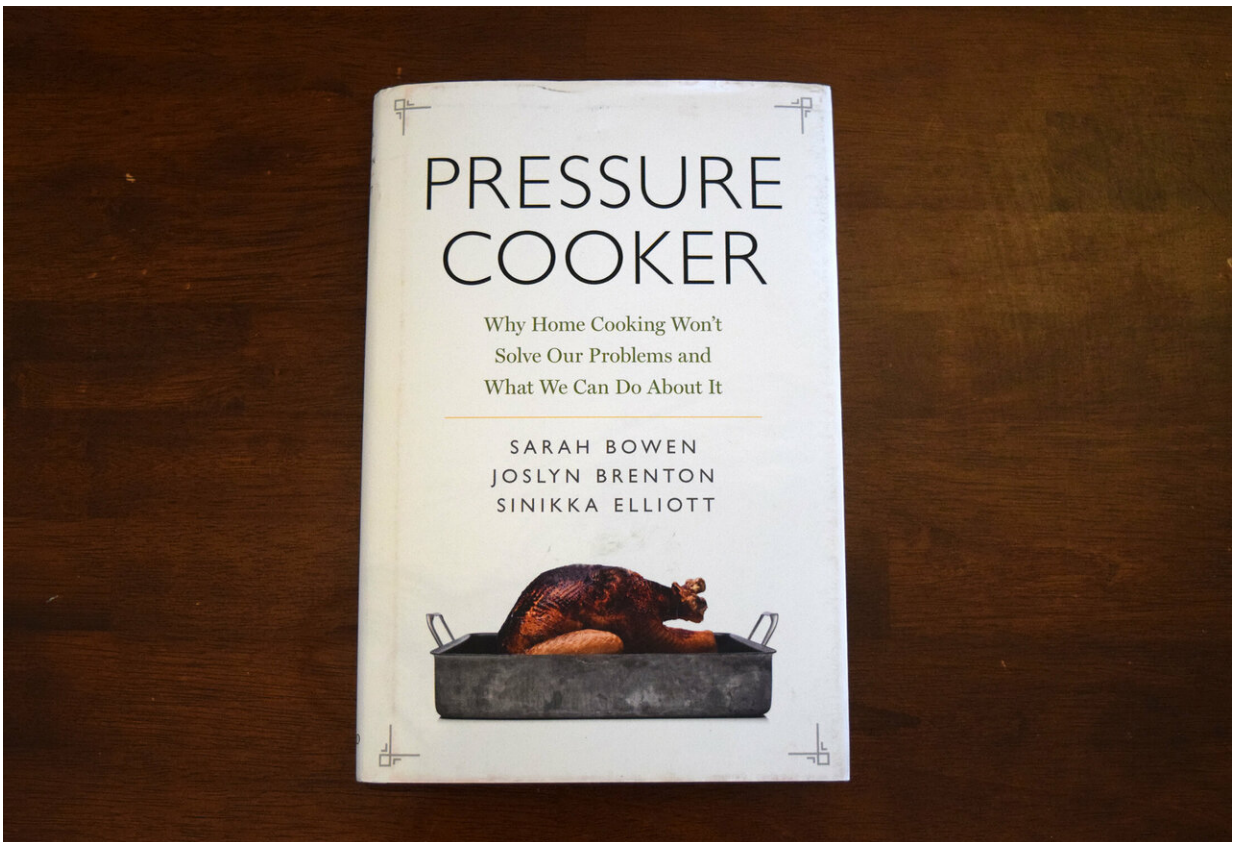


# Why home cooking isn't possible for everyone – and what we can do about it

March 4 2019, by Matt Shipman

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Credit: North Carolina State University

Many people have fond memories of home-cooked meals, and aspire to an ideal of preparing delicious, healthy food that can be shared around the table with family. But that ideal is out of reach for many Americans

– and reality leaves many people feeling inadequate or even guilty. What can we do about it?

Outlining these challenges, and proposing real-world solutions, are at the heart of a new book co-authored by Sarah Bowen, Joslyn Brenton and Sinikka Elliott, titled [Pressure Cooker: Why Home Cooking Won't Solve Our Problems and What We Can Do About It](#). Bowen is an associate professor of sociology at NC State, while Brenton got her Ph.D. at NC State, and they began the project when Elliott was also on faculty in Raleigh.

We recently had the opportunity to talk with Bowen about her research on the challenges of [home cooking](#) – many of which have little to do with food – and what we can do to address those challenges.

## **The Abstract: You and your co-authors are sociologists. What drew you to look at the social factors and implications associated with home cooking?**

Sarah Bowen: I started thinking about this while teaching an undergraduate class called Food and Society. A lot of my students had read Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, and Jamie Oliver's TV show *Food Revolution* – where he moves to West Virginia to try to get people there to eat healthier – had just come out.

Both Pollan's book and Oliver's show basically put forth the argument that we need to take food seriously, that what we eat matters. My students were thinking deeply about food and cooking. But I spent a lot of time that semester trying to convince some of them that what we eat and how we cook isn't just a matter of our personal preferences or the efforts we're willing to make. So I started thinking more carefully about

all of the factors that influence how people shop, cook and eat. Food is an easy subject to discuss because everyone eats and lots of people prepare at least some meals. Asking people questions about food can give us insight into deeper challenges – things like poverty, discrimination and stigma – that families face.

**TA: Pressure Cooker's subtitle is "Why Home Cooking Won't Solve Our Problems and What We Can Do About It." That makes me think that pundits have been proposing home cooking as a solution to a variety of problems. What problems are you talking about here?**

Bowen: People are increasingly concerned that something is wrong with our food system. There's a lot of evidence for that. Childhood obesity rates have risen in recent decades, people are nervous about the ingredients in their food, and now we have to worry that just eating lettuce might make us seriously ill.

There is also alarm about the amount of time Americans spend cooking; women have cut their cooking time in half since the 1960s, and although men are cooking more, it doesn't come close to making up for the decrease. In this context, the food we put in our shopping carts and on our plates has acquired new meanings. Cooking itself is now a way to demonstrate our morality and our commitment to the health of our families and the environment. Celebrity chefs and other food pundits tell us that we need to get back to cooking, and that we have few excuses for not doing so.

**TA: Is this something you've studied?**

Bowen: Yes! Over a five-year period, between 2012 and 2017, a team of researchers and I did interviews with 154 mothers and grandmothers in North Carolina about what it's like to feed a [family](#). We were frustrated that many of the messages that we get about food and family meals come from affluent white men. These messages can be inspiring, but they also often miss important aspects of what's really going on in American kitchens. So we spent five years talking to a diverse group of American families about how they cooked, shopped and made decisions about food. We also did in-depth observations with 12 families. We went grocery shopping with them, tagged along on visits to doctors and social services offices, and hung out in their homes as they made and ate meals.

We got a really deep look into all of the complexities that go into feeding a family. Our book is informed by all of these interviews and observations, but we focus in particular on nine women and their families. All of them lived within an hour of Raleigh. They were all raising young children. They were all working really hard to make sure their families have food to eat. Most of them liked cooking, at least some of the time, and all of them felt it was important. And, despite big differences in the circumstances of their lives and their resources, they all felt like they were failing to feed their kids the "right" way or to live up to the expectations of what "good food" or ideal family meals should look like.

**TA: The book argues that rather than solving these problems, the social and cultural emphasis on home cooking has actually created a new set of problems. Could you explain some of those problems, and why they are important?**

Bowen: We organize our book around seven foodie myths, showing how each of them resonates and does not resonate in the lives of the families

in our study (and families in general). Broadly speaking, we try to show how encouraging people to "cook from scratch" and "get back into the kitchen" is not going to solve the problems in our food system.

For example, lots of people suggest that the time to cook is there, if only we would get our priorities straight. But this doesn't take into account the multiple directions parents are pulled in, or the way expectations around parenting have increased over time. It's not a matter of just making dinner from scratch. Parents are also expected to read to their children, get down on the floor and play with them, help them with their homework, and teach them how to be good citizens. Parents today have less free time than they did in previous generations.

And it's not just about the amount of time parents have (or don't have). A lot of workers have unstable schedules, where [work hours](#) vary widely from week to week and even day to day. Some of the families in our study, for example, worked at service jobs (like for fast-food restaurants) where they had little control over their time and often didn't know in advance if they'd even be home in time for dinner. All of this obviously has an effect on how you cook.

Another example is the idea of "shopping smarter to eat better." This is the idea that poor people can eat healthfully, if only they'd learn to shop and cook smarter. But of course, poor people already know a lot about getting by on a budget. No matter how many sales they shop or coupons they clip, the simple fact is that lots of people simply don't have enough money to spend on food. And it's not just the amount of money, but how it intersects with other things. It can be expensive to be poor.

One of the families in our book was experiencing homelessness during our observations with them. They had been evicted and had to move into a hotel room. Without any space to store food, they couldn't stock up on deals like they had done previously, and they were limited to preparing

things that can be heated in the microwave, which are also more expensive, so their food stamps weren't stretching as far as they would have otherwise.

**TA: If home cooking isn't necessarily the answer, and can be part of the problem, what sort of solutions do you and your co-authors propose?**

Bowen: The idea that we can change the world through the food we cook is appealing, because it's something concrete that we can do right now. This isn't a bad thing, but it relies on asking people to try harder and care more. But the women in our study were already trying hard. They cared a lot, but it wasn't working, and it led to a lot of guilt and shame around food. Instead of focusing our attention on what's on people's individual dinner plates, we need to think about what needs to change so that all families can enjoy a good meal at the end of the day.

Some of these changes involve food. If we invested more in school lunch, we could offer free school lunches to all kids, regardless of income, removing some of the stigma and shame associated with free and reduced lunch. We also talked about whether there are ways to make it possible for families to enjoy a meal at the end of the day without expecting the work of creating this meal solely in the home.

If you have money, this is already possible – you can have your groceries delivered to your door or use "meal kits" to solve the problem of having to figure out what you're going to make for dinner every night. But most of the families in our study couldn't afford solutions like these. Is there a way we could repurpose school or church kitchens to make low-cost frozen meals, like lasagna or soup, for families to heat up at the end of the day?

At the same time, ensuring that all families have access to good food also involves solutions that have nothing to do with food, at least on the surface. For example, we need to raise the minimum wage, so that working families are able to feed themselves, and invest in affordable housing, given the links between housing insecurity and homelessness and food insecurity. And we need to expand access to [food](#) assistance programs like SNAP and WIC, which so many of the families in our study relied on, rather than continuing to debate who deserves to use them and whether they should be more restrictive.

We don't have all the answers, but we know we're not going to solve these inequalities without thinking outside the kitchen, and that's what we propose.

Provided by North Carolina State University

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