



APRIL 2020

## Meal Appeal: Patterns Of Expenditures On Food Away From Home

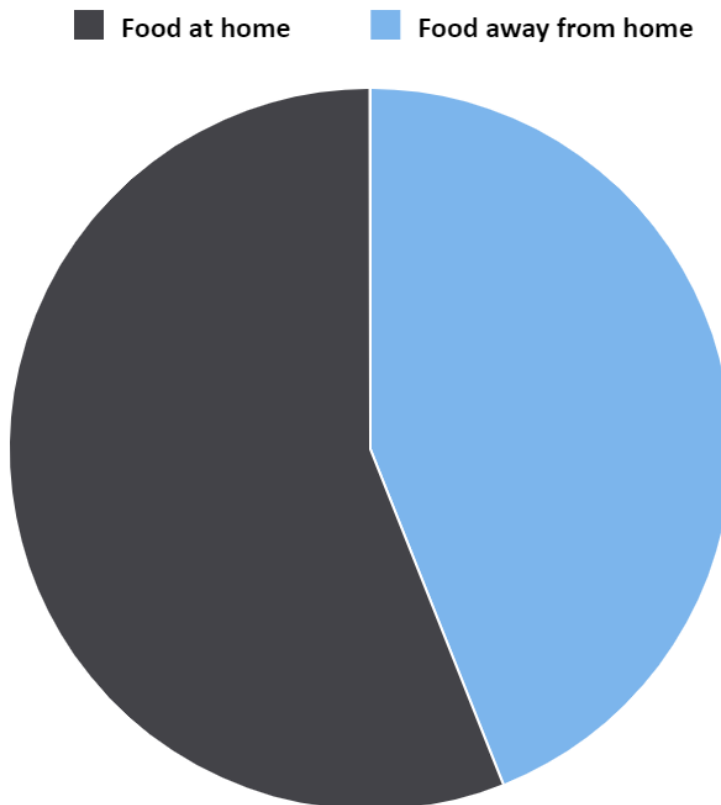
**Geoffrey D. Paulin**

Dining out is an activity many Americans enjoy. Whether for social contact or convenience, purchasing food away from home (such as meals or snacks from restaurants, vending machines, employer cafeterias, or other venues) is a routine and seemingly unremarkable occurrence. But, on closer examination, there are interesting patterns to these expenditures. This Spotlight on Statistics provides valuable data for you to digest.

## In 2018, 44 percent of all food spending was on food away from home

In 2018, the average consumer unit (similar to a household) spent nearly half of its food dollars on food away from home.

### Allocation of food dollars in 2018



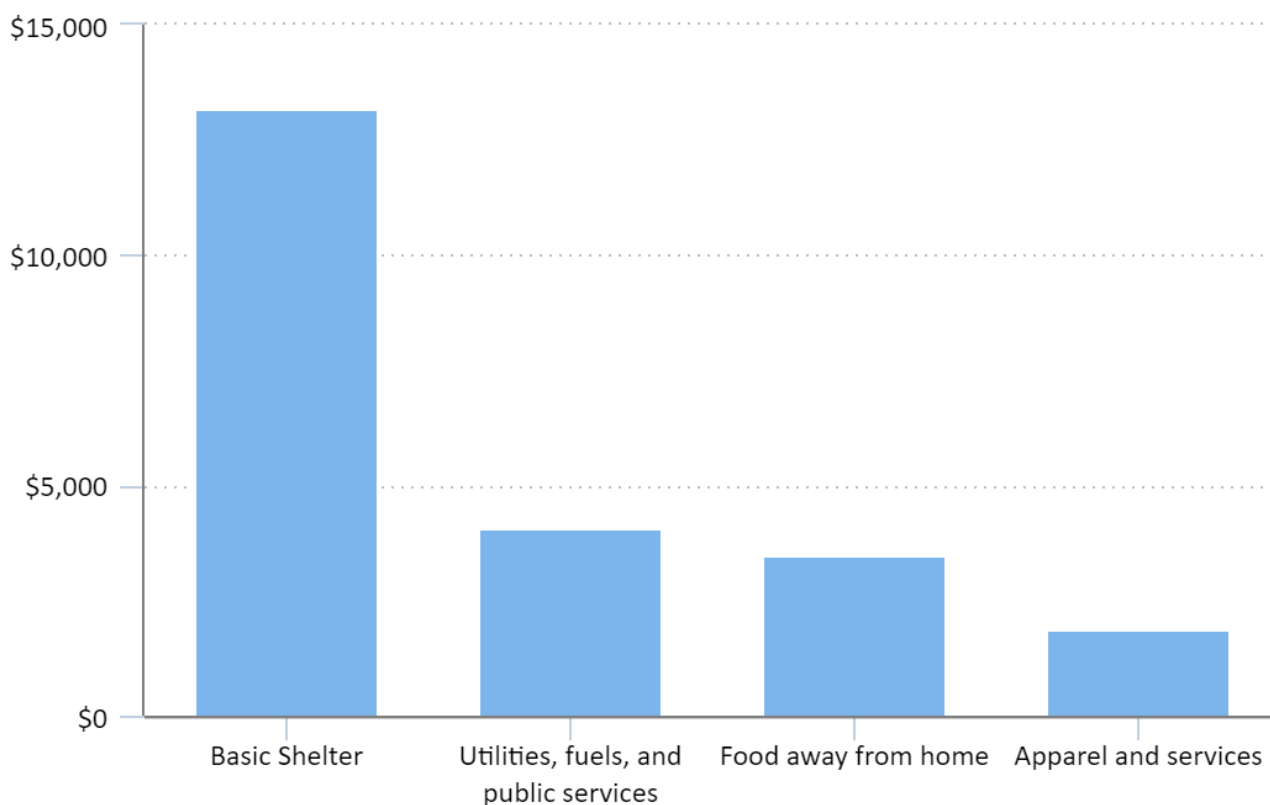
Hover over chart to view data.  
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



## Consumers spent \$3,459 on food away from home

The average consumer unit spent \$3,459 in 2018 (or about \$67 per week) on food away from home. To put this in perspective, that is about one-fourth the amount spent on basic shelter (mortgage payments, including principal, interest, and other charges; maintenance and repairs; property taxes; and rent). It is somewhat less than the amount spent on utilities, fuels, and public services. Spending on food away from home is almost twice the amount spent on apparel and services.

Consumer expenditures, selected categories, 2018



Hover over chart to view data.

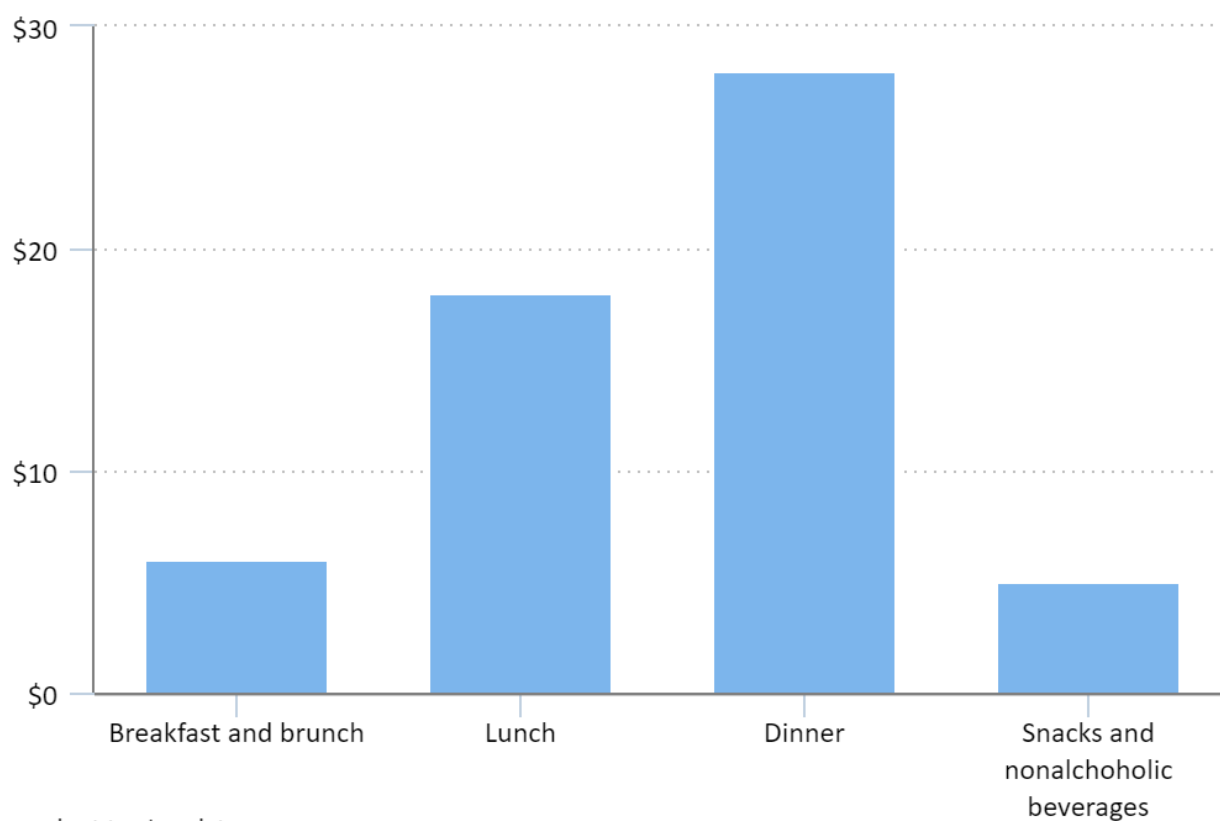
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



## Spending on dinner away from home was more than breakfast and brunch and lunch combined

It is often said that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. However, the highest average weekly expenditures are for dinner. In 2018, the average consumer unit spent almost five times as much each week (more than \$28) on dinner away from home than on breakfast and brunch (less than \$6 per week). In fact, spending on dinner away from home was about the same amount as the combined spending for breakfast and brunch, lunch, and snacks and nonalcoholic beverages.

**Average weekly expenditures on food away from home in 2018, by meal type, all respondents**



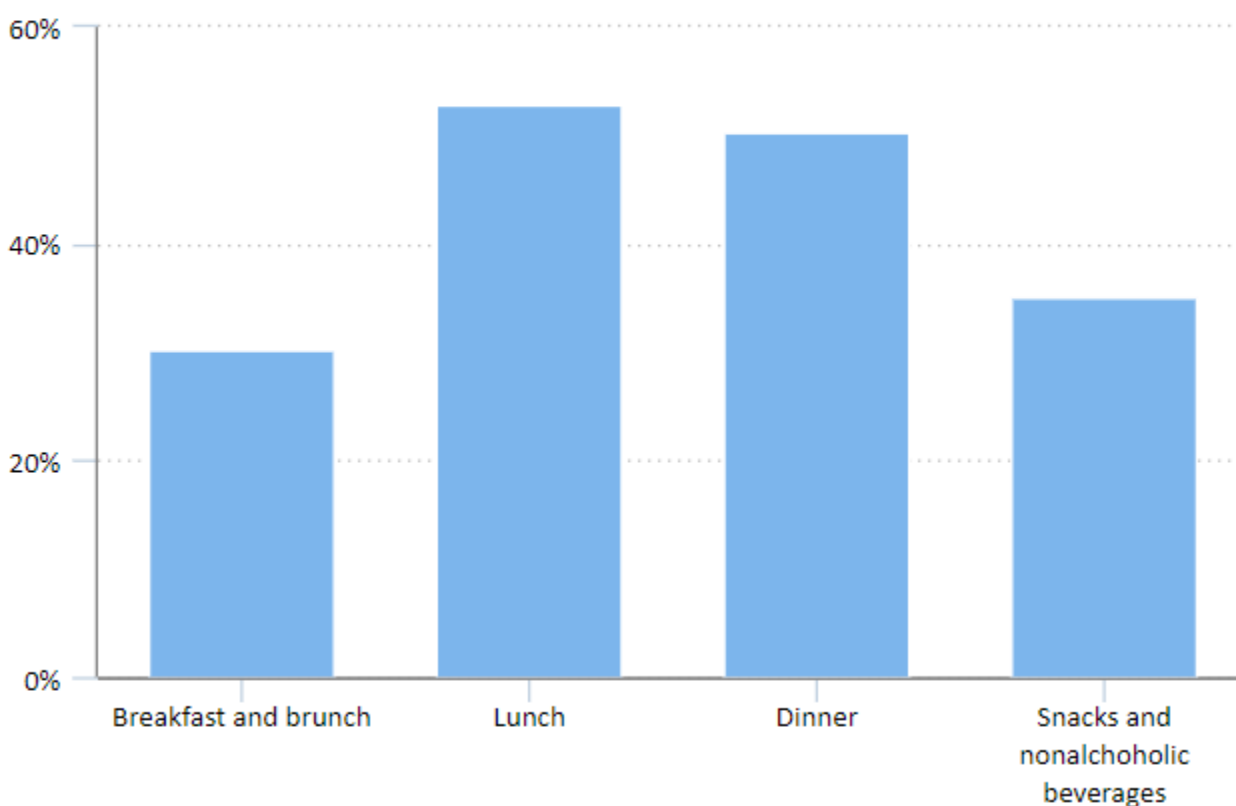
Hover over chart to view data.  
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



## Consumers purchased lunch away from home more frequently than dinner

Dinner comes in second in terms of frequency of reporting meals away from home. While exactly half (50 percent) of consumer units reported expenditures in a given week for dinner away from home, more than half (53 percent) reported expenditures for lunch away from home. About one-third reported expenditures for snacks and nonalcoholic beverages (35 percent) or breakfast and brunch (30 percent).

**Percent of respondents who purchased food away from home in 2018, by meal type**



Hover over chart to view data.

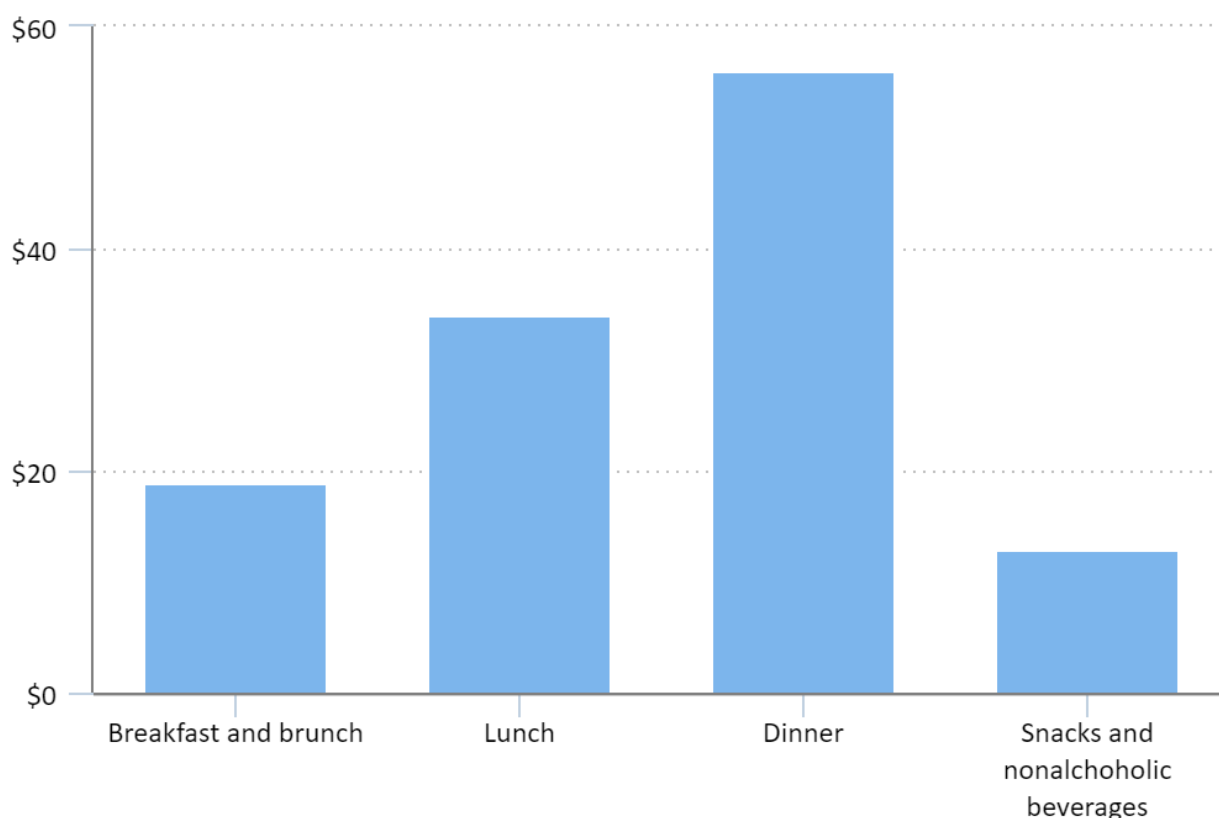
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



## Dinner is more expensive than other meals

By themselves, the previous charts do not tell the whole story. For example, the average expenditure includes positive values for those who purchased, and \$0 values for those who did not. So, for example, if “everyone” buys lunch, and spends \$50, the average is \$50, and the percent reporting is 100. However, suppose that only half of “everyone” buys dinner, and those who do all spend \$100. The average expenditures will still be \$50. This means dinner is twice as expensive but half as frequent. So does the average spent by those who purchase dinner show a different pattern than in the previous graphs? Perhaps surprisingly, it does not. As shown in the first graph, dinner is the most expensive meal (\$56 for those who purchase). Lagging behind are lunch (\$34), breakfast and brunch (\$19), and snacks and nonalcoholic beverages (\$13).

**Average weekly expenditures for respondents who purchased food away from home in 2018, by meal type**



Hover over chart to view data.

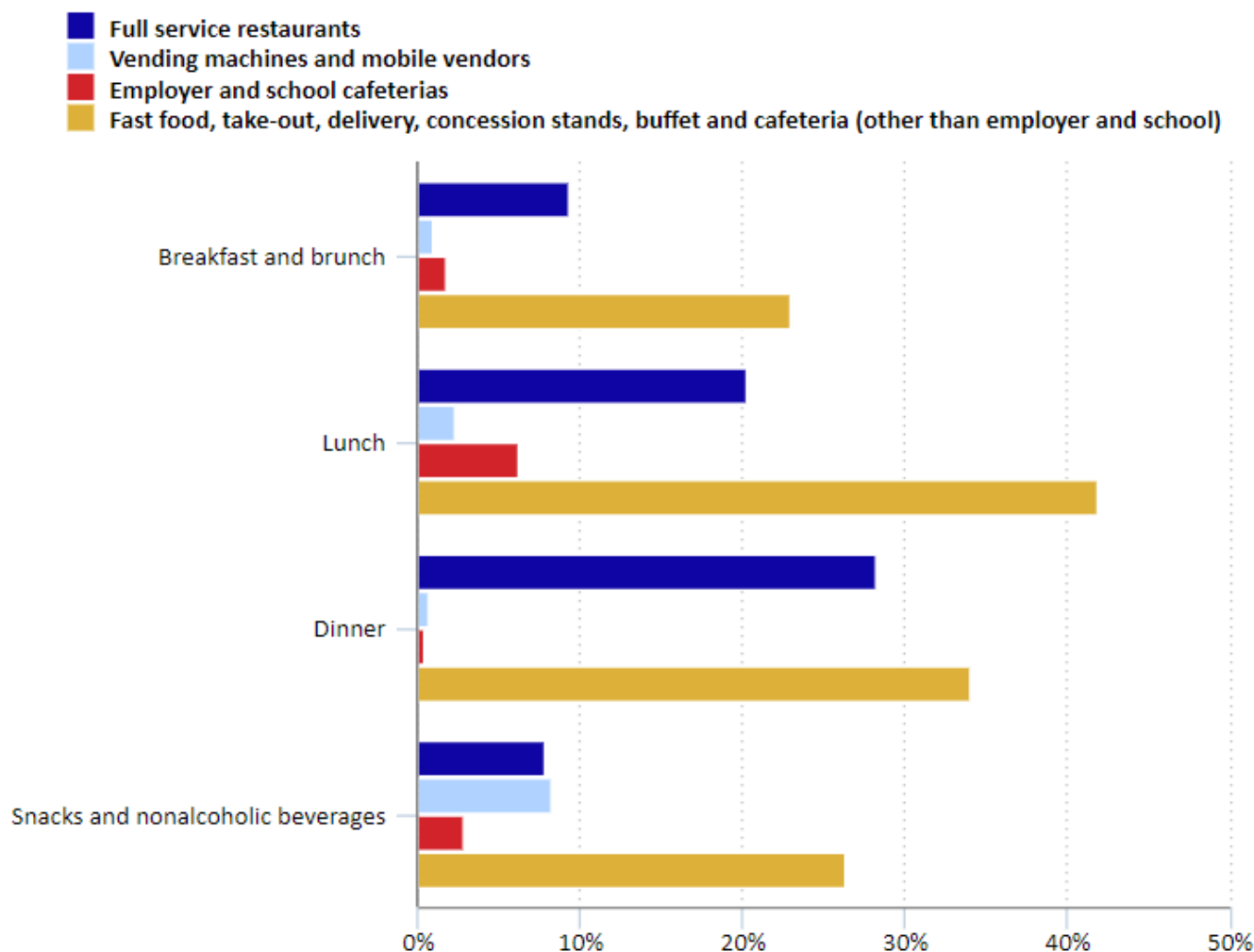
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



## Lunch purchased at fast food establishments more frequently than other meals

Breakfast, lunch, dinner or snack, the most popular vendor for these meals is fast food, delivery, or take-out type restaurants. More than one-third of consumer units purchased dinners at these venues each week, and about one-fourth reported breakfast and brunch or snack and nonalcoholic beverage purchases. But the “whopper” is for lunch; three in seven consumer units reported weekly expenditures for lunch at fast food and similar establishments.

Percent who reported buying a meal away from home in 2018, by meal

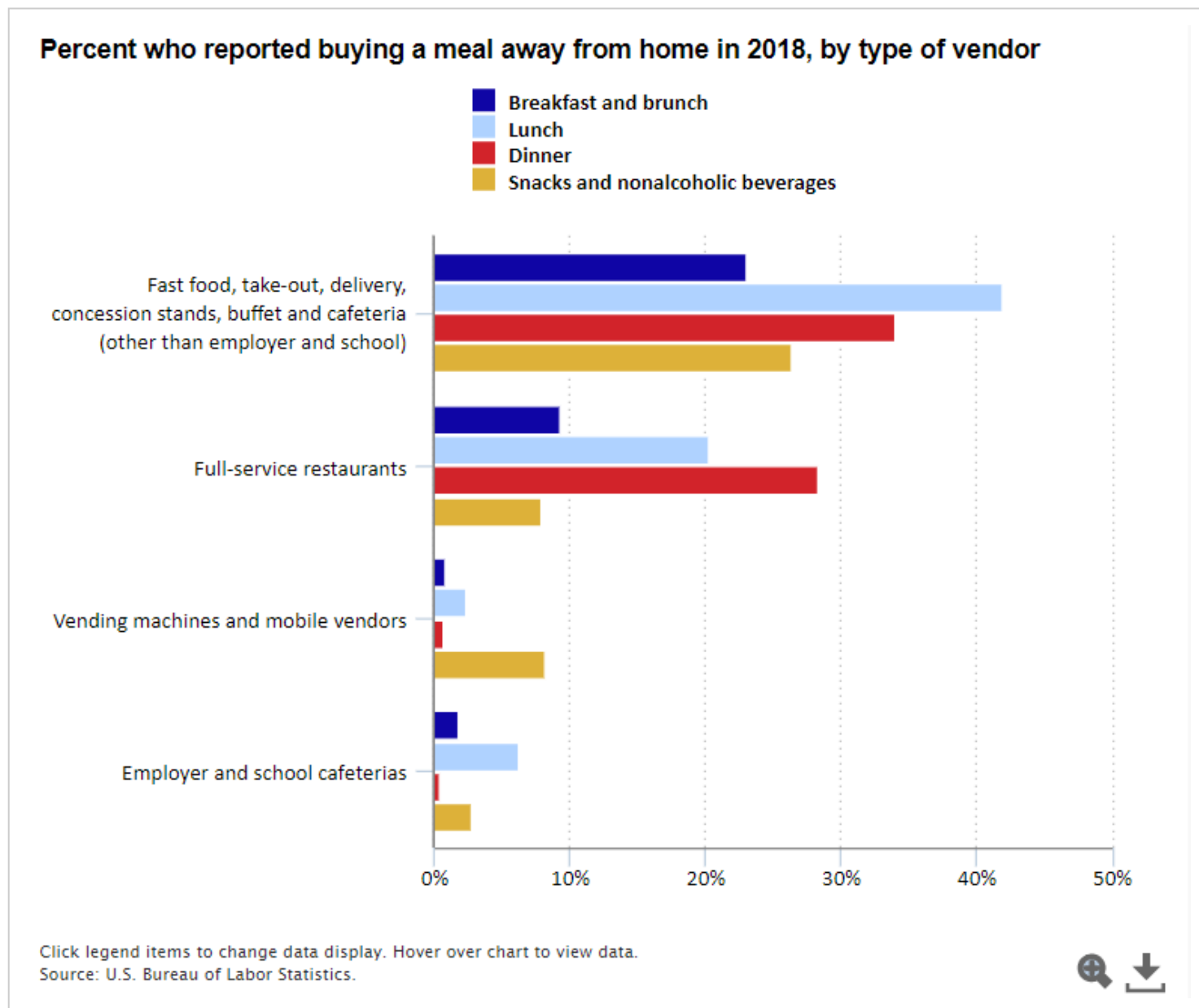


Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.  
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



## Consumers prefer full-service restaurants for dinner

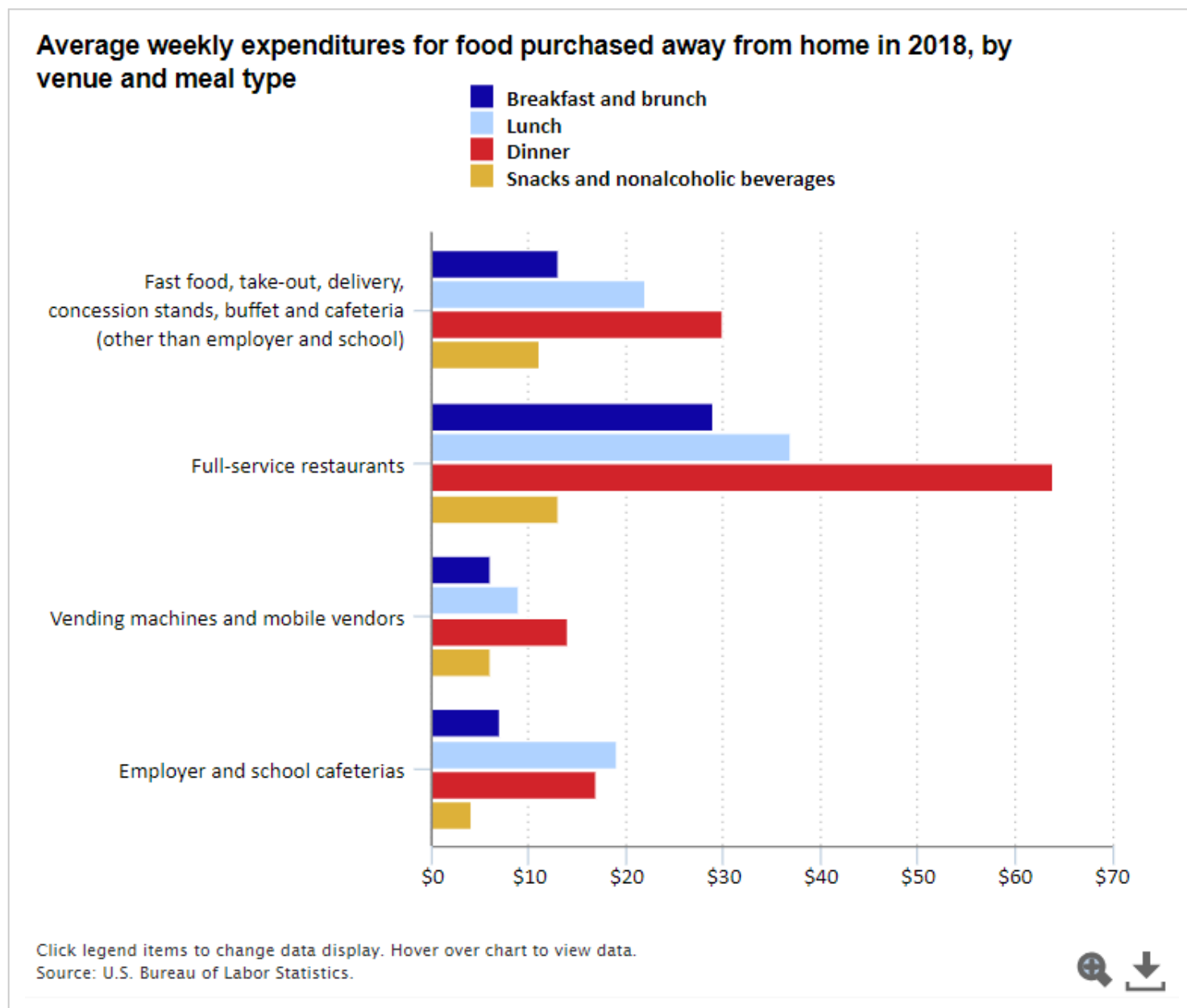
When viewed by venue of purchase, the story changes. Lunch was the biggest seller for fast food and similar establishments (42 percent of consumers reported it each week in 2018), followed by dinner (34 percent reporting). But dinner was the most frequently reported purchase for full-service restaurants, followed by lunch. Not surprisingly, snacks and nonalcoholic beverages were most frequently reported as purchased from vending machines and mobile vendors, with 8 percent of consumers reporting such expenditures in a typical week.





## Consumers spent the most for dinner at full-service establishments

Also not surprising, among those who purchased, the highest expenditures were reported for full-service establishments. And the meal for which they spent the most there was once again dinner.

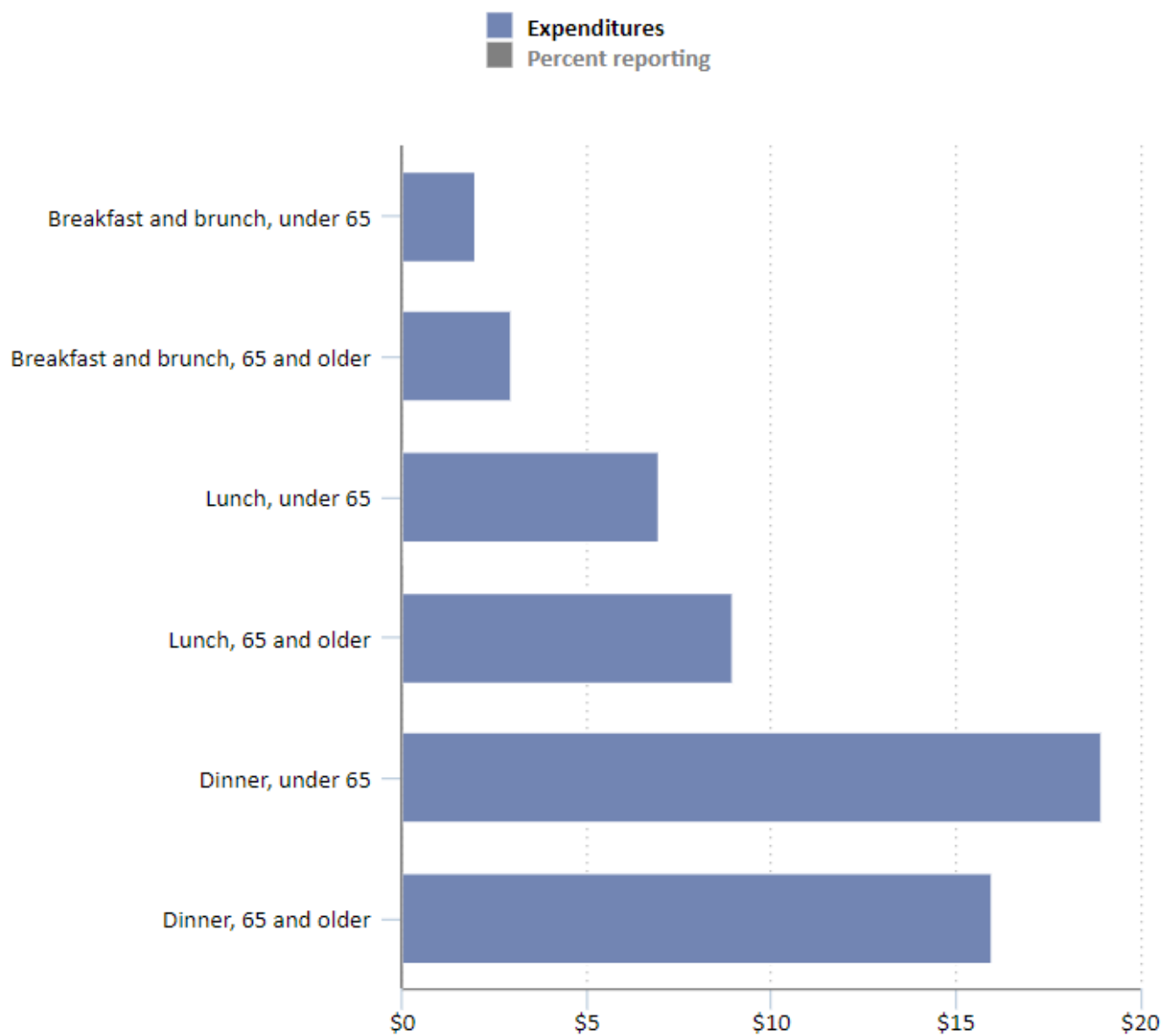


## **Those under 65 years old usually spent more on food away from home**

Unsurprisingly, average expenditures and the percent reporting them increased with income, regardless of meal or venue. Similarly, these expenditures and reporting rates generally were higher for consumer units whose reference person was under age 65 than for those whose reference person was age 65 or older. Those 65 and older are more likely to be retired and presumably to have more time to prepare meals at home. They also may face mobility or other constraints that limit their access to meals away from home.

But there is one surprising result: Those age 65 and older reported higher and more frequent expenditures for breakfast and brunch, and for lunch, but only at full-service restaurants.

## Average weekly expenditures and percent who reported buying meals at full-service restaurants in 2018, by age group



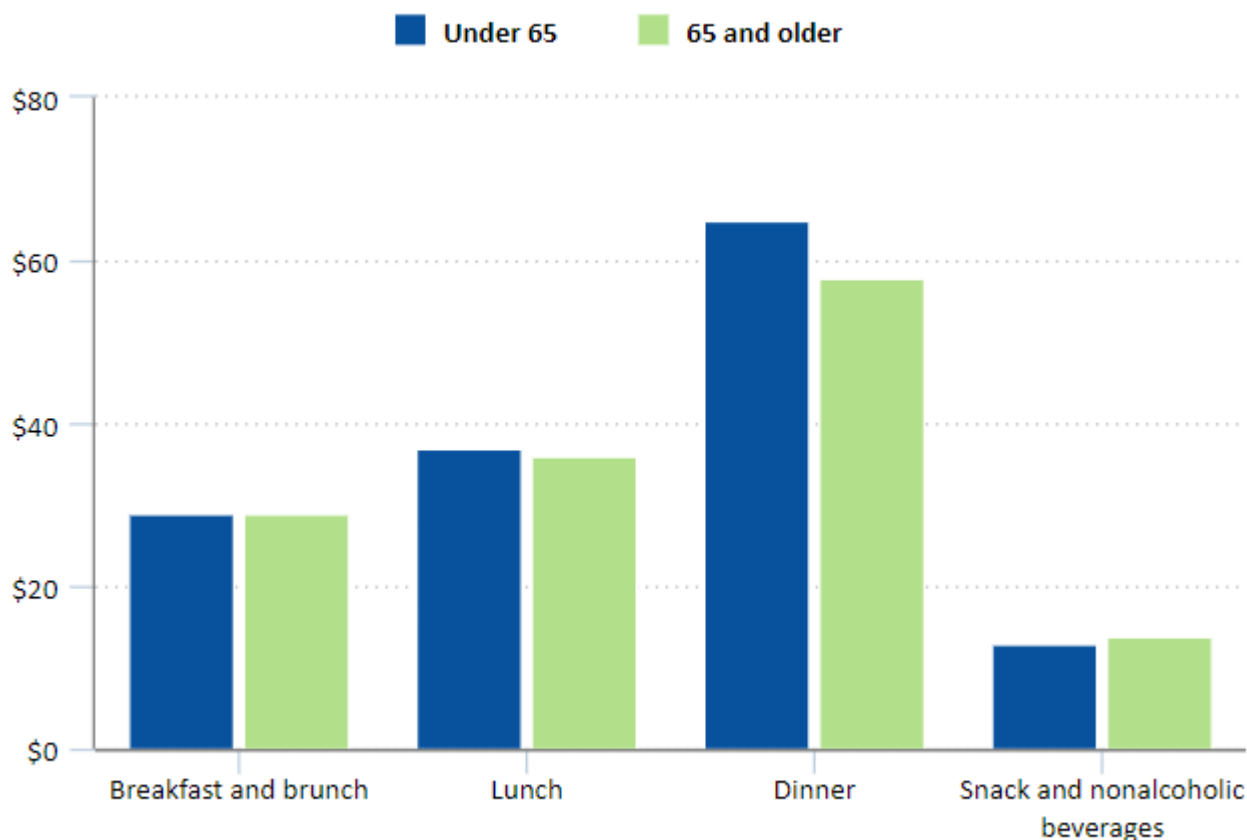
Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.  
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



## Little difference between age groups on spending for breakfast and lunch

Despite the difference in percent reporting, the average spent per week for breakfast or brunch and lunch at full-service restaurants is about the same. Purchasers under age 65 reported about \$37 per week for lunches at full-services restaurants, compared with \$36 for those age 65 and older. Similarly, those under age 65 and age 65 and older reported \$29 per week for breakfast and brunch at full-service restaurants. Despite similar percent reporting (29 and 27 percent), however, older consumers spent less on dinner at full-service restaurants. Finally, while infrequently reported, those who purchased snacks and nonalcoholic beverages at full-service restaurants spent about the same amount on average when they did purchase, and it was substantial—nearly half of what purchasers spent on breakfast or brunch.

**Average weekly expenditures for only those who reported buying meals at full-service restaurants in 2018, by age group**



Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.  
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

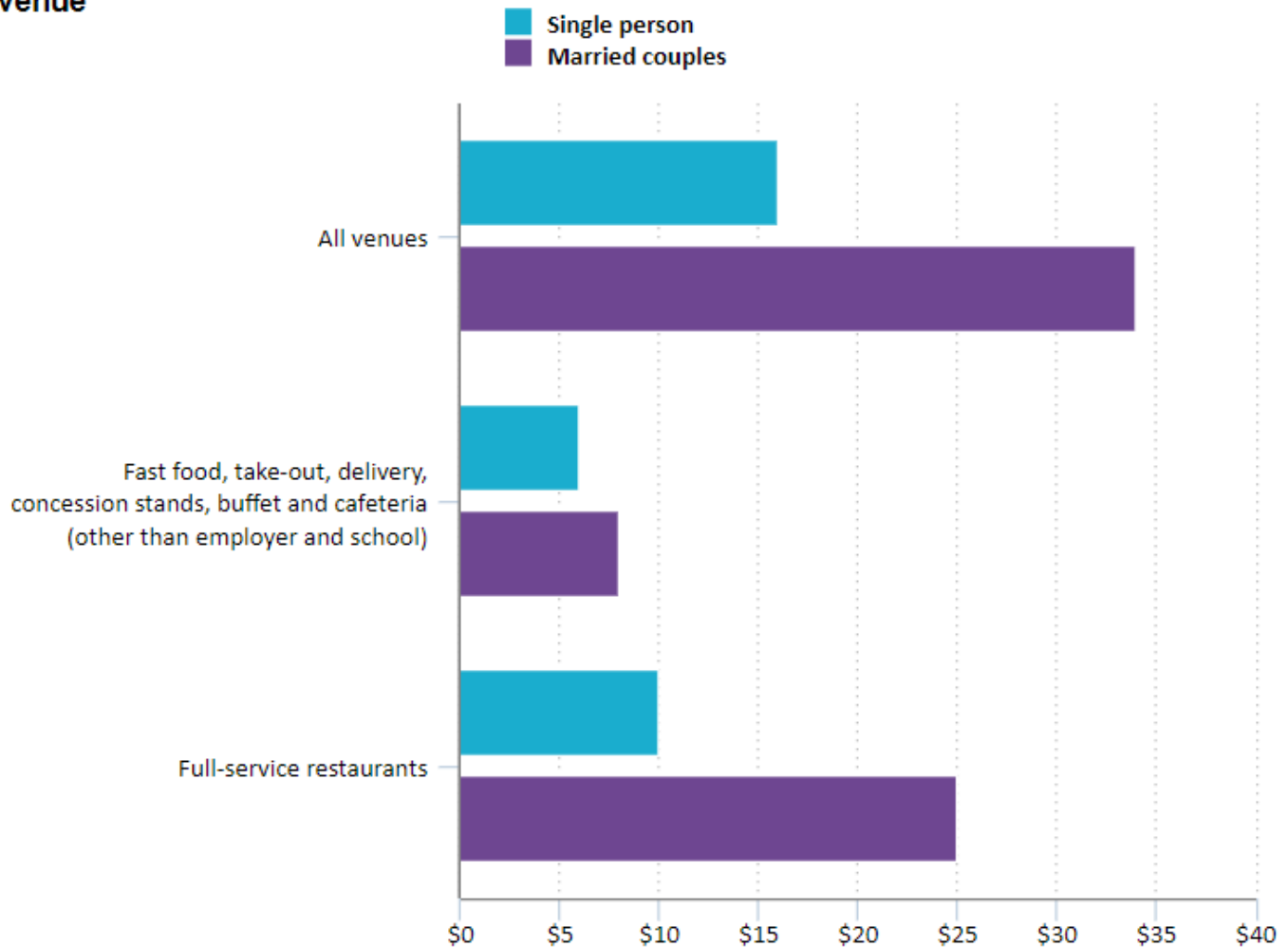


## How does the spending of couples and singles compare?

When considering food away from home, one might ask, “What about date night?” Do married couples eat as cheaply as one?

For all meals away from home in 2018, on average, married-couple consumer units (that is, couples without children or others living with them) spent about twice what single people did. This makes sense, if each member of the couple orders a separate meal. But, within each meal type, there are differences by type of venue. Consider dinner, for example. The average weekly dinner expenditure overall for married couples is about twice what it is for singles (\$34 compared with \$16). At fast food restaurants, spending was about 1.5 times higher for couples than singles. At full-service restaurants, spending was about 2.5 times higher for couples than singles. (The chart does not show dinners from mobile vendors or employer/school cafeterias because the percent reporting was less than 1 percent for both singles and couples.)

## Average weekly expenditures for dinner in 2018, by marital status and type of venue

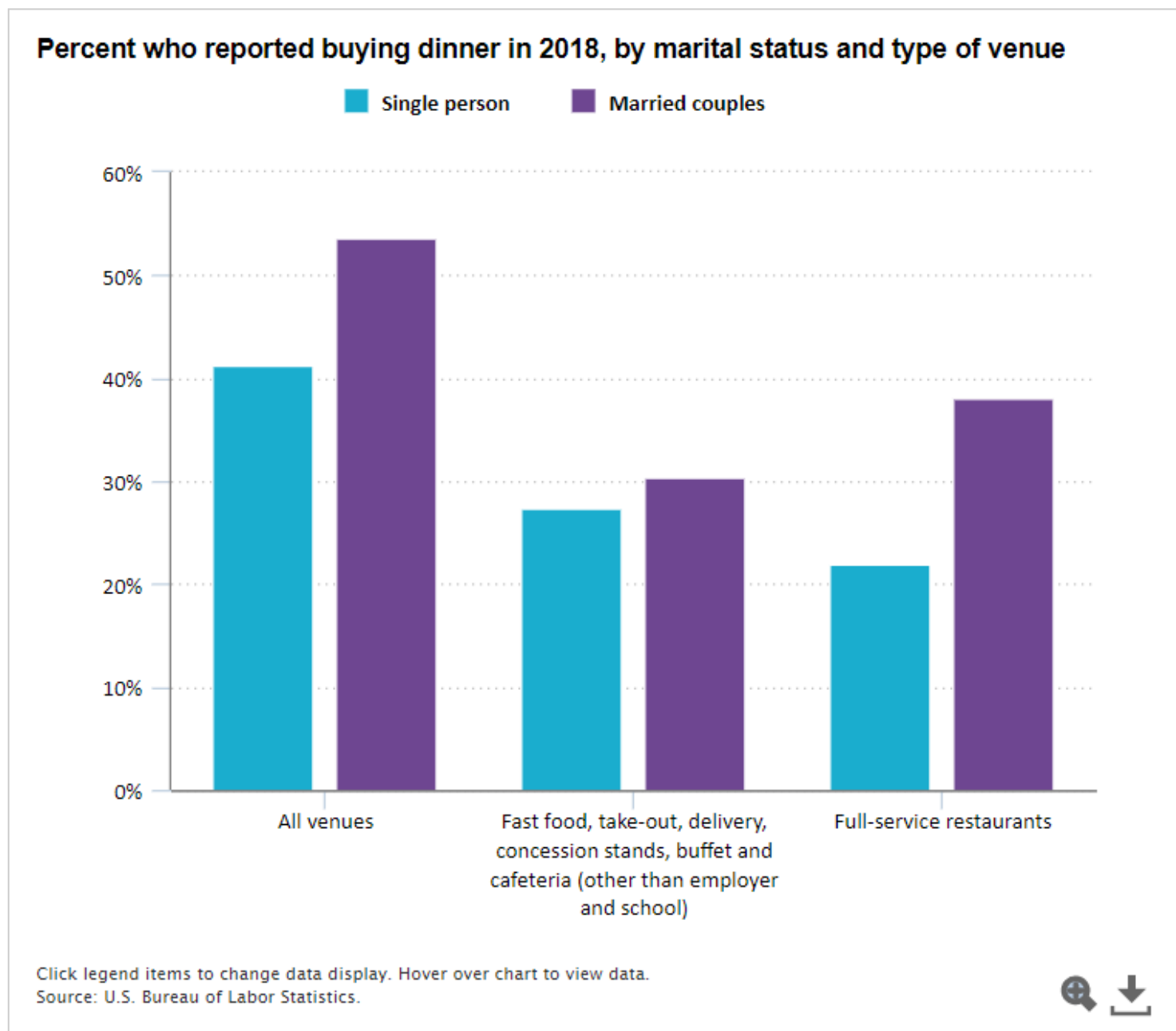


Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.  
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



## Married couples more likely than single people to report buying dinner out

Married couples were nearly twice as likely as single people to report buying dinner at full-service restaurants. The difference was much smaller for dinner purchased at fast food, take-out, delivery, and other venues.

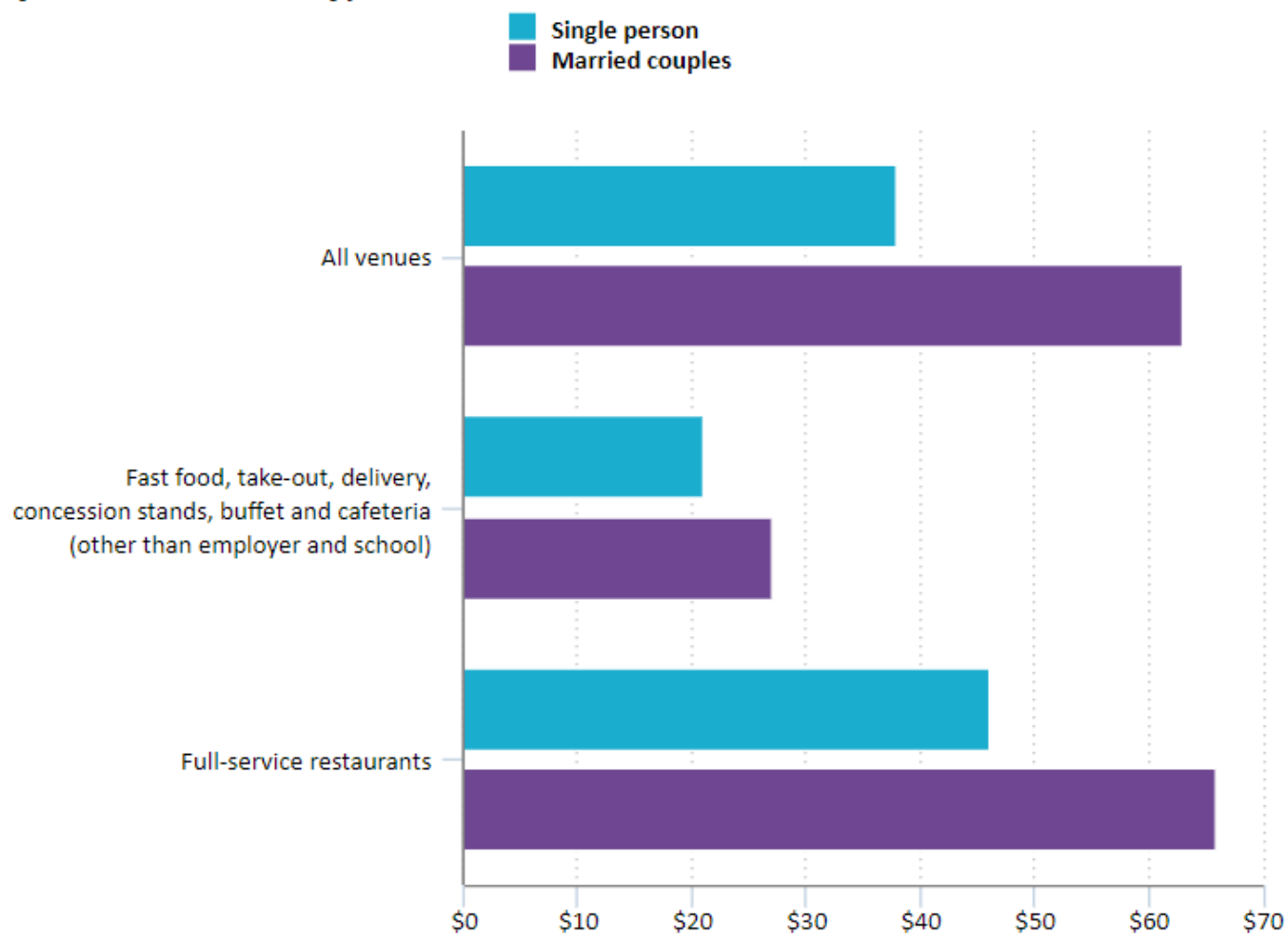


## **Married couples spent more for dinner away from home**

Expenditures for those reporting were far less than twice for married couples than for singles. Perhaps the couples share an entrée or a side order of fries. Or perhaps it is more subtle. Consider two sets of two singles who meet for dinner. In the first case, each person pays separately. In the second case, one person buys for both. Even if the meal costs are identical, the percent reporting in this sample is 75 (because three of the four people reported an expenditure). Now consider two married couples. It does not matter whether the members of the couple dine together or separately (for example one goes to lunch with colleagues from the office and the other does not), the percent reporting is 100 percent if either member of both couples incurs an expenditure. So, as they say, when comparing singles and married couples, “It’s complicated.”



## Average weekly expenditures for only those who reported buying dinner in 2018, by marital status and type of venue



Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.  
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



## More information

Geoffrey D. Paulin is a Senior Economist in the Division of Consumer Expenditure Surveys at the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The data presented in this Spotlight on Statistics are from the 2018 [Consumer Expenditure Surveys](#) calendar year and experimental tables produced by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. While some are available online, some are unpublished, but releasable on request by [emailing us](#). Presented here are average weekly expenditures and percent of consumer units reporting expenditures, as well as results derived using these data. The analysis includes expenditures by type of meal (breakfast and brunch, lunch, dinner, and snacks and nonalcoholic beverages) by type of venue of purchase (for example, fast food or full-service restaurant).

The Consumer Expenditure Surveys program includes two surveys, the Quarterly Interview Survey and the Diary Survey, that provide information on the buying habits of America's consumers, including data on their expenditures, income, and consumer unit (families and single consumers) characteristics. The survey data are collected for the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics by the U.S. Census Bureau. The Diary component of the survey is used to collect data on meal type and venue of purchase for food away from home.

The Consumer Expenditure Surveys are the only federal surveys to provide information on the complete range of consumers' expenditures and incomes and as the characteristics of those consumers. The standard unit of measure in the surveys is the consumer unit. Although the terms “household” or “family” are sometimes used as synonyms of consumer unit for convenience, the [glossary](#) defines a consumer unit as “either: (1) all members of a particular household who are related by blood, marriage, adoption, or other legal arrangements; (2) a person living alone or sharing a household with others or living as a roomer in a private home or lodging house or in permanent living quarters in a hotel or motel, but who is financially independent; or (3) two or more persons living together who use their income to make joint expenditure decisions. Financial independence is determined by the three major expense categories: Housing, food, and other living expenses. To be considered financially independent, at least two of the three major expense categories have to be provided entirely, or in part, by the respondent.”

In published tables, consumer units are categorized by the characteristics of the reference person. The [glossary](#) defines a reference person as “The first member mentioned by the respondent when asked to ‘Start with the name of the person or one of the persons who owns or rents the home.’”