Meat Preferences Vary a Lot Across Different Countries

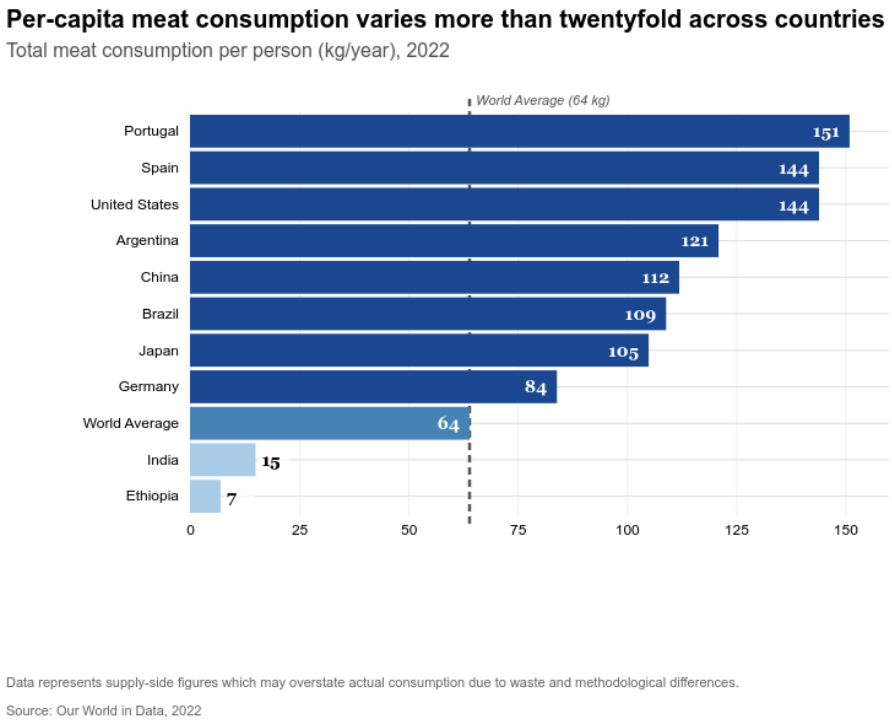
This comprehensive report examines the dramatic variations in meat consumption worldwide, exploring not just overall quantities but the striking differences in preferred meat types across nations. Drawing on data from multiple sources, we analyze the cultural, economic, and social factors driving these preferences, track recent consumption trends, and consider future projections alongside sustainability implications.

Global Landscape of Meat Consumption

The global meat consumption landscape reveals extraordinary disparities across countries, with some nations consuming more than twenty times the amount of meat per person compared to others. These variations reflect deep differences in economic development, cultural traditions, agricultural practices, and dietary preferences.

Per-Capita Consumption Shows Dramatic Range

Per-capita total meat consumption in 2022 varies more than twentyfold across countries. Portugal tops the list at 151 kg/person/year, followed by Spain and the United States at 144 kg each. Other high-consumption nations include Argentina (121 kg), China (112 kg), Brazil (109 kg), and Japan (105 kg). These figures stand in stark contrast to the world average of 64 kg—and even more dramatically against countries like India (15 kg) and Ethiopia (7 kg), which have among the lowest per-capita consumption rates globally.



Understanding Data Limitations

It's crucial to note that these figures come with important methodological caveats. FAO supply-side data, which form the basis of many international comparisons, typically overstate actual human meat consumption due to several factors:

1. **Bones and inedible parts** included in carcass weight calculations
2. **Food losses** throughout the supply chain
3. **Export imbalances** that may not be fully accounted for

Denmark provides a striking example of how methodology affects reported consumption figures. The country's per-capita "carcass mass availability" fell dramatically from 145.9 kg in 2002 to 95.2 kg in 2009 after methodology changes. Furthermore, loss-adjusted estimates by DTU's Fødevareinstituttet put real consumption at just 48 kg per adult per year during this period—roughly a third of the original figure.

Similarly, US per-capita meat intake estimates vary widely by data source. In 2012, the USDA ERS unadjusted supply figure was 330 g/day (11.6 oz/day), but after adjusting for various losses (39.8% farm-to-retail, 4% retail, 15% consumer loss), this figure dropped to 166.5 g/day (5.9 oz/day). Meanwhile, FAO reported 382.4 g/day (13.5 oz/day) for 2011, and NHANES 2011-12 Food Pattern Equivalents indicated just 125.9 g/day (4.4 oz/day) of cooked lean meat.

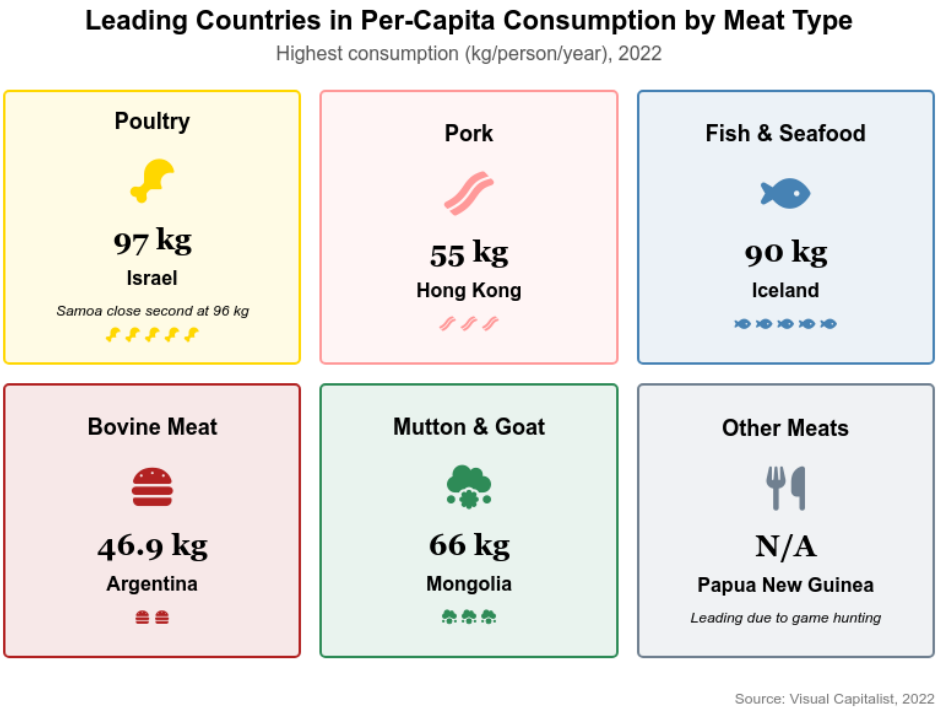
These discrepancies highlight the challenges in accurately comparing meat consumption across countries and underline why caution is needed when interpreting international consumption data.

National Preferences by Meat Type

Beyond total quantities, countries display remarkably distinct preferences for specific types of meat. These preferences are shaped by a complex interplay of factors including geographic location, agricultural traditions, religious practices, economic development, and culinary heritage.

Dominant Meat Types Show Regional Patterns

Poultry has emerged as the single most-consumed meat type in approximately 70 countries (about 40% of all nations), with fish and seafood second in 56 countries. However, specific nations stand out as leaders in particular meat categories:

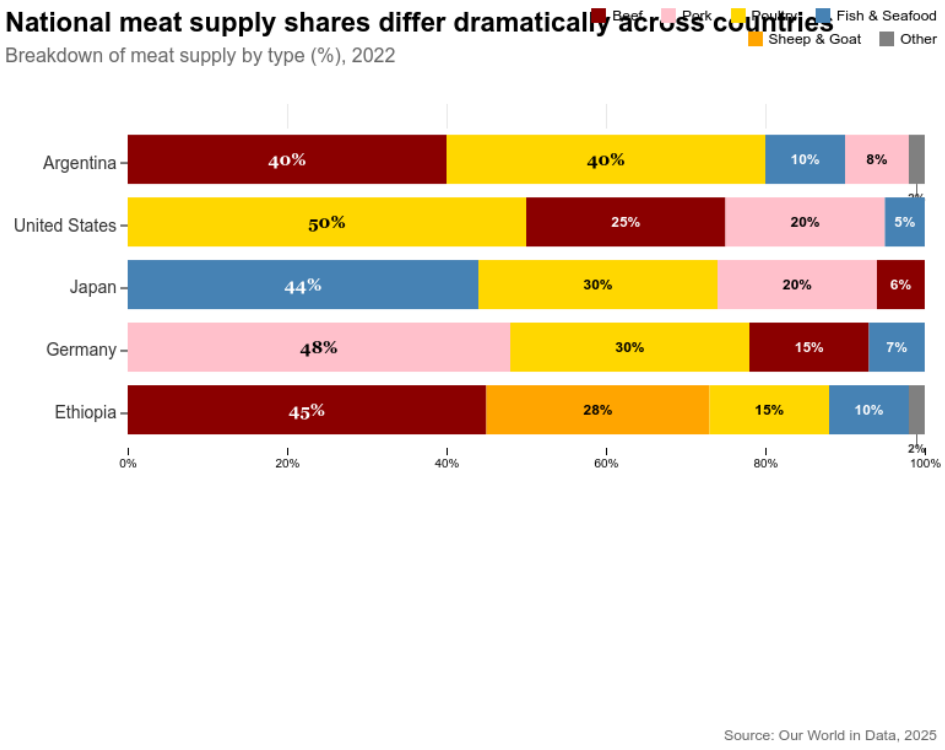


- **Poultry**: Israel (97 kg) and Samoa (96 kg) lead global consumption
- **Pork**: Hong Kong tops the chart at 55 kg per person per year
- **Fish & Seafood**: Iceland consumes an impressive 90 kg per person annually
- **Bovine Meat**: Argentina maintains its beef tradition with 46.9 kg per capita
- **Mutton & Goat**: Mongolia's nomadic heritage is reflected in its 66 kg consumption
- **Other Meats**: Papua New Guinea leads in this category due to its strong game-hunting tradition

These standing leaders represent extremes within meat type categories, but their dominance reveals how deeply cultural practices, agricultural systems, and geographic location shape dietary preferences.

National Supply Shares Reveal Dietary Patterns

Beyond identifying consumption leaders, examining the composition of national meat supply reveals distinctive dietary patterns across countries. These supply shares illustrate the relative importance of different meat types in national diets:



Source: Our World in Data, 2025

- **Argentina's** diet is split evenly between beef and poultry (40% each)
- **United States** is poultry-dominant (50%)
- **Japan** consumes a substantial proportion of fish and seafood (44%)
- **Germany's** supply is predominantly pork (48%)
- **Ethiopia** relies heavily on beef (45%) and sheep/goat (28%)

These differences reflect not just resource availability but also deeply ingrained cultural preferences. For example, Germany's pork dominance connects to its centuries-old traditions of sausage and cured meat production, while Japan's high seafood consumption is tied to its island geography and culinary heritage.

Supply-Side Data vs. Actual Consumption

The challenge of accurate consumption measurement persists when examining meat types. FAO's standardized Supply Utilization Accounts (SUAs) use commodity trees and extraction rates to convert all processed outputs back to primary-commodity equivalents. While this standardization is useful for global comparisons, imbalances between supply and utilization are resolved using tolerance intervals on measurement errors, distributing discrepancies proportionally rather than assigning a single residual.

FAO's SDG 12.3.1a model for pre-retail food loss leverages a 28,000-point Food Loss and Waste (FLW) database and random-effects regression with proxy drivers (climate, logistics, energy, finance) to estimate country and commodity-level losses. The results for 2021 show global losses of 13.2% before retail, peaking at 19.9% in sub-Saharan Africa and 31.2% for fruits and vegetables.

These methodological considerations underscore that supply figures should be interpreted as indicative rather than precise measures of actual human consumption.

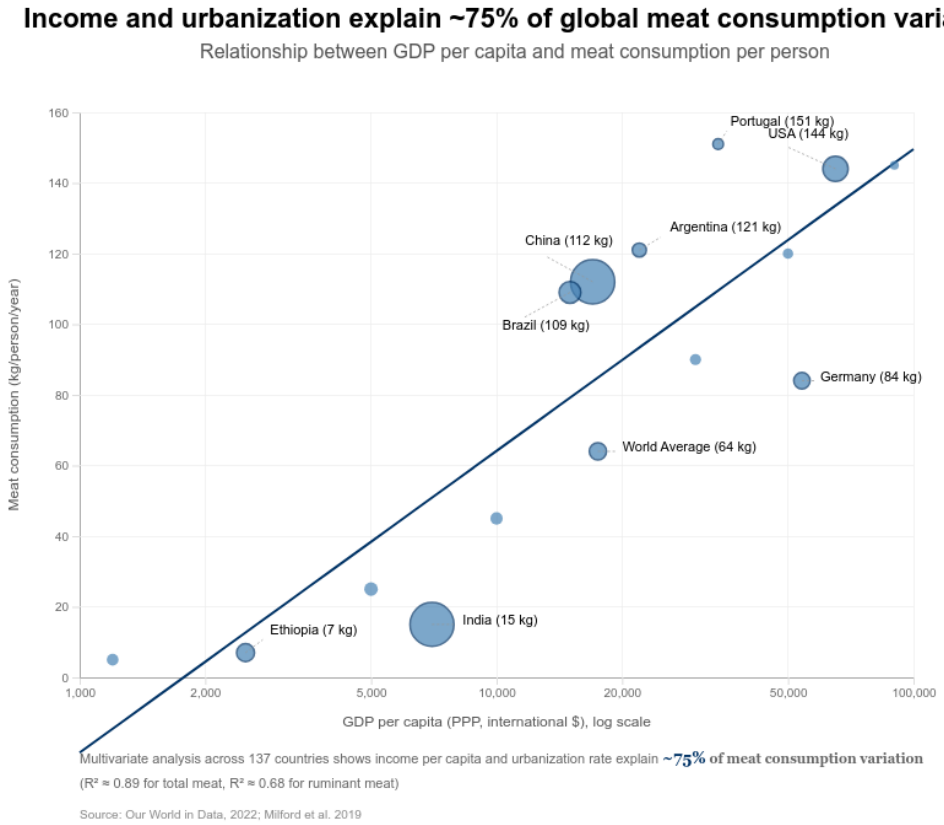
Cultural, Economic, and Psychographic Drivers

Meat consumption patterns are not random - they reflect complex interplays between economic factors, cultural traditions, and individual psychology. Understanding the key drivers behind national and individual preferences reveals why meat consumption varies so dramatically worldwide.

Income and Urbanization as Primary Drivers

A cross-country multivariate regression across 137 nations identified income per capita and urbanization rate as the two most important drivers of total meat consumption per capita. Together, these factors explain approximately 75% of global meat consumption growth between 1961 and 2011. This strong relationship highlights how economic development typically corresponds with increased meat intake.

The relationship is particularly strong for total meat consumption ($R^2 \approx 0.89$), though somewhat weaker for ruminant meat ($R^2 \approx 0.68$), where natural endowment factors play a more significant role. This difference suggests that while wealth drives overall meat consumption, the specific types of meat consumed are also influenced by local agricultural conditions and traditions.



Psychographic Segmentation Reveals Consumer Groups

Beyond macroeconomic factors, individual attitudes and beliefs strongly influence meat consumption. A comparison of consumer segments in Switzerland and Vietnam revealed fascinating insights into how psychology shapes meat preferences across different cultural contexts.

Five psychographic meat-consumer segments emerged in both Switzerland and Vietnam, with three shared clusters across both countries:

1. **Meat Lovers** (21% Switzerland, 19% Vietnam): High consumption (Switzerland 0.71 kg/week, Vietnam 1.04 kg/week)
2. **Proactive** consumers (22% Switzerland, 14% Vietnam): Lower consumption (Switzerland 0.22 kg/week, Vietnam 0.44 kg/week)
3. **Suggestible** consumers (19% Switzerland, 25% Vietnam): Moderate consumption with high susceptibility to influence (intention scores: Switzerland 4.40/6, Vietnam 4.75/6)

Each country also showed two unique segments: **Traditional** (19%) and **Basic** (21%) in Switzerland, and **Confident** (16%) and **Anxious** (26%) in Vietnam.

These segments exhibited markedly different attitudes toward meat consumption. For instance, Swiss Proactive consumers scored 5.61/6 on pro-environmental attitude and 5.55/6 on animal welfare, compared to Meat Lovers at just 3.84/6 and 3.64/6, respectively. Meanwhile, Vietnamese Suggestible consumers showed the highest familial-influence barrier (4.40/6) compared to Confident consumers (2.57/6), indicating how social context shapes consumption decisions differently across cultures.

Cultural Heritage and Meat as Social Marker

Meat has long functioned as a potent social marker across different societies. In France, for example, meat transitioned from an aristocratic prerogative to a working-class staple, while executives now increasingly favor plant foods. This evolution reflects meat's changing status as a cultural signifier over time.

The relationship between meat and status dates back centuries. In medieval and Renaissance France, protein access was a stark class marker: peasants subsisted primarily on grains, root vegetables, and "occasional meat scraps," while the aristocracy feasted on roast swan, peacock, and exotic spices to broadcast their status.

During Louis XIV's reign (1643-1715), French cuisine was institutionalized as cultural capital. The 1651 publication of Le Cuisinier françois codified multi-course menus for nobility, and the Sun King's elaborate daily dinner ritual served by 500 staff using gold and vermeil tableware became the apex of gastronomic display. Courtiers and bourgeois imitated these banquets in diminishing tiers of refinement, exemplifying how food preferences trickle down through society.

The French Revolution of 1789 catalyzed the democratization of meat consumption. The rise of restaurateurs and cookbooks on "cuisine bourgeoise"—rich in butter, sauces, and slow-cooked meats—made dishes like coq-au-vin and boeuf bourguignon affordable to a broader public. This period accelerated meat's shift from aristocratic symbol to working-class staple.

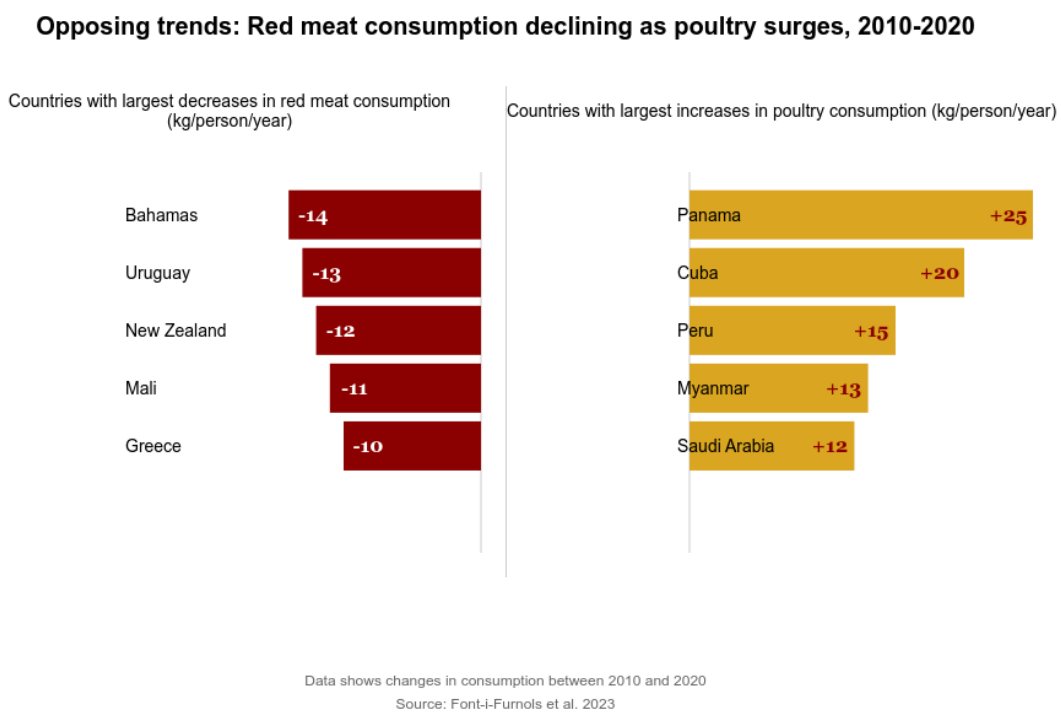
These historical patterns demonstrate how meat consumption is deeply embedded in social structures, with preferences evolving alongside changes in economic and political systems.

Shifting Trends and Recent Dynamics

Meat consumption patterns are not static—they evolve over time, reflecting changing economic conditions, health awareness, and cultural attitudes. Recent decades have witnessed significant shifts in both total consumption levels and preferences for specific meat types across different regions.

Red Meat Decline and Poultry's Rise

Between 2010 and 2020, red meat consumption fell by more than 10 kg per person per year in several traditional meat-producing countries, including the Bahamas, Uruguay, New Zealand, Mali, and Greece. This decline reflects a broader trend away from red meat in many developed economies, driven by health concerns, environmental awareness, and changing consumer preferences.



Conversely, poultry consumption climbed by more than 10 kg per person per year in 16 countries during the same period, with Panama (+25 kg) and Cuba (+20 kg) showing the largest gains. This dramatic growth in poultry consumption represents one of the most significant dietary shifts of the past decade.

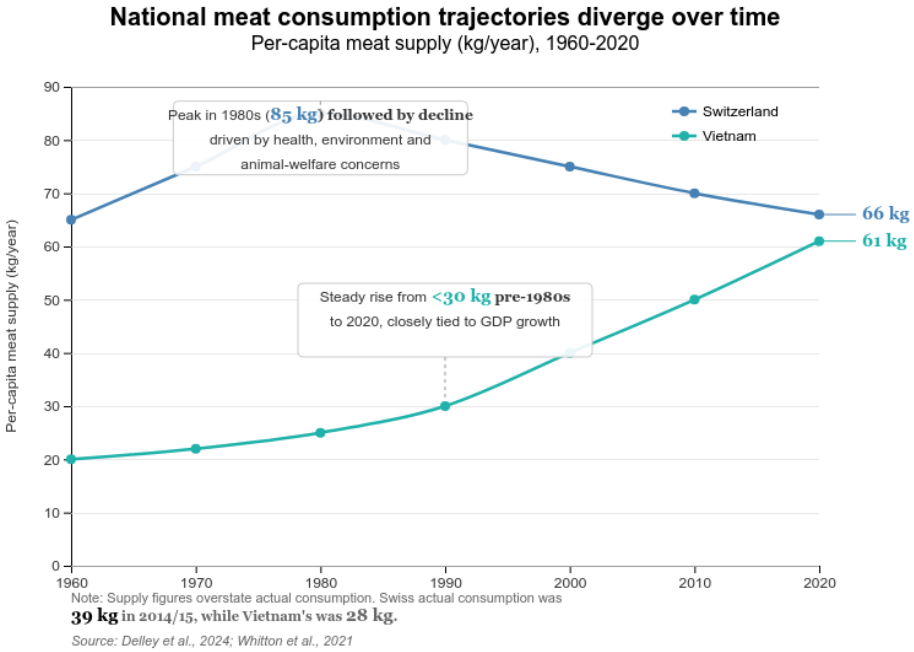
The shift from red meat to poultry is not coincidental—it reflects several key advantages that poultry production offers:

- **Superior feed conversion efficiency**: Producing 4,184 kJ of beef requires 37,656 kJ of grain (9:1 ratio), while pork requires a 4:1 ratio and chicken just 2:1.
- **Shorter production cycle**: Poultry reaches market in just 4-8 weeks, compared to months for pork and years for beef.
- **Integrated contract farming**: The poultry industry has pioneered efficient vertical integration.
- **Price competitiveness**: These efficiency factors translate to lower consumer prices.

Between 1961 and 2022, global per capita poultry consumption more than tripled—from roughly 5 kg/person to about 15 kg—outpacing pork (which rose from ~8 kg to ~14 kg) and beef (from ~7 kg to ~9 kg), making poultry the world's fastest-growing meat category.

National Consumption Trajectories

Individual countries show distinctly different meat consumption trajectories over time, reflecting their unique economic development paths and cultural factors.



Switzerland's per-capita meat supply peaked at 85 kg/year in the 1980s, then declined to 66 kg by 2020 (with actual consumption measured at just 39 kg in 2014/15). This decline was driven by growing health consciousness, environmental concerns, and animal welfare considerations among Swiss consumers.

In stark contrast, Vietnam's meat supply rose steadily from less than 30 kg in the pre-1980s period to 61 kg by 2020 (with actual consumption at 28 kg). This growth trajectory closely parallels Vietnam's economic development and rising GDP per capita, illustrating the strong relationship between economic growth and meat consumption in developing economies.

The UK provides another example of shifting preferences, with per-capita poultry consumption increasing fivefold since the 1960s—driven largely by a substantial drop in chicken's relative price—while beef and lamb intake declined over the same period.

Recent Drivers of Consumption Change

In a 2021 Uruguay survey, respondents identified three main drivers for their reduced red meat consumption:

1. **Cost concerns** (cited by 46% of respondents)
2. **Health concerns** (21%)
3. **Dietary changes** (19%)

These findings suggest that economic factors remain paramount in consumption decisions, but health considerations and broader dietary shifts are increasingly influential.

Demographic factors also play a role in shaping consumption patterns. A 2014 cross-sectional survey of 520 New York City women (ages 20-29) found that annual total meat consumption varied significantly by ethnicity:

- Non-Hispanic Blacks: 64.2 kg
- East Asians: 53.6 kg
- Whites: 46.9 kg
- Hispanics: 35.8 kg

These differences were statistically significant ($P < 0.05$), with Blacks consuming the most chicken (odds ratio = 2.1 vs. Whites; 95% CI 1.0-4.7) and East Asians leading in pork and processed meat consumption (processed meat odds ratio = 6.3; 95% CI 1.8-22.1). Interestingly, more than 50% of all ethnic groups expressed an intention to reduce their future meat intake, suggesting a growing consciousness about meat consumption across demographic groups.

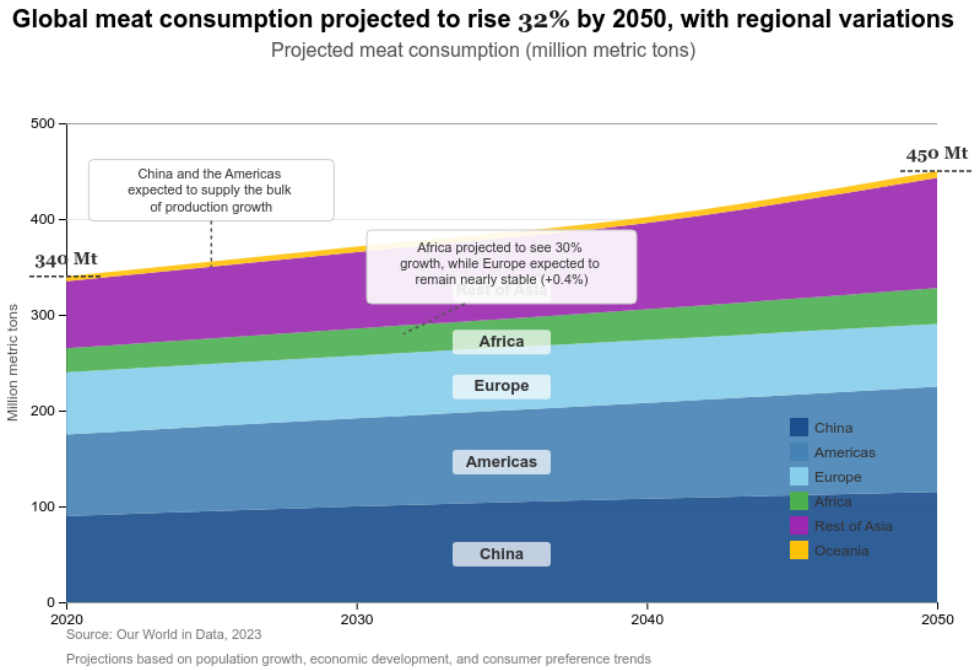
Future Outlook and Sustainability Implications

As we look toward the coming decades, understanding projected meat consumption trends and their sustainability implications becomes increasingly important. Multiple factors—including population growth, economic development, changing consumer preferences, and environmental concerns—will shape the future of global meat consumption.

Global Consumption Projections

Our World in Data's global meat projections show total meat consumption climbing from approximately 340 million metric tons in 2020 to about 450 million metric tons by 2050—representing a 32% increase over three decades. This expansion will be driven by both population growth and increases in per-capita

consumption in developing economies.



According to OECD-FAO's 2021 Agricultural Outlook, global per capita meat consumption is projected to rise at 0.3% per annum to 35.4 kg retail-weight equivalent by 2030. This growth will not be evenly distributed across meat types, with poultry's share of meat-sourced protein climbing to 41% (an increase of 2 percentage points compared to 2018-20), while pigmeat, beef, and sheep meat are expected to account for 34%, 20%, and 5%, respectively.

Regional projections show significant variations: - Africa is projected to see approximately 30% growth in meat consumption - Europe is expected to remain nearly stable with just 0.4% growth

These projections reflect the continued correlation between economic development and meat consumption, with growth concentrated in regions experiencing rising incomes and urbanization.

The Poultry Revolution Continues

The dominance of poultry in future meat consumption growth appears likely to continue. Dr. Paul Aho (Poultry Perspective) forecasted at the 25th Latin American Poultry Congress that by 2050, per capita beef and pork consumption will shrink, whereas poultry and eggs will grow "significantly." In the near term (2017-27), US chicken output was projected to rise from 19 million tons to 20 million tons (+1% p.a.) and exports from 3.1 million tons to 3.6 million tons (+0.5% p.a.).

OECD/FAO projections suggest that poultry will account for 52% of the increase in meat consumption by 2030, reinforcing its position as the world's fastest-growing meat category. This continued shift toward poultry is driven by several factors:

1. **Superior feed efficiency**: Poultry's more favorable feed conversion ratio makes it both economically and environmentally advantageous.
2. **Lower production costs**: Shorter production cycles and vertical integration enable lower consumer prices.
3. **Health perceptions**: Many consumers perceive poultry as healthier than red meats.
4. **Environmental footprint**: Poultry generally has a lower environmental impact per unit of protein than beef.

Sustainability Considerations

The projected 32% increase in global meat consumption by 2050 raises important sustainability concerns. Meat production—particularly beef—is associated with significant environmental impacts, including greenhouse gas emissions, land use, water consumption, and biodiversity loss.

Intensive livestock production systems have emerged partly in response to these concerns. Intensive poultry systems, with their superior feed conversion efficiency and shorter production cycles, offer environmental advantages over more extensive livestock systems. However, they also raise animal welfare concerns and can create localized pollution issues.

As global meat consumption continues to rise, addressing these sustainability challenges will require a multifaceted approach:

1. **Efficiency improvements** in livestock production to reduce environmental footprints
2. **Shifts in consumer preferences** toward lower-impact meat types
3. **Development of alternative proteins** to complement traditional meat production
4. **Reduction of food waste** throughout the supply chain

5. **Policy interventions** to promote sustainable production and consumption

The future of meat consumption will be shaped by the complex interplay of these factors, with significant implications for global food security, environmental sustainability, and human health.

This report has explored the remarkable diversity in meat consumption patterns across countries, examining not just the quantities consumed but the types preferred and the driving factors behind these preferences. From Portugal's world-leading 151 kg per person per year to Ethiopia's modest 7 kg, these differences reflect deep-seated cultural traditions, economic conditions, and individual attitudes toward meat consumption.

As we look toward the future, understanding these patterns becomes increasingly important for addressing global challenges related to nutrition, resource allocation, and environmental sustainability. The projected 32% growth in global meat consumption by 2050 will require thoughtful approaches to balance nutritional needs with environmental constraints, particularly in rapidly developing regions where meat consumption is expected to rise most significantly.

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