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COVID-19 and Food - Food Security: A Major Concern for Households

The image of empty supermarket shelves is one of those that will remain from the announcement of the first lockdown. The Europeans practiced the «Hamsterkauf» as dubbed by the German speakers: they stocked up like hamsters. This rush on food supplies, especially rice and pasta, shows that the first worry was not the disease but the risk of running out of food: a striking phenomenon in affluent societies. During lockdowns, food stores were tagged «essential.» Food's centrality returned to the forefront: one could no longer delegate its management or forget its role (as is often the case in the West because of its easy access and urban lifestyles). The primary functions of food were exacerbated: setting the rhythm of a daily time that stretched to infinity, regulating emotions, being at the center of constrained social interactions, and anxieties about the risk of food insecurity. On the World Pandemic Research Network database, various studies dug into how the pandemic has shaken our relationship with food.

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All bakers?

In France, baking at home, «making its own bread» in particular, has been a striking social fact resulting in a relative shortage of flour and yeast in shops during the first lockdown. According to [the CNRS survey “Manger au temps du coronavirus”](#) listed on WPRN, it is surprising given the continued openness of bakeries and supermarkets, and it cannot be reduced to the goal of limiting social interaction during shopping. Beyond “the pleasure of the table” (fresh bread and pastries are emblematic), the researchers hypothesize that the lockdown triggered re-identification dynamics around gestures and products that are powerfully symbolic of cultural and social ties. Moreover, as Abdu Gnaba, author of [“Anthropologie des mangeurs de pain,”](#) explains: «We are going through a crisis. Sanitary, that’s for sure, but also an identity crisis. We find ourselves cut off from the world and our habits from one day to the next. In our culture, bread is reassuring and stable. To lack bread is synonymous with terror (...) There is also a strong link between bread and autonomy. It is the first food that babies eat in perfect autonomy or the one that older children can buy alone. »

A desire to become more «food self-sufficient»

[The CNRS study](#), which is based for its first phase on nearly 800 testimonials, underlines that regaining control over one’s food security is another social phenomenon characteristic of the lockdown. Citizens with the capacity to produce at home have turned to self-production (gardening and micro-livestock farming). Many have become more involved in cooking, and others have begun to share their culinary productions with friends and neighbors. According to the study’s findings, these practices are part of a desire to become more food self-sufficient. Many consumers have taken an active, sometimes creative role in gaining direct access to products. Lockdown has reinforced short circuit ordering systems through formal and informal arrangements (grouped orders between neighbors, orders over the phone between regular market customers and producers, volunteers selling products to their neighbors to support small producers by reducing the number of deliveries they had to do...) The direct relationship between consumers and producers has developed. In the United Kingdom, according to a [YouGov survey](#) recorded by WPRN, three million people tried for the first time an organic vegetable basket or ordered food directly from a local farm, both to obtain the food they needed and to support local production. [The WPRN survey](#) indicates that the stability over time of these new short-circuit practices remains an open question, with recent months suggesting a return to pre-lockdown consumption patterns. What about the organic sector?

Lockdown has accelerated the transition to organic and zero waste

Preliminary results from [a study of ten European countries](#) show that during the pandemic, in most countries, more organic products were purchased and less food was thrown away (however, the majority of households consumed less fresh food than usual). It was not in Central and Northern Europe that the change in these directions was the greatest, but in the countries of Southern, Eastern, and Western Europe. The researchers hypothesize that the latter countries had not yet reached as high a level of organic purchases as the former and were less concerned about food waste. Changes in the diet caused by the pandemic would have pushed them to catch up. Another part of [this study from Denmark, Germany and Slovenia](#) also points out that the type of food purchased often differed according to the degree of income loss during the pandemic. Those who experienced significant income losses tended to switch to more affordable foods and away from fresh foods. In contrast, those who experienced small losses compensated more for their isolation by increasing their prepared meals, sweets, and alcohol consumption. Food played an essential role in regulating emotions during this lockdown.

Discipline or emotional comfort: an ambivalent relationship to food

In Spain, [a study conducted in Catalonia](#) recorded by WPRN highlights the implementation of preventive practices related to the search for «healthy food.» The aim was to be «healthy,» protect the immune system and minimize other diseases' emergence. Concerns about fitness and weight, particularly those derived from the internalization of aesthetic standards of thinness, emerged or intensified, reinforcing disciplinary practices. It oscillated with moments of indulgence: an increase in the consumption of alcoholic beverages, pastries, snacks, or products whose consumption is usually controlled, as a way of managing time («filling in» temporary availability and «boredom»). This consumption also represented a way to cope with social discomfort and disciplines (legal, social, moral, and physical), but also with numerous uncertainties (virus hazard, lockdown evolution, contradictory pieces of information circulating in the media and on social networks...) Food thus became a means to ensure a minimum amount of pleasure and escape: it gave oneself emotional shelter.



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Food became a critical component in the emotional health of the respondents, through which they have channeled or subverted processes of discipline and individual control. However, this rules' transgression was also experienced under the sign of guilt: relaxing moments also became dosed and controlled. Behind these adaptations and disciplinary practices, [the Spanish study](#) emphasizes that a moral of lockdown is noticeable: one has to reinvent oneself and control oneself. Economic precariousness gave extra rise to anxiety in this context of unbalance and uncertainties.

An explosion in food aid demand

In France, many households fell into food insecurity through loss of income or increased expenses (for instance, families whose children usually had free meals at school). [The CNRS survey](#) underlines a massive influx of people who have to use food aid for the first time. [A study conducted at Princeton University](#), listed on WPRN reveals that the U.S. food stamp program number of applications has also increased dramatically (e.g., it was multiplied by five in Vermont). Due to the pandemic between April and June, more than half of those already in the program reported skipping meals and relying on relatives or associations to eating. Worldwide, the figures are even more worrisome. According to the [UN report *The impact of COVID-19 on food security and nutrition*](#), between February and June 2020, measures introduced to curb the spread of COVID-19 may already have pushed up to 45 million people into acute food insecurity, the majority of them in South and Southeast Asia (33 million), and most of the rest in sub-Saharan Africa. During the first four weeks of lockdown in India, poor households lost 88% of their average weekly income compared to the previous year. They had to reduce meal portions and consume less variety of food ([research conducted by Virginia Tech, listed on the WPRN](#).) Central Africa, already affected by droughts, has seen its production fall due to measures imposed to contain the spread of the virus. The UN report highlights the potentially dramatic impact of the crisis on global food security.



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Food crisis, resilience, experimentation

The pandemic revealed the strengths and weaknesses of our systems by putting pressure on them. Food is no exception. While inequalities have increased, throwing millions of people into food insecurity, lockdowns have also enabled experimentation, the emergence of new practices, and the demonstration of human resilience and creativity. How will these phenomena evolve in 2021? Several studies listed on the WPRN, notably the one covering ten European countries and the one of the CNRS mentioned above, keep monitoring the situation.

Was there a risk of food shortage in France?

As the CNRS points out in its research ["Manger au temps du coronavirus,"](#) in France, difficulties were not linked to the actual availability of food but rather to the supply chain's ability to adapt to a sudden, one-off increase in demand (increase in the number of customers and increase in the average basket). It put supply systems under pressure, requiring the emergency hiring of staff for transport, storage, traying in, and sales. As a general rule, the study concludes that the supply chain has been agile and resilient. It underlines territorialized food circuits' capacity to respond almost instantaneously to this demand explosion thanks to the reinforcement of existing systems and the emergence of new systems.

This memorandum is based on resources from the World Pandemic Research Network

Maréchal, Gilles. «Manger au temps du coronavirus».

<https://wprn.org/item/419752>

This TerrAlim-CNRS survey addresses the effects, questions, and solutions regarding the relations between the COVID19 epidemic and food systems. Its first phase is based on nearly 800 testimonials collected from March 16 to June 11, 2020. Short term, it aims at gathering and disseminating facts, data, and know-how about the reactions to the crisis. On a medium-long period, its goal is to raise, formalize and engage participatory research-action processes on the identified topics. The team gathers academic researchers, associations working on food systems, local associations, and social economy enterprises.

MacMillan, Tom. «UK food behaviour and attitudes YouGov poll».

<https://wprn.org/item/412052>

Led by the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission, in collaboration with the Food Foundation, this YouGov survey asked about 4,000 British citizens about reported changes in food behavior after about two weeks of lockdown and their hopes for after the pandemic was over. The finding is that only 9% of respondents wanted everything to return to how it was before the outbreak was widely reported in the UK.

Millard, Jeremy. «Our relationship with food during the covid-19 pandemic.

<https://wprn.org/item/422252>

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Food-Covid-19 network of food experts and researchers launched an online survey to gather initial information on how households have changed how they obtain, prepare and consume food. The data collected also covers behavioural changes resulting from variations in national lockdowns and other restrictions - such as physical closures of workplaces, canteens, restaurants, schools, and childcare institutions; changes in the frequency of household food purchases; individuals' perception of risks linked to COVID19; income losses due to the pandemic and socio-demographic factors. Approximately 8,000 valid responses were obtained, with most national surveys using quota sampling to ensure that samples were generally representative of national populations.

Maria Clara Gaspar, Marta Ruiz, Arantza Begueria, Sarah Anadon, Amanda Barba y Cristina Larrea-Killinger «Comer en tiempos de confinamiento: gestión de la alimentación, disciplina y placer» in Fradejas-Garcia, Ignacio. «Etnografías de la pandemia por coronavirus».

<https://wprn.org/item/464452>

A special issue of the journal analyzing the pandemic's social dimensions. Published in July 2020, it includes sixteen peer-reviewed articles based on empirical anthropological research in Spain, Italy, Morocco, Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, and Ecuador. The methodology used is mainly qualitative (interviews, online/offline ethnography, etc.) and combines with quantitative methods (online surveys) to develop mixed methods. The article cited in this note, «Comer en tiempos de confinamiento: gestión de la alimentación, disciplina y placer,» aims to analyze the lockdown experience caused by the state of emergency in Spain through the dietary practices and representations of adult women living in urban areas of Catalonia. The majority of them are women with higher education and professional experience who did not stop working at the time of lockdown.

Enriquez, Diana. «Covid-19's Socio-Economic Impact on Low-Income Benefit Recipients: Early Evidence from Tracking Surveys.

<https://wprn.org/item/466652>

This research at Princeton University aims to understand the incidence of COVID-19-induced hardships among low-income/benefits-eligible households during the early months of the crisis. Five repeated online surveys of SNAP recipients measured perceived and realized housing insecurity, food scarcity, new debt accrual, and recent job loss. Food insecurity and debt accrual grew more prevalent between April to June 2020, and job losses compounded. Although the magnitude of racial differences varies across indicators and data sources, black respondents fared consistently worse than non-Hispanic whites in both survey data sets, and Latinx respondents fared worse than whites in the Household Pulse Survey. These results provide early systematic evidence on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on poor Americans and racial disparities therein.

Gupta, Anubhab; Zhu, Heng; Doan, Miki Khanh & Al. «Economic Impacts of the COVID-19 Lockdown on the Poor».

<https://wprn.org/item/476552>

In India, the lockdown affected 1.3 billion people. Before the pandemic, this Virginia Tech study was already tracking the weekly financial activities of a sample of poor households in rural India for over a year. Using this unique high-frequency weekly data and supplementing it with phone-call surveys conducted on the same households for four weeks after the lockdown announcement, the study econometrically estimates the impacts of the lockdown on the poorest Indian households.