thirds of the average household's food budget was spent on raw ingredients in 1980 but by 2000 it was less than a third, broadly similar to today. Over the same period, the average family's expenditure on prepared food rose from 26% to 44%, while spending on eating out almost tripled, from 4.7% to 15%.

Meanwhile, the proportion of women in the labour market rose from 55% to 85%. The average weekly hours of a working woman increased from about 22 to 33 hours.

The economists conclude that time spent cooking has become more costly in terms of forgone earnings, even though the price of raw ingredients fell by almost 35%, compared with a 25% fall for prepared food.

Rachel Griffith, research director at the Institute for Fiscal Studies and one of the study's authors, said that the answer to tackling obesity lay in analysing the impact of food advertising and encouraging schools to teach cooking.

The last recession, in 2008, led to a rise in home cooking. Griffith predicted Covid-19 might have a similar effect. "People got healthier during the last recession. I'm sure we'll see that happen again."

And, of course, more men at the kitchen stove would help too!

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