Food Safety Concerns in Public Venues

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# Abstract

This research paper explores the critical issue of food safety at public sporting events, focusing on a personal incident involving the receipt of expired food at a basketball game at Reed Arena, Texas A&M University. The study examines regulatory frameworks, ethical implications, health risks, and proposes solutions to enhance food safety in large event venues. Through analysis of food laws, training standards, international practices, and real-world cases, the paper advocates for improved oversight and awareness to protect consumers.

# Introduction

Public sporting events draw large crowds, creating high demand for food and beverages. However, this convenience often comes at a cost—compromised food quality. The inspiration for this research stems from a first-hand experience of receiving expired food at a Texas A&M basketball game at Reed Arena. This incident underscores the broader issue of inadequate food safety enforcement in event settings. The goal of this paper is to explore the legal, ethical, and health dimensions of such incidents and recommend practical solutions.

# Background and Motivation

The availability of food during games is part of the fan experience. Yet, in fast-paced environments like sports arenas, food handling protocols can be overlooked. Vendors may prioritize speed and profit over safety, leading to situations where expired or improperly stored food is served. The experience at Reed Arena is not isolated. According to a report by the CDC (2013–2020), over 800 foodborne illness outbreaks have been linked to mass gatherings in the United States. Public venues must implement robust food safety systems, yet many concessions rely on undertrained staff and outdated practices.

# Legal and Regulatory Framework

The U.S. relies on a fragmented food safety system led by the FDA and USDA. The FDA Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) introduced preventive controls (HARPC), traceability mandates, and inspection authority—but only for registered facilities.

Although the FSMA marked a significant shift toward preventive food safety in the U.S., it lacks specific provisions addressing the sale or handling of expired food. FSMA focuses on preventive controls and supply chain accountability, yet it does not regulate expiration labeling beyond offering voluntary guidelines. Except for infant formula, no federal law prohibits the sale of food past its printed expiration date.

Terms like “sell by,” “use by,” and “best before” are not legally enforceable, and vendors may legally sell expired food unless it is visibly spoiled or misrepresented. This creates confusion and leaves enforcement largely to state and local authorities, who may have limited resources—especially when overseeing temporary or mobile food vendors at large venues such as sporting events. These sellers often operate in a regulatory gray zone, with less frequent inspections and looser oversight.

In contrast, the European Union enforces mandatory “use by” labeling with strict legal consequences for distributing expired food. Similarly, China prohibits the sale of expired packaged goods and imposes criminal penalties for violations, regardless of spoilage visibility. These systems promote accountability through clear labeling rules and uniform national enforcement.

In Texas, the Food Establishment Rules (Chapter 228) mandate food to be safe and wholesome but do not require real-time tracking or removal of expired items. This absence of expiration-specific standards limits the effectiveness of inspections and allows expired food to circulate at events like those hosted at Reed Arena.Overall, the U.S. system lacks the consistency and clarity found in international frameworks, leaving a critical gap in consumer protection and venue accountability.

# Ethical and Public Health Implications

From a public health standpoint, the consumption of expired food—particularly perishable items such as dairy, meats, or pre-cooked snacks—can lead to severe foodborne illnesses. Pathogens like Salmonella, E. coli, and Listeria monocytogenes pose a real risk when food is consumed beyond safe storage timelines, especially in crowded venues where hygiene control is inconsistent.

Ethically, the sale of expired food at a public institution raises questions of accountability and duty of care. Consumers have the right to make informed decisions based on accurate labeling. When vendors fail to discard expired goods or when institutions fail to enforce quality standards, they breach that trust. Universities, as educational and community pillars, hold an ethical obligation to uphold safety standards and lead by example. Negligence in this regard reflects a broader disregard for health, transparency, and consumer rights.

# Literature Review

A growing body of research emphasizes that food safety is not only a matter of regulation but also of education, behavior, and organizational culture. Training, awareness campaigns, and international comparisons all contribute to understanding how expired food reaches consumers and what measures can prevent it.

**Soon et al. (2021)** conducted a comprehensive systematic review and meta-analysis examining the effectiveness of food safety and hygiene training on food handlers across multiple settings and countries. Their analysis found that such training significantly improves both knowledge retention and positive attitudes toward hygiene practices. However, they noted a gap between knowledge acquisition and real-world application, particularly when training was conducted only once or lacked ongoingreinforcement. The study recommended continuous education, supervisory feedback, and workplace culture change as critical factors in sustaining behavioral improvements.

Building on this, **Berglund, Simsek, and Feng (2024)** investigated the effectiveness of online food safety education programs and concluded that while digital platforms increased general awareness, their success in changing behavior depended on interactiveelements and real-time assessments. Programs that included quizzes, scenario simulations, and gamified learning were more impactful than static video lectures. The study is particularly relevant to high-turnover environments—like sports venues or campus events—where training must be efficient, engaging, and repeatable.

In the context of developing nations, **Amoah et al. (2023)** found that food safety training has a direct, measurable correlation with improved safe food handling practices. Their meta-analysis of studies conducted in Ghana revealed that workers who received targeted training showed greater compliance with hygiene standards, including proper storage, rotation, and disposal of expired products. Although focused on Ghana, the study’s insights apply globally—particularly in under-regulated or temporary vendorenvironments like those found at public events in the U.S. The findings emphasize that regulatory oversight must be coupled with grassroots education to create sustainable change.

**Hui (2020)** presented a comparative analysis of food contact material (FCM) regulations and expiration labeling laws in China versus the United States. The study highlights that China's recent food safety reforms include criminal penaltiesfor the sale of expired food, mandatory expiration labeling, and strict enforcement mechanisms. In contrast, U.S. laws remain largely voluntary and fragmented, especially in non-federally regulated settings like sports arenas and temporary food stalls. Hui argues that the U.S. could benefit from adopting clearer expiration guidelines and stricter enforcement protocols, as China’s model prioritizes consumer safety through legal accountability.

Finally, reports from the **Institute of Medicine (1998)** and the **FDA’s New Era of Smarter Food Safety Blueprint (2021)** emphasize the importance of cultivating a “food safety culture” within organizations. These sources stress that beyond compliance, food safety must be internalized by all levels of staff—from management to temporary workers—through training, leadership modeling, and operational practices. For venues like Reed Arena, Kyle field, where event-based staffing is common, building this culture is essential to reduce risks associated with expired or improperly handled food.

# Case Studies and Real-World Comparisons

**Reed Arena Incident (2024):** During a Texas A&M University basketball game at Reed Arena, a student purchased a pre-packaged snack that was found to be past its expiration date. The incident, although seemingly minor, raised significant concern about food safety and quality control at large university-hosted events. Despite attempts to report the issue, no formal response or corrective action was taken by the concession vendor or venue administration. This incident serves as the core motivation for this research and exemplifies the risks posed by insufficient inspection and inventory management practices.

**Oogie Boogie Bash, Disneyland (2024):** At this Halloween-themed event in California Adventure Park, multiple guests received expired snack items in their trick-or-treat bags, including well-known brand products like Goldfish Crackers and Sun-Chips. These findings were publicized through social media and blogs, leading to widespread criticism. Although no major health outcomes were reported, the incident tarnished the event's reputation and highlighted lapses in stock rotation and food safety verification even at top-tier commercial venues.

**Chicago Cubs Vendor Scandal (2004):** Health inspectors conducting surprise checks at Wrigley Field discovered that several food vendors were storing and selling expired or visibly spoiled food, including moldy pretzels and outdated hot dogs. The city of Chicago fined vendors, and several stands were shut down temporarily. This case revealed long-standing issues with vendor oversight at large sporting venues and led to increased training and inspection requirements for event-based food services in the city.

**United States v. Park (1975):** This landmark U.S. Supreme Court case involved the CEO of Acme Markets, a national food chain, who was held criminally responsible under the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act (FDCA) after repeated findings of rodent contamination in company warehouses. The Court ruled that a corporate officer can be liable even without direct involvement if they were in a position of authority and failed to prevent or correct violations. This precedent underscores the importance of managerial accountability in food safety, especially within large institutions and chains.

**Policy Recommendations: Toward a Federal Expiration Law**

To close the regulatory gap, this paper recommends the following federal policy actions:

**Establish a National Expiration Labeling Standard**  
The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) should develop and enforce a standardized expiration labeling system that applies to all perishable and shelf-stable foods sold in the United States. This system must clearly distinguish between:

* Quality-based dates (e.g., “Best if used by”) which relate to flavor and texture.
* Safety-based dates (e.g., “Use by”) which indicate when a product is no longer considered microbiologically safe for consumption.

These labels should be printed in uniform format and font size and placed prominently on product packaging to eliminate consumer confusion. The development of this standard should be based on scientific research and input from food safety experts, consumer advocacy groups, and industry representatives.

**Define "Safe Consumption Windows"**  
The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) should collaborate to define science-backed timelines—referred to as “safe consumption windows”—for how long different food categories remain safe beyond their printed expiration dates, assuming proper storage conditions. For example:

* Refrigerated deli meats may remain safe for 3–5 days after the “sell by” date.
* Dry cereals might be safe up to 3 months after “best before” if stored in airtight containers.

This guidance would help regulators and vendors make informed decisions about removing items from circulation and would provide a clear foundation for legal enforcement. Public dissemination of these windows would also improve consumer awareness and reduce food waste through education.

**Enforce Automatic Expiration Removal for Public Vendors**  
Federal regulations should require public-serving food vendors—including those operating in universities, stadiums, arenas, parks, and transit centers—to remove expired food products from shelves and storage immediately after their designated safety thresholds. This rule would apply to both packaged and prepared foods, and should include:

* Mandatory inventory checks at the start and end of each day,
* Labeling systems that trigger alerts on or near the expiration date,
* Logbooks or digital apps for verification by venue managers or inspectors.

Compliance with this policy would help eliminate the risk of selling expired goods to large crowds, particularly in venues that serve high volumes of children, students, or immunocompromised individuals.

**Include Expiration Checks in Health Inspections**  
To ensure compliance, federal guidelines should require state and local health inspectors to routinely audit expiration date compliance during all scheduled and unscheduled inspections of food service operations. These checks should include:

* Spot-checking shelf inventory,
* Reviewing vendor rotation logs or digital tracking systems,
* Observing labeling practices in cold and dry storage areas.

Vendors who are found distributing or displaying expired food products should face graduated penalties, including warnings, fines, and possible suspension of operating licenses. The presence of expired food should be recorded as a critical violation, just like improper temperatures or cross-contamination. Integrating expiration checks into routine inspections would formalize responsibility and deter vendors from neglecting best practices.

# Proposed Solutions

In addition to legislative reforms, practical steps can enhance food safety in public venues:

1. **Mandatory Food Safety Training**  
   To ensure all individuals involved in food handling understand proper safety procedures, the implementation of mandatory short-course certifications is essential. These should cover topics such as proper storage temperatures, safe food rotation, expiration date interpretation, personal hygiene, and allergen awareness. For temporary or seasonal workers, such as those hired during sporting events, a condensed but comprehensive module—available online or through mobile platforms—would be practical. Certification must be completed before employment begins and renewed annually. Institutions and venues should maintain a record of staff completion for inspection purposes.
2. **Smart Inventory Systems**  
   One of the most effective ways to prevent expired food from reaching consumers is using digital inventory tracking systems. These systems use barcodes or QR codes to log and monitor the shelf life of food items. With real-time alerts, vendors can receive notifications as items approach expiration, allowing for proactive removal or markdown. These systems can be integrated into smartphones or tablets, making them accessible even to small or mobile vendors. Over time, such technology can also generate useful analytics to improve purchasing patterns and reduce waste.
3. **Visible Expiration Tags for Consumers**  
   Transparency at the point of sale empowers consumers to make safe choices. Vendors should be required to display **clearly visible expiration dates** on all packaged foods and freshly prepared items. For example, a pre-packed sandwich sold at a concession stand should have a front-facing “Use by [Date]” tag in large, legible font. This allows consumers to verify freshness themselves and removes ambiguity. Additionally, color-coded labeling (e.g., red for expired, green for fresh) can further assist both staff and customers in identifying out-of-date products briefly.
4. **Guest Feedback Mechanism**  
   Public accountability is a powerful tool in food safety. Stadiums, arenas, and event venues should implement anonymous guest feedback systems, allowing attendees to report expired or suspicious food via QR codes placed on receipts, packaging, or vendor booths. These digital forms can be linked to internal audit systems and include the option to upload photos or provide comments. Not only does this create a direct communication channel between the consumer and management, but it also encourages vendors to maintain higher standards, knowing their practices are subject to real-time review.
5. **Vendor Accountability Programs**  
   Contracts between event venues and third-party food vendors should include specific clauses addressing food expiration management. These contracts should mandate expiration tracking, periodic audits, and immediate removal protocols for expired items. Penalties for non-compliance—such as fines, probation, or contract termination—should be clearly outlined and enforced. Additionally, vendors should be required to submit monthly or event-specific compliance reports. This structured accountability ensures that food safety is embedded in vendor operations and not left to chance.
6. **Interactive Learning Modules**  
   Deploy or develop gamified apps like Food Safety Hero to engage and educate temporary workers efficiently.

# Discussion

While laws exist to regulate food safety, gaps in enforcement—especially in temporary settings—leave consumers at risk. The paper illustrates how even well-regarded institutions like Texas A&M are vulnerable to lapses without proactive systems. Public awareness and vendor education must go hand in hand with regulatory oversight. By embedding safety into vendor culture and using digital tools for transparency, incidents like those at Reed Arena can be prevented.

# Conclusion

The issue of expired food in public venues, as seen at Reed Arena, reflects deeper systemic flaws in U.S. food regulation and vendor oversight. The absence of enforceable expiration standards not only jeopardizes health but also erodes trust in institutions meant to serve the public. Learning from international frameworks, implementing mandatory training, and adopting federal expiration laws are crucial next steps. Food safety is not just about avoiding illness—it is about respect, accountability, and the right to consume food that is safe, fresh, and honestly represented.

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