

Sharing Meals

A research program to study and strengthen social dining at Harvard.

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MOTIVATION

Sharing a meal is one of the oldest and most universal forms of human connection, and new evidence suggests it may also be one of the most important. Drawing on survey data from over 150,000 people across 142 countries, De Neve, Kaats, and colleagues (2026) find that differences in meal sharing explain as much global variation in life satisfaction as differences in income. Yet more people are eating alone than ever before. In the United States, the share of young adults who report eating every meal by themselves has risen by roughly 180% since 2003.

Whether this decline in shared meals is a cause of rising loneliness and falling wellbeing, or merely a symptom of deeper trends, remains an open and increasingly urgent question. Few institutions are better positioned to answer it than Harvard, where nearly every undergraduate holds a meal plan, lives on campus, and dines within a shared system serving more than 22,000 meals a day. Meal swipes are collected regularly and can be linked to academic and residential records, making it possible to study the causes and effects of social dining at scale and over time.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This proposal outlines a year-long program, running across the 2026 to 2027 academic year, built around three complementary tiers. Each tier studies meal sharing at a different level of resolution. Data collected at each tier strengthens the others. Project funding may be provided by Barilla and is pending approval.

Tier 1

Individual

Collect daily data on meal sharing and wellbeing through QR codes on dining tables.

Tier 2

House

Randomly vary house dining policies to test effects on shared meals and wellbeing.

Tier 3

Population

Leverage years of meal swipe data, linked to administrative records, to study long-term trends.

BREAD GETS BROKE

At the heart of the program is Bread Gets Broke: a small QR placard on each dining table that leads to a voluntary 30-second survey, ending in a wildcard. Most wildcards are joyful and meaningless. Some lead to prizes, but prizes can only be won in pairs. Claiming one requires breaking bread with a tablemate, so to speak. A solo survey becomes a shared moment, giving a student dining alone a reason to connect. Every participant who completes five or more surveys may also be eligible to win a trip to Italy, sponsored by Barilla. Click [here](#) to view the demo.

REQUIREMENTS

First milestones include HUDS approval for QR placards on dining tables, selection of dining policies to randomize, and adding meal sharing survey items to existing Residential Life surveys. Next steps include funding deliverables from Barilla, IRB submissions and approvals, and Data Use Agreements covering informed consent and data privacy protocols. The full schedule is available in the online proposal.



The full proposal, interactive demo, and details regarding data privacy, funding, and timelines are available at www.sharingmealsproposal.com.