



Volume 4. Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890
Food Expenditures of Two Working-Class Families (1887-1888)

In the 1870s and 1880s the cost of food accounted for about 60% of the total expenditures of a typical working-class family – with some fluctuation based on total family income and the number of children. The table below shows the food expenditures of two working-class families. The first family had less money per person to spend on food than the second one. Both spent the most on bread: 21.5% and 28.1% of total food expenditures. The next largest share was for meat (including sausages). The expenditures appear to show great disparities for some items: for example, the first family spent just 1.3% for butter, whereas the second family spent 16%. The next line, however, shows that the first family spent more on fats and lard, perhaps to compensate for their meager use of butter.

Expenditure on Foodstuffs by Two Working-Class Families 1887-88

Food item	Working-class family of 7-8 according to Opificius (1888)		Working-class family of 5 according to Mehner (1887)	
	in marks	in percent	in marks	in percent
Bread	140.77	21.5	183.04	28.1
Bread rolls	21.25	3.3	–	–
Kaiser buns	–	–	13.00	2.0
Potatoes	24.14	3.7	60.84	9.4
Flour	7.85	1.2	10.40	1.6
Rice (barley)	–	–	10.40	1.6
Butter	8.41	1.3	109.20	16.7
Fats and drippings	28.83	4.4	11.44 ^a	1.8
Salad and rapeseed oil	10.66	1.6	–	–
Beef	40.08	6.3	22.36	3.4
Various meats	9.94	1.5	15.60	2.4
Sausage ^b	19.90	3.1	15.60	2.4
Herring ^c	–	–	10.40	1.6
Milk	50.45	7.9	–	–
Cheese ^c	5.55	0.9	–	–
Farmer's cheese	–	–	6.24	1.0
Eggs	11.28	1.7	20.80 ^d	3.2
Vegetables	11.96	1.9	13.00	2.0
Pulses	4.15	0.7	–	–
Other soup ingredients	14.12	2.2	–	–
Onions	–	–	1.04	0.2
Fruit	8.08	1.3	–	–

Sugar	19.09	2.9	–	–
Salt, vinegar, spices	11.46	1.8	5.20 ^d	0.8
Honey or fruit puree	1.71	0.3	–	–
Coffee	33.88	5.2	15.60	2.4
Coffee substitutes	1.85	0.3	10.40 ^e	1.6
Beer	–	–	27.04 ^f	4.2
Spirits	15.00	2.3	31.20	4.8
Provisions at work	95.02	14.6	57.72 ^g	8.8
Provisions at inns ^h	45.26	7.1	–	–
Misc.	6.11	0.9	–	–
Total	646.53	100.0	650.52	100.0

- a) Mehner only lists beef drippings.
- b) Here, it should be noted that the consumption of sausages, herring, and cheese by members of the family charted by Mehner was substantially higher, but this is recorded under the category “provisions at work,” since both spouses worked in a factory.
- c) In Mehner’s statistics, the consumption of eggs is divided in two categories: “eggs” and “salad and eggs.” Since the latter cannot be divided, it was added to the total consumption of eggs.
- d) Mehner only lists salt.
- e) Mehner only lists “barley.”
- f) Beer consumption was higher as well, but the beer consumed during work breaks is included under the category “provisions at work.”
- g) Compiled by the author from the categories: sausage or cheese (34.32 marks), cucumber or cheese (3.64 marks), cucumber or herring (4.16 marks), as well as brown beer (15.60 marks).
- h) Opificius’ table reads: Provisions at inns *and* tobacco. Since this category cannot be divided, it was listed as a whole. In Mehner’s listing, a worker’s consumption of tobacco amounts to 34.32 marks. Cf. Mehner loc. cit., p. 309. It was omitted here. The worker’s consumption at inns is included in beer consumption.

Source: L. Opificius, “Haushaltsbudget eines Arbeiters in einer chemischen Fabrik,” [“Household Budget of a Chemical Factory Worker”] *Frankfurter Arbeiterbudgets* (Schriften des freien deutschen Hochstiftes) [*Frankfurt Workers’ Budget* (Writings of the Free German Hochstift)]. (Frankfurt a.M., 1890): pp. 69-70, and H. Mehner, “Der Haushalt und die Lebenshaltung einer Leipziger Arbeiterfamilie” [“The Budget and Cost of Living for a Working-Class Family in Leipzig”], in *Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung, Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft im Deutschen Reich* [*Yearbook for Legislation, Administration and National Economy of the German Reich*] 11 (1887): p. 310; both in Lothar Schneider, *Der Arbeiterhaushalt im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert* [*Working-Class Budgets in the 18th and 19th Centuries*]. Berlin, 1967, pp. 158-59.

Original German text reprinted in Gerd Hohorst, Jürgen Kocka, and Gerhard A. Ritter, *Sozialgeschichtliches Arbeitsbuch II* [*Social History Workbook II*], 2nd ed. Munich: Beck, 1978, pp. 118-19.

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