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# A Note on Maintenance of Ethnic Origin Diet and Healthy Eating in *Understanding Society*

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# **A note on maintenance of ethnic origin diet and healthy eating in**

## ***Understanding Society***

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### **Abstract**

In this note we take a first look at the extent to which ethnic minorities in the UK maintain or diverge from the diet associated with their country of origin; and whether those who maintain their ethnic origin diet eat more or less healthily. We find that immigrants are more likely to eat food of ethnic origins than minority group members born in the UK. Those of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnicity are more likely than other minority groups to eat food of ethnic origin whether immigrant or UK-born. UK born minorities who eat ethnic origin food less often also eat fruits and vegetables less often. Thus maintenance of an ethnic origin diet appears to be associated with healthier eating patterns.

**Key words:** ethnicity, diet, healthy eating

**JEL classification:** J15; I18; Z13;

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## **A note on maintenance of ethnic origin diet and healthy eating in *Understanding Society***

Accumulating evidence suggests that fruit and vegetable intake plays a protective role against major diseases (Joshi-pura et al. 2001; He et al. 2006). Accordingly, increasing consumption of fruit and vegetables in the general population has been one of the major goals of health promotion programmes across the globe (World Health Organization 2002). Demographic factors such as age, socioeconomic status, and immigration status have long been known to shape dietary choices, including fruit and vegetable intake. One striking finding consistently demonstrated by epidemiologic studies conducted with different immigrant groups is that immigrants tend to develop the chronic disease patterns of their new host country (Ziegler et al. 1993; Sundquist and Winkleby 1999). Changes in immigrants' dietary patterns have been identified as one factor responsible for this shift (Satia-Abouta et al. 2002).

In this article, we ask the following questions capitalizing on an innovative suite of questions asked of *Understanding Society*'s extra five minutes sample (McFall 2012):

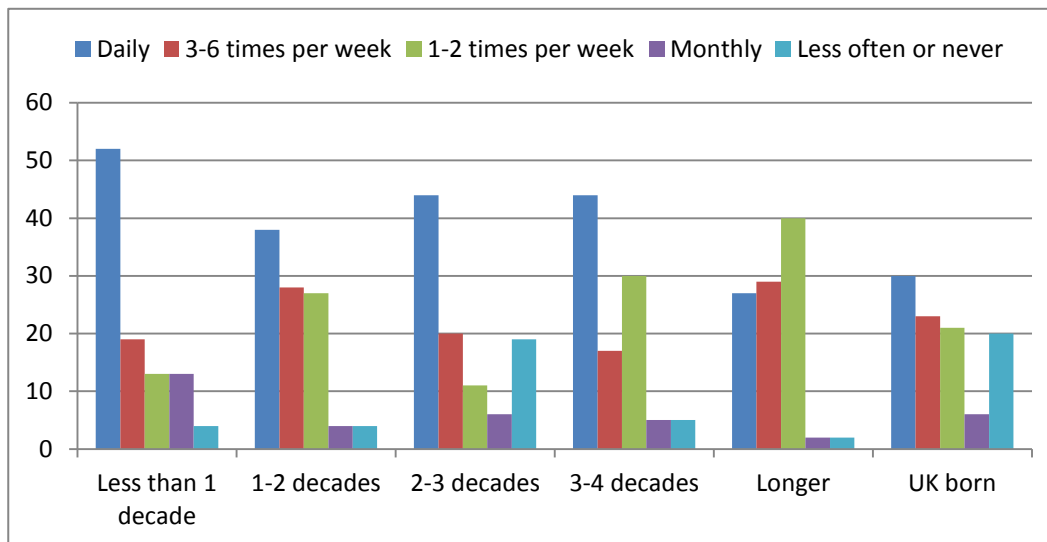
1. Do the eating patterns of members of ethnic minorities vary as a function of length of residence in the UK?
2. Do members of ethnic minority groups who maintain their ethnic origin diet eat more healthily, that is, do they consume more fruits and vegetables, compared to those who consume food of ethnic origin to a lesser extent?

To answer these questions, we turned to Wave 2 (2011-2012) of *Understanding Society*, which includes items designed to assess fruit and vegetable intake as well as eating patterns

of members of ethnic minorities. We exploit the large numbers of ethnic minorities from both the immigrant and subsequent generations whose coverage is boosted in the survey. Percentages are weighted to represent their distribution in the overall UK population.

We first examined the extent to which minority group members maintained their ethnic origin diet and whether this showed variation as a function of how long they have been living in the UK. As shown in Figure 1, although across time in the UK, there is a declining trend in maintaining ethnic origin diet, these differences were not significantly significant. However, ethnic minority members born in the UK reported consuming food of ethnic origin significantly less frequently than immigrant (or non UK-born ethnic minorities?) minorities as a whole.

**Figure 1. Frequency (in percentages) of eating food of ethnic origin by length of residence in the UK, ethnic minority group members only**



Of course, it would be wrong to assume that there is one pattern that applies to all minority groups when it comes to maintenance of ethnic origin diet. We also examined our question separately by ethnic group. As shown in Table 1 there were some differences in the extent to

which food of ethnic origin was maintained, controlling for whether born in the UK or not. For example, in the immigrant generation, Chinese, Caribbean, Black African and those of mixed ethnicity were significantly less likely than Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi respondents to eat food of ethnic origin every day; and the British born or second generation Caribbeans were again significantly less likely than all three South Asian groups to eat food of ethnic origin daily.

**Table 1. Frequency (in percentages) of eating food of ethnic origin by ethnic group**

		Daily	3-6 times per week	1-2 times per week	Less than once a week but once a month	Less often or never	Total (N)
Immigrant generation	Bangladeshi	67	20	8	3	1	100 (404)
	Indian	64	21	9	3	3	100 (587)
	Pakistani	61	29	7	1	2	100 (418)
	Chinese	42	41	10	5	2	100 (126)
	Black African	30	30	22	10	8	100 (527)
	Caribbean	22	27	24	14	13	100 (273)
	Mixed groups	24	28	21	10	17	100 (115)
British born	Bangladeshi	52	21	12	0	15	100 (155)
	Indian	32	25	13	5	25	100 (229)
	Pakistani	33	27	8	5	27	100 (246)
	Chinese	14	9	50	9	17	100 (25)*
	Black African	17	24	11	10	37	100 (91)
	Caribbean	12	22	26	14	27	100 (279)
	Mixed groups	36	28	12	6	18	100 (258)

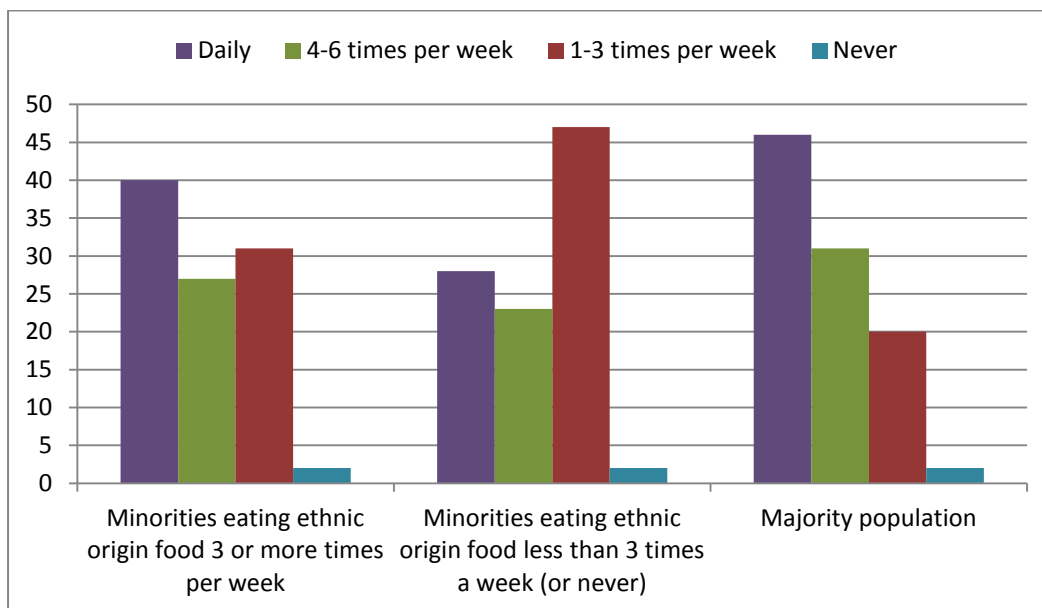
\*Note: the small sample size for this group invites caution in interpretation.

We next examined how members of ethnic minorities born in the UK versus those who migrated from elsewhere compared in terms of their fruit and vegetable consumption, focusing on whether they reported eating at least 1 fruit per day or 1 vegetable per day (the most frequent consumption option provided in the survey) (compared to less frequently). We found that while maintenance of ethnic origin diet did not make a difference for fruit and

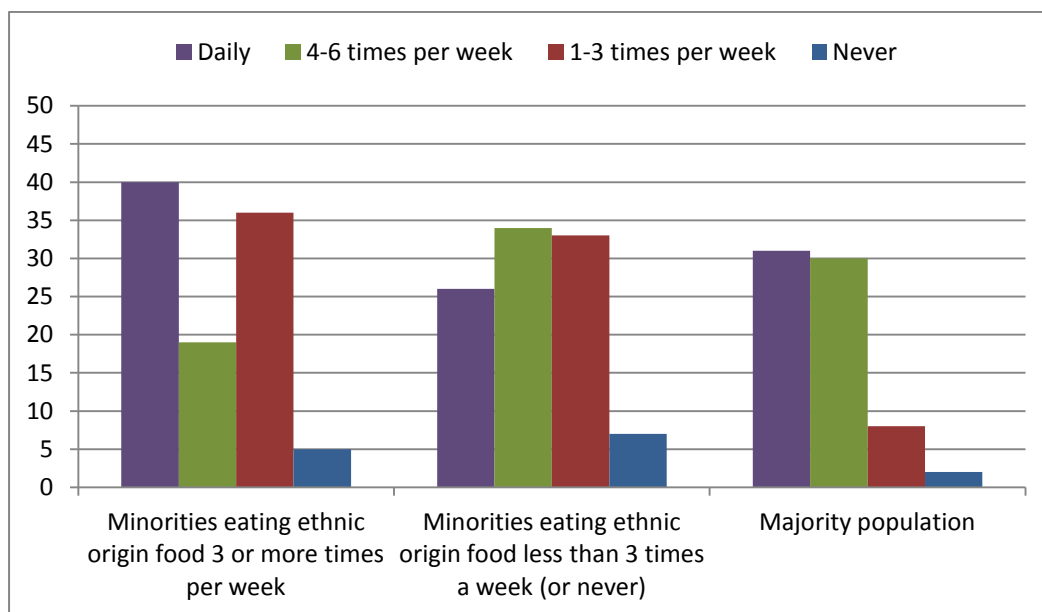
vegetable consumption among immigrants, consuming food of ethnic origin at least three times per week was associated with being one and a half times as likely to consume daily fruit or vegetables daily among the UK-born ethnic minority members. Thus, holding onto traditional ways of eating by the UK-born members of ethnic minorities is associated with a higher intake of vegetables and fruits.

Finally, we explored differences between the UK born ethnic minority members and members of the majority group in fruit and vegetable intake, maintaining the division between ethnic minority members who consume food of ethnic origin food three or more times per week versus those that consume food of ethnic origin less frequently or never. As shown in Figure 2 for vegetable intake (the same pattern applies for fruit intake, shown in Figure 3), those who move away from “traditional” eating patterns tend to adopt less healthy eating habits than is typical within the population as a whole. Majority group members are slightly more likely to eat fruit and vegetables daily.

**Figure 2. Vegetable consumption (in percentages) among UK born members of ethnic minorities and majority group**



**Figure 3. Fruit consumption (in percentages) among UK born members of ethnic minorities and majority group**



Maintenance of original ethnic food among members of ethnic groups has typically been studied in relation to endorsement of ethnic identity (Jamal 1996; Romo and Gil 2012), rather than how it might shape healthy or unhealthy eating patterns. *Understanding Society* provides us with unique ways of examining the interplay between migrant status, maintenance of original ethnic diet and healthy eating. Furthermore, it highlights maintenance of original food habits as a potential strategy to promote healthy eating among certain immigrant groups.

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