

The COVID-19 consumer research

Area of research interest: [Behaviour and perception](#)

Study duration: 2020-04-01

Project status: Completed

Conducted by: Ipsos Mori and Food Standards Agency

Background

The Food Standards Agency commissioned social research to develop its evidence base on issues affecting consumers and businesses in order to inform its COVID-19 response. The COVID-19 consumer tracker ran for 19 months (19 waves) from April 2020 to October 2021, resulting in three reports (waves 1-5, 1-12 and 1-19).

The monthly tracker was intended to understand consumers' concerns around food insecurity and their experience of food unavailability, to understand and observe food behaviours that put consumers health and safety at risk and to understand the pattern and changes in food consumption and purchasing behaviours over the pandemic. The tracker has now been replaced with the ['Consumer Insights Tracker'](#) (from November 2021 onwards) where similar measures are covered.

Ipsos Mori were commissioned to track consumer attitudes through an omnibus survey. Bright Harbour were commissioned to produce qualitative reports on the lived experience of people living in food insecurity during COVID-19 and the impact on consumers' engagement with the food system in June and July 2020.

Additionally, we undertook in-house social media listening to support our insight gathering around the impact of COVID-19 on food safety, food authenticity and food regulation.

In addition, the COVID-19 expert panel was set up to help identify the most important implications of the COVID-19 outbreak in relation to food policy. The FSA drew on its networks of leading researchers and industry experts between April and June 2020.

Key findings

COVID-19 Consumer Tracker

Food insecurity

From April 2020 to October 2021 all measures of food insecurity significantly increased, apart from concerns around food availability and affordability which ended at a similar proportion to the start of the tracker.

From April 2020 to October 2021, the proportion of respondents skipping meals or cutting the size of meals because they did not have enough food to buy food had significantly increased, May 2021 being its highest point. Significantly more respondents reported using food banks at the end of the tracker compared to the start.

Participants from larger households (4+), those in younger age groups (16-24), and households with a child present were more likely to be 'food insecure' across all these measures of food insecurity.

Food purchasing, nutrition and food safety behaviours

From August 2020 to October 2021, the majority of respondents in our tracker reported positive nutrition behaviours such as frequently cooking from scratch. However, the majority of respondents also reported frequent unhealthy nutrition behaviours such as snacking on cakes, biscuits, confectionery and savoury snacks and purchasing takeaways.

From May 2020 to October 2021, the majority of respondents practised safe food practices. However, the proportion of those checking use-by dates when they are about to cook or prepare food significantly increased (measured from July 2020).

Throughout the COVID-19 tracker, males and those living in single households were significantly less likely to eat healthy meals. 16-44-year-olds, those living in a house with at least one child present and those living in larger households were significantly more likely to buy processed foods. Males, older participants and those with children in the household were significantly more likely to eat meat.

Consumers' food concerns

From December 2020, the COVID-19 tracker asked respondents about their food concerns.

Consumers' food concerns significantly increased from December 2020 to October 2021, across measures including concerns around the quality of food produced in the UK and concerns about the food they eat.

In October 2021, 24% of participants reported having a concern about the food they eat. By the end of the tracker, 1 in 5 respondents expressed a food related concern with 'the healthiness of food in my diet', 'the price of food' and 'food waste' being the top three concerns in October 2021. Younger age groups, households with children, and larger households were significantly more likely to report concerns about the food they eat.

Report on the lived experience of food insecurity under COVID-19

The qualitative research showed how people in food insecurity were coping with income loss, which has rapidly exacerbated existing insecurity and vulnerabilities.

- Basic costs rising (such as utility bills or caring for parents or children) impacted access to affordable food.
- Impacts reached far beyond missed meals: participants were experiencing complex and interlocking physical, emotional, social and financial challenges.
- People were unable to access sufficient help to meet their needs, or alternatively were unaware of support that may be available or unwilling to access charitable help due to perceived stigma.

Report on consumers and the food system: COVID-19

The qualitative research showed that more generally, COVID-19 had changed how consumers buy, cook and eat food.

- Experiences of COVID-19 for UK citizens were variable, including time, space to spare, health, employment and financial status, existing food habits, geography and trust in food businesses and systems.
- Many experienced positive changes to household food behaviours that they wished to continue as lockdown eased, for example increased home-cooking and food sharing and increased attention to diet.
- Trust in food businesses had mostly strengthened under COVID-19, driven primarily by a perceived robust 'return to normal' after early disruptions like product shortages.
- Participants were eager for clear visual safety cues in shops, particularly clear social distancing.
- Participants were for the most part not thinking in-depth about UK or global food systems under COVID-19. However, awareness of food systems issues were more prominent than in past research.

Social media listening

- Key themes included consumer purchasing behaviours, food delivery, restaurants' response to lockdown and safety around new regulations and recommendations.
- This short study demonstrated the potential use and inherent limitations of using social media to gain insight into people's behaviour and attitudes. In context with survey and desk research data, social media listening helped to provide a more complete picture of how the public reacted to this pandemic in near real time. We concluded that social media analysis should be used to support other, more robust research and surveys.

FSA COVID-19 expert panel

Our expert panel helped us to understand the potential impact of longer-term changes. They concluded that the policy response to COVID-19 outbreak needs to be responsive, far reaching, and address the needs of both the consumer and food businesses.

- In the short term, a reduction of regulatory oversight/inspection was a cause of concern.
- Later, changing businesses models leading to a lack of awareness of requirements was another focus. Changes to business practices include business diversification, specifically the shift to online delivery and takeaway
- Changes to consumer behaviours include an increase in home cooking/food preparation.

Data tables are available for each Wave on our [open data catalogue](#). You will also find guidance on how to use the data tables.

Research report

England, Northern Ireland and Wales

PDF

[View Covid-19 Consumer Tracker summary report \(Waves 1 to 19\) as PDF\(Open in a new window\)](#) (568.8 KB)

PDF

[View Covid-19 Consumer tracker report waves 9. 10, 11, 12 as PDF\(Open in a new window\)](#) (688.49 KB)

England, Northern Ireland and Wales

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[View Covid-19 Consumer tracker report waves 5, 6, 7 and 8 as PDF\(Open in a new window\)](#)
(641.33 KB)

England, Northern Ireland and Wales

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[View Covid-19 Consumer Tracker Report waves 1, 2, 3 and 4 as PDF\(Open in a new window\)](#)
(924.61 KB)

England, Northern Ireland and Wales

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[View Covid-19 Consumer Tracker Report waves 1 and 2 as PDF\(Open in a new window\)](#)
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[View The lived experience of food insecurity under Covid-19 \(qualitative research\) as PDF\(Open in a new window\)](#) (1.82 MB)

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[View Consumers and the Food System Under Covid-19 \(qualitative research\) as PDF\(Open in a new window\)](#) (400.03 KB)

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[View Appendix A - Consumers and the Food System Under Covid-19 as PDF\(Open in a new window\)](#) (297.94 KB)

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[View FSA Covid-19 social media listening as PDF\(Open in a new window\)](#) (563.2 KB)

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