

Food Consumption, Prices, and Expenditures, 1970-97. Judith Jones Putnam and Jane E. Allshouse. Food and Rural Economics Division, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. Statistical Bulletin No. 965.

Abstract

This report presents historical data on food consumption, prices, expenditures, and U.S. income and population. In 1997, each American consumed, on average, 81 pounds more of commercially grown vegetables than in 1970; 65 pounds more of grain products; 57 pounds more of fruit; 32 pounds more of caloric sweeteners; 13 pounds more of total red meat, poultry, and fish (boneless, trimmed equivalent); 17 pounds more of cheese; 13 pounds more of added fats and oils; 3 gallons more of beer; 70 fewer eggs; 10 gallons less of coffee; and 7 gallons less of milk. Retail food prices, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), increased 2.6 percent in 1997. Food price inflation in 1997 was higher than the overall increase in the CPI for all goods and services (2.3 percent) for the third consecutive year. Americans spent \$715 billion for food in 1997 and another \$95 billion for alcoholic beverages. Away-from-home meals and snacks captured 45 percent of the U.S. food dollar in 1997, up from 39 percent in 1980 and 34 percent in 1970. The percentage of disposable personal income spent on food declined from 13.8 percent in 1970 to 10.7 percent in 1997.

Keywords: Food consumption, disappearance data, food use data, food supply, nutrients available for consumption, retail food prices, expenditures.

Note: Use of brand or firm names in this publication does not imply endorsement by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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Summary

Consistent with dietary and health recommendations, Americans now consume about 50 percent more grain products and about 25 percent more fruits and vegetables per capita than they did in 1970, eat leaner meat, and drink lower fat milk. But contrary to recommendations, they are consuming record-high amounts of caloric sweeteners and some high-fat dairy products and near-record-high amounts of added fats, including salad and cooking oils.

In 1997, Americans consumed an average of 13 pounds more of total red meat, poultry, and fish (boneless, trimmed equivalent) than in 1970, but 10 gallons less of coffee and 7 gallons less of milk. Americans consumed per capita 81 pounds more of commercially grown vegetables, 65 pounds more of grain products, 57 pounds more of fruit, 32 pounds more of caloric sweeteners, 17 pounds more of cheese, 13 pounds more of added fats and oils, 3 gallons more of beer, and 70 fewer eggs.

Retail food prices, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), increased 2.6 percent in 1997, slightly above the 2.3-percent increase in the CPI for all goods and services. Americans spent \$715 billion for food in 1997 and another \$95 billion for alcoholic beverages.

In 1997, 45 percent of U.S. food spending went for away-from-home meals and snacks, up from 34 percent in 1970 and 39 percent in 1980. The percentage of disposable personal income spent on food declined from 13.8 percent in 1970 to 10.7 percent in 1997.

Evidence from various sources suggests that Americans now consume, on average, more total food, more snacks, bigger portions of food, and more calories than they did 29 years ago.

In 1994 (the latest year for which nutrient data are available), total meat, poultry, and fish contributed 30 percent less saturated fat to the per capita food supply than in 1970 and beverage milk contributed 50 percent less saturated fat.

A variety of factors are responsible for the changes in U.S. food consumption patterns in the last 29 years, including changes in relative food prices, increases in real (adjusted for inflation) disposable income, and more food assistance for the poor. New products, particularly more convenient ones, also contribute to shifts in consumption, along with more imports, growth in the away-from-home food market, expanded advertising programs, and changes in food-enrichment standards and fortification policy. Sociodemographic trends also driving food choices include smaller households, more two-earner households, more single-parent households, an aging population, and increased ethnic diversity. An expanded scientific base relating diet and health, new Dietary Guidelines for Americans designed to help people make food choices that promote health and prevent disease, improved nutrition labeling, and a burgeoning interest in nutrition also influence marketing and consumption trends.

ERS food consumption data are based on the amount of food available for consumption each year in the United States. Estimates of food for human consumption are derived by subtracting measurable uses such as exports, industrial uses, farm inputs, and end-of-year stocks from total supply (the sum of domestic production, imports, and beginning stocks). Accordingly, the data are indirect measures of consumption.