

The COVID-19 consumer research

Research programme [Research projects -](#)

Study duration April 2020 to March 2021

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 published data from our Covid-19 consumer tracker includes waves from April 2020 to March 2021, the data from future waves will be published in due course.

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

Concerns about food availability, food affordability and skipping meals for financial reasons were high in April 2020 but declined significantly in August 2020. They have since risen again to their current level in March 2021.

The proportion of respondents who reported use of food banks/charities also dropped in August 2020. Otherwise, this proportion has remained relatively stable across all waves.

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

Stable trends in food purchasing, nutrition and food safety behaviours

Trends in food purchasing, eating and food safety/hygiene behaviours in the home have remained stable over time. They are consistent since the tracker began in April 2020.

Consumer's food concerns

From December 2020 to March 2021, the Covid-19 tracker asked respondents about their food concerns.

28% of respondents reported being concerned about the quality of food produced in the UK in March 2021, whilst 50% reported being 'concerned' about the quality of food imported from outside the UK. These were consistent across all collected waves.

In March 2021, 22% of participants reported having a concern about the food they eat at the moment. The 3 biggest concerns selected by participants were:

- The 'healthiness' of food in my diet (53%)
- Animal welfare (52%)
- The ethical treatment of producers and farmers (50%)
- Food freshness (50%)
- Hormones, steroids or antibiotics in food (50%)

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.

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

[View Covid-19 Consumer tracker report waves 9, 10, 11, 12 as PDF](#) (688.49 KB)

[View Covid-19 Consumer tracker report waves 5, 6, 7 and 8 as PDF](#) (641.33 KB)

[View Covid-19 Consumer Tracker Report waves 1, 2, 3 and 4 as PDF](#) (924.61 KB)

[View Covid-19 Consumer Tracker Report waves 1 and 2 as PDF](#) (686.92 KB)

[View The lived experience of food insecurity under Covid-19 \(qualitative research\) as PDF](#) (1.82 MB)

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

[View Appendix A - Consumers and the Food System Under Covid-19 as PDF](#) (297.94 KB)

[View FSA Covid-19 social media listening as PDF](#) (563.2 KB)

[View FSA Covid-19 expert panel report as PDF](#) (267.47 KB)