

# The COVID-19 consumer research

Research programme [Research projects -](#)

Study duration April 2020 to July 2020

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 includes waves from April to July 2020, 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 July 2020.

## Key findings

### COVID-19 Consumer Tracker

#### Eating out

When asked about what would reassure respondents that it is safe to return to eat in restaurants, 31% in July said they would not do so for the foreseeable future. This is up from 25% in June. Older people were more likely than young people to say they would not be returning to eat out for the foreseeable future.

#### Eating food past use-by dates

The number of people who reported eating more risky food past its use-by date remained relatively consistent across waves, in July the percentages ranged from 16% for smoked fish to 37% for bagged salad. Those experiencing food insecurity or those who were worried about food affordability were more likely to eat those foods past their use-by dates.

#### Food availability/affordability

There was a significant increase in foodbank usage between May (7%) and June (10%), remaining consistent in July (9%). As in previous waves, foodbank usage remained higher for

younger people, households with children (and larger households), those with a physical or mental health condition and those who are shielding or had COVID-19 symptoms.

Reasons for foodbank usage in July primarily reflected economic hardship, with 25% reporting it was because they had lost their job, 20% reporting it was because they were on furlough, 27% reporting a delay or problems with benefits and 20% stating it was simply due to not having enough money. Respondents also reported using foodbanks due to self-isolation or shielding (26%) or difficulties travelling to get food (26%).

## **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. We hope to be able to upload our SPSS datasets on to the open data catalogue shortly.

## Research report

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

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