

Food in a Pandemic

Area of research interest: [Emerging challenges and opportunities](#)

Study duration: 2020-11-01

Conducted by: Demos

Methodology

This report draws on a broad set of methodological approaches, which provide qualitative and quantitative data about people's experiences of food during the pandemic and their preferences for the future of the system. Four main methodologies were utilised:

- a series of four deliberative workshops with 30 participants (held online, to comply with government lockdown regulations)
- a nationally representative poll of 10,069 UK adults
- an open-access survey with 911 respondents
- a nationally representative Polis with 1,006 UK adults. This section outlines these methodologies in more detail

Fieldwork dates are provided for each methodology. However, note that all of these took place in November 2020, while the UK was under various lockdown restrictions:

- England was in a full lockdown from 5 November through the duration of the fieldwork
- Wales was in a 'firebreak' lockdown until 9 November (followed by tight restrictions)
- Scotland had a system of 'protection levels' and Northern Ireland had various restrictions, which were tightened significantly on 27 November

Key findings

Food insecurity

The report shows there has been an increase in multiple forms of food insecurity, including physical availability and financial access. People have also stepped in to prevent new forms of food insecurity caused by people self-isolating, such as by offering informal forms of support, for example, shopping

Findings show that there is a public appetite for the government to take action to help feed those without the means to do so. They also tend to be more supportive of preventative actions for food insecurity, such as ensuring well-paid jobs are available to all. Just under two thirds (63%) agreed 'it is the government's responsibility to make sure no-one goes hungry'.

UK food supply

The report shows that a significant proportion of the population have bought food more locally or grown more food during the pandemic, reflecting a wider move towards individual self-sufficiency. Most people who have moved towards more self-sufficiency, such as buying more locally-produced food, expect this to continue after the pandemic.

78% of those surveyed in a nationally representative poll of 10,069 adults in November 2020 supported the UK keeping its current food quality standards, even if food is more expensive and less competitive in the global market. A similar proportion (82%) also supported maintaining the UK's current animal welfare standards, when presented with the same trade-off against prices and competitiveness.

Diet and eating habits

There has been a complex shift in people's diets during Covid-19, with more home cooking. Although a third (32%) of respondents in the nationally representative poll reported eating more healthy main meals, a third (33%) ate more unhealthy snacks.

Some of the restrictions and public health advice, such as stay at home, might have encouraged more healthy eating. Those who have cooked more or eaten healthier main meals tend to expect this change to continue. However, this is likely to be somewhat dependent on the other changes, such as continued flexible working.

The Psychology of Food

While the bulk of the report examines how attitudes to food have been shifted by our experience of the pandemic, the psychology of food in the UK was considered more broadly to provide context for the broader findings presented throughout this report.

The nationally representative poll found that people in the UK tend to have positive attitudes towards food, with 64% saying food was a source of comfort.

Research report
PDF

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