



food safety policy center

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Survey: Optimism and misperception a recipe for national confusion about food safety

EAST LANSING, Mich. – Americans are confident about their ability to keep the food they eat safe – but a new survey shows they don't trust their neighbors, and they don't really have a good feel for how widespread food-borne illness is.

Survey results released today in Washington, D.C., by a Michigan State University center show a country in cuisine conflict. The MSU Food Safety Policy Center seeks to understand U.S. attitudes about food safety – who we think should be responsible for it, who we think is most at risk, and even how severe we think the risk might be.

The survey shows that only 10 percent of Americans say they got food poisoning in the past year – yet statistics say a quarter of Americans suffered food-borne illnesses each year – data that itself is more than 10 years old.

“We get sick, by and large we know we get sick – but we don't know if it's food-borne illness,” said Craig Harris, an MSU sociologist and study director of the Food Safety Policy Center. “We can see that Americans tend not to attribute as many of our illnesses to food as we should.”

“People who got sick probably don't know that the foods they eat are unsafe,” added Andrew Knight, a visiting professor in the center. “When you tell them how much food-borne illness there is out there, they find it unacceptable.”

Harris said there is little data even tracking how much of a toll food-borne illness takes on the nation. The latest study, published by the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, indicates that food-borne illness sends some 325,000 people to the hospital each year, and kills 5,000 people, but he notes that estimate comes from data gathered in the early 1990s.

“We don't know who is getting sick and we don't know if food-borne illness is evenly distributed across the United States or whether some groups are more able to protect themselves or are more protected against food-borne illnesses than other groups,” he said.

The survey was created by the Food Safety Policy Center, whose mission is to promote the development and implementation of food and water safety policies that will ultimately improve human health by more effectively and efficiently reducing food- and water-borne illnesses.

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The information was collected in telephone interviews with 1,014 adults in the United States between Oct. 31, 2005 and Feb. 9. The margin of error is plus or minus 3 percent. The survey was paid for by the Food Safety Policy Center. Food-borne illness springs from a complex web that encompasses farm and field, processing and distribution channels, as well as restaurants, kitchen tables, and lunch bags left on the front seat of a car longer than any health official can feel comfortable about.

Harris said the survey is unique in that it sought to represent the juggling of values Americans face in food. What have surfaced are dichotomies: Confidence and optimism sometimes outpace statistical reality when it comes to perception of how widespread food-borne illness is. Trust in federal government is high – but half of Americans say they don't want the government to ban foods that may be unsafe, but also hold high value. Harris points to foods like raw milk fresh cheese or unpasteurized apple cider as examples of national disagreement.

“We are all complex and we all have a combination of expectations,” Harris said. “On one hand, we want the federal government to make the food supply as safe as possible, but sometimes we're quite happy to accept unsafe food because it's fresher, because it tastes better or because it's part of our ethnic identity. We want to obtain the freedom and autonomy to choose bundles of goods, positives and negatives.”

Among the findings:

- Ninety-six percent of Americans feel they trust themselves to ensure foods they eat are safe. But when asked if they trust others to handle their food, the confidence rate drops to 62 percent. Add to that is that despite the rate of self-confidence, only 58 percent say they know a lot or quite a bit about food safety.

“The data shows that people feel very comfortable with their own practices and their own behaviors,” said Michelle Worosz, a research associate in the center. “There's a high level of belief in themselves.”

- Sixty-three percent of Americans say they are very or fairly concerned about the safety of the food they eat. Fifty-four percent say they think about food safety when grocery shopping and 46 percent say they consider it when eating out at a restaurant.
- Some Americans are willing to put their money where their mouths – and digestive tracks – are. Eighty-four percent said they'd be willing to add \$270 a year to their food bill (the equivalent of paying 5 percent more) if food-borne diseases could be reduced by 50 percent.
- Americans identify the federal government most – 38 percent – as the group they expect to keep food safe. Most – 88 percent – say they think the government – most notably the FDA and the USDA – are capable of keeping food safe, but only 49 percent say they feel the government has enough resources to do the job properly.

The survey also raised some warning flags about how race and class affect food safety issues. The survey indicated higher levels of concern about food safety among people with lower education levels, lower income levels and among African Americans.

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“It’s quite possible one of the things we don’t know is whether persons in these groups have the same access to safer foods,” Harris said. “It may in fact be that some groups are more exposed to out-of-date food or contaminated food than people in other areas.”

MSU also is home to the National Food Safety & Toxicology Center, comprised of faculty from seven colleges and 19 departments. Areas of expertise within this center include pre-harvest food safety, epidemiology, toxicology, food- and water-borne disease, microbiology, risk communications, and food law.

The Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station provides support for the Food Safety Policy Center.

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