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PRESERVATION

The Family Dinner, Alive and Well

By Karlyn Bowman

Dan Quayle and Al Gore found something to agree on recently — a concern about family dinners.

The former Vice President lamented that family life was in decline. "We find ourselves looking forward to absurd developments like microwave ovens in our cars," he said. "That means not as many dinners together as a family."

The current Vice President, meanwhile, expressed worry about the "time deficit in family life... dinner tables that sit empty when working parents do not have the time to share a meal with their children."

Neither candidate's remarks sound like much of a rallying cry for winning the highest office in the land. Nor is it obvious what, if anything, the Federal Government should do about Americans' dinner plans. But to give the candidates their due, they talk about things that concern people. A successful society cares deeply about children, and family dinners provide sustenance of more than the nutritional kind. But is it really true that the family dinner is at risk?

Vice President Gore's remarks came on the heels of a report by the Council of Economic Advisers that documented a substantial increase from 1969 to 1999 in the number of hours parents were employed. Nearly all of the rise came from increases in women's work outside the home. According to the council, the expansion in mothers' paid work combined with the shift to single-parent households resulted in parents having on average 22 fewer hours a week to spend with their children. Smaller families and higher household incomes mitigate to some extent more hours on the job.

The report, however, doesn't tell us how people spend the rest of their time. For this we must rely on other data, including time diaries and public opinion surveys. These studies suggest that there may be less to the fabled time crunch than meets the eye, and that families are quite capable of deciding on their own what's important. Moreover, one of their priorities appears to be dinner with the family.

John Robinson, a professor of sociology at the University of Maryland, and Geoffrey Godbey, a professor of leisure studies at Penn State, document some dramatic changes in daily activities in the detailed diary studies they have conducted over the past 30 years. For example, women spend substantially less time on housework (even though houses are getting bigger). Mr. Robinson and Mr. Godbey offer the surprising conclusion that after taking into account all work activities (paid job, housework, child care, shopping and personal care), most people actually have more free time than they did 30 years ago.

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Roper Starch Worldwide, a leading survey research firm, has been asking people for a quarter-century how they use their time. Here is one question, first asked in 1978: "We hear a lot about people being caught in the rat race. That is, they are so busy trying to keep up at their job, or keep the household running that they really don't have much time to enjoy life. Do you feel you personally are in the rat race?" That year, 34 percent said they were harried; 57 percent did

Al Gore and Dan Quayle see a problem where none exists.

not. Seventeen years later, the responses were virtually identical. Perhaps because people hear so much from politicians and the media about the time deficit, however, slightly more than 60 percent in both years said they knew someone in the rat race.

Nor has Roper Starch found much data to support another time-crunch myth, increased commuting times. For Americans who travel any distance to work, the median commute in Roper Starch data for 1998 was 17.1 minutes, up slightly from 15 minutes in 1980. Forty-two percent in 1998 said their commute took 15 minutes or less, 13 percent 16 to 20 minutes, and about a third, 21 minutes or more. Three percent say their commute is an hour or more. Samsung Corporation's decision to introduce a car with a microwave next year probably says more about our desire to be technologically cutting-edge than it does about a lack of family time.

Indeed, surveys show that families still eat dinner together. In 1990, CBS News and The New York Times asked parents whether they usually had family dinners when they were about the age of their children. About 85 percent said they did. People were then asked a specific question about what they do today. Slightly more than two-thirds said their family ate dinner together five, six or seven evenings in the past week and an additional 16 percent said they ate together three or four evenings a week.

A 1997 survey from the Pew Research Center confirms this picture of family togetherness: 80 percent of mothers with children under the age of 18 said they "usually" ate dinner together. Ninety-two percent said this was the situation when they were growing up. This summer, NBC News and The Wall Street Journal found that 69 percent of households with children had a family dinner five nights a week or more.

In a 1995 Better Homes and Gardens/Food Market Institute survey, just 23 percent strongly agreed that "it's getting more difficult for our family to schedule meal times together." Interestingly, 31 percent felt that "most families" had a difficult time scheduling meals together. But asking people about what they themselves do is more reliable than asking them about what most families do, because perceptions of the world at large are likely to be influenced by the media.

The family dinner isn't endangered, but our eating habits have changed. People are dining out more. In a 1997 Reader's Digest survey, 62 percent of people over age 30 said they ate out or ordered takeout food at least once a week. Fewer than 20 percent said they dined out or ordered takeout that often when they were growing up. Mr. Robinson and Mr. Godbey suggest that the trend toward eating out may have peaked, because people are now choosing to

spend more time at home.

Even dining arrangements are being adapted to encourage more time together. Better Homes and Gardens, which began publishing a "home of the year" issue in the late 1970's, gave up a formal dining room in 1998 to accommodate a larger kitchen-family area. Formal dining rooms may be disappearing, but family dinners are not.

In a recent profile, Tina Brown, the editor of *Talk* magazine and certainly one of the busiest women around, made a point of telling her interviewer that she went home to have dinner with her children every day at 6, returning to the office at 9:30 and working until midnight. This may not be a universal pattern among contemporary workaholics, but it shows that commitment to family suppers is still strong.

Now, if we could just get the telemarketers not to call during dinner. □

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Too Many Bad-Air Days

By Angus King
and Ned Sullivan

The record high temperatures that blistered much of the East this summer have produced the most severe air pollution of the decade and worsened a long-simmering dispute about how to solve the problem of ground-level ozone.

Ozone pollution, or smog, is formed when heat and sunlight combine with emissions from automobiles, power plants and other combustion sources. As temperatures rise, the problem gets worse, increasing the suffering of those with asthma and other respiratory problems, and even affecting healthy people.

In 1990, Congress overhauled the Clean Air Act, first enacted almost three decades ago, to include new requirements intended to reduce ozone pollution. Some rules apply to states individually and carry costly sanctions, like the loss of Federal highway funds, for failure to comply. Other standards require collaboration among states when pollution is transported by wind across state boundaries.

In places like New York and Maine, gaining public support for local emissions controls has been difficult, be-

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cause virtually every state in the Northeast can point to an upwind neighbor as the source of at least a portion of its bad air. While local controls have resulted in steady improvement in air quality in some Eastern states, plumes of polluted air continue to billow in from the Ohio River Valley, particularly from coal-fired utilities.

In 1977, Congress exempted these power plants, already old at the time, from stringent controls of the Clean Air Act in the expectation that they would soon be retired, and expensive antipollution equipment wouldn't be

Congress must curb the Midwest's smog exports.

worth the cost. Well, more than 20 years later, they're still running and everyone downwind — whether in New York City or Castine, Me. — is paying the price. Many plants have extra tall stacks, and prevailing winds blow the bad air as far away as the Eastern seaboard.

The Midwestern utilities play down the idea that pollution can be transported, but everyone who watches the news knows our weather moves from west to east. At the same time, experts have concluded that ozone is harmful at even low levels. The Environmental Protection Agency has established tougher standards, even as periodic peaks in temperature have continued

to cause violations of the old health threshold.

In a Herculean attempt to overcome the inter-regional dispute, environmental chiefs from the Great Lakes states to Florida and Maine worked together to figure out what might solve the problem. Carol Browner, Administrator of the E.P.A., accepted the group's recommendations and took seriously a petition by the Northeastern states aimed at pushing the agency to help curb the regional pollution problem. She issued tough new regulations that imposed reduction requirements on 22 states from the Midwest well up into New England, based on their contribution to regional ozone.

Sadly, the once hopeful process has now fallen victim to the same inter-regional forces. A coalition of Midwest utilities persuaded a two-judge panel in the District of Columbia Circuit Court of Appeals to throw out Ms. Browner's new ozone rule and to put the new requirements on hold in the 22 states. And Michigan and Ohio Congressmen are trying to prohibit the E.P.A. from acting on the Northeast's petition.

But Congress should level the playing field, requiring all sources east of the Mississippi River that are contributing to the regional ozone problem to reduce their emissions. Congress should also impose the same tough emission standards on old coal-fired power plants that the new generation of cleaner-burning electric plants must meet.

As we approach the 30th anniversary of the original Clean Air Act, Congress should comply with the law's original intent: to insure that all Americans have clean, healthful air. □

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