



EXPLORING PUBLIC OPINION AND RISK PERCEPTIONS OF FOOD IN WISCONSIN

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DEPARTMENT OF LIFE SCIENCES COMMUNICATION

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

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Food-related opinions and behaviors can be impacted by a large number of factors. These can include how much attention people pay to food-related news, their trust in the abilities of various food-related organizations to keep food safe, and the types of foods themselves. In this report the public opinions, risk perceptions, and behaviors related to food of Wisconsin residents will be discussed, based on a survey conducted from April to July 2015.

Findings

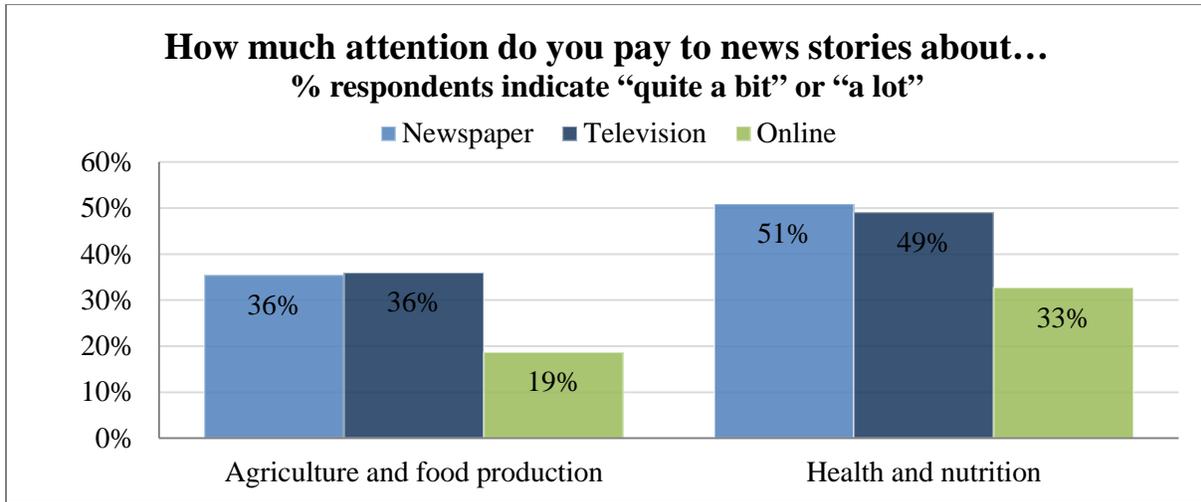


Figure 1. Respondents ($N=892$ to $N=938$) who paid “quite a bit” or “a lot” of attention to news stories about “Agriculture and food production” and “Health and nutrition” from newspapers (online and print), television (including online), and online only sources (blogs, websites, social media). Large portions of respondents paid attention to food-related news. (5 point scale, from 1=“None” to 5=“A lot”; Missing values excluded.)

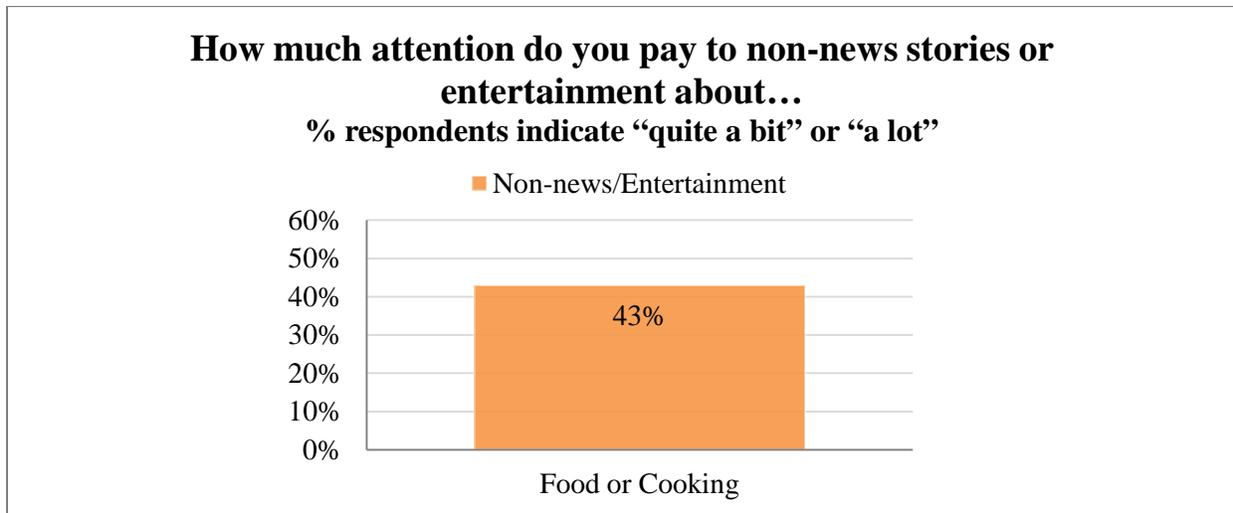


Figure 2. Respondents ($N=942$) who paid “quite a bit” or “a lot” of attention to non-news stories or entertainment about “Food or cooking.” Almost half of respondents paid high levels of attention to food or cooking entertainment stories. (5 point scale, from 1=“None” to 5=“A lot”; Missing values excluded.)

Overall, a considerable portion of respondents paid “quite a bit” or “a lot” of attention to food related media (Figures 1 and 2). About half of respondents indicated that they paid high levels of attention to health and nutrition news from newspapers (51%) and television (49%), while a third indicated the same for online sources (33%). Fewer participants paid high levels of attention to agriculture and food news, with just over a third of respondents reporting that they paid high attention to agriculture and food news from newspaper (36%) and television (36%) sources. The same topic was attended less with high attention via online sources, with fewer respondents reporting high attention to the topic using online sources (19%). Additionally, almost half of participants (43%) indicated high levels of attention to food or cooking entertainment media.

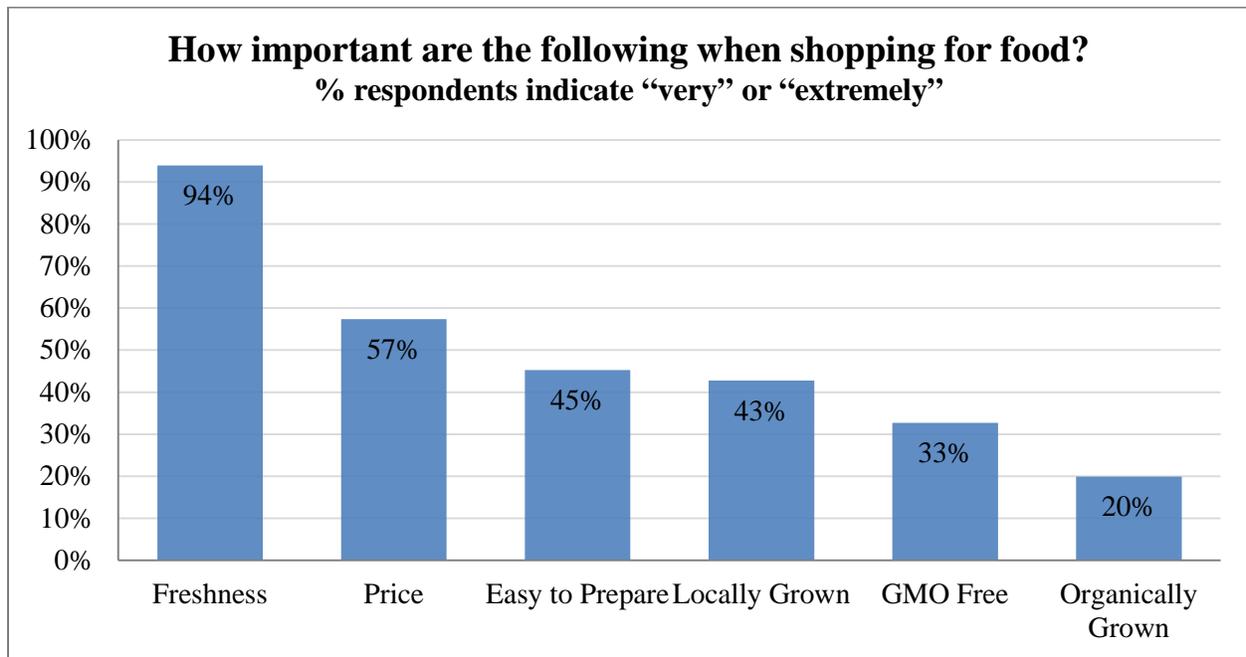


Figure 3. Attributes of food which respondents ($N=911$ to $N=921$) reported as “very important” or “extremely important” when shopping. Freshness and price were both highly important when shopping for food. (5 point scale, from 1=“Not at all” to 5=“Extremely”; Missing values excluded.)

The vast majority of respondents (94%) indicated that freshness was highly important to them when shopping for food (Figure 3). There was a considerable gap between the percent of participants who rated freshness as important and the next highest attribute, price. Price was rated as highly important by over half of participants (57%). Locally grown food was ranked as important by under half of participants (43%) and a significant portion also rated organically grown produce as important (20%). Of note, a third of Wisconsin resident respondents indicated GMO free food was highly important (33%).

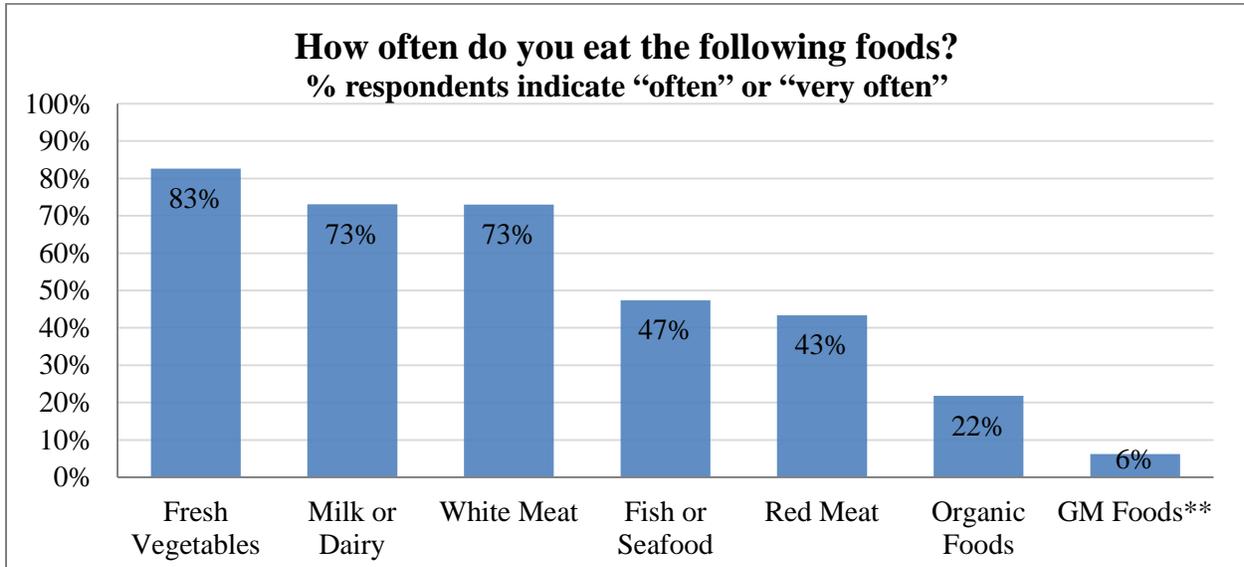


Figure 4. Percent of respondents ($N=910$ to $N=924$) who indicated they “often” or “very often” ate particular foods. Fresh vegetables, dairy, and white meat were all frequently consumed by the majority of respondents. (5 point scale, from 1=“Never” to 5=“Very often”; Missing values and “Not sure” excluded.)

***Note: 17.5% of sample indicated “Not sure” if eating GM Foods ($N=753$ for this category only).*

The large majority of participants reported frequently consuming fresh vegetables (83%), milk or dairy (73%), and white meat (73%). Organic foods were frequently consumed by almost a fourth of respondents (22%). Importantly, only 6% of respondents indicated that they “often” or “very often” ate GM foods, while 18% of respondents were unsure (Figure 4).

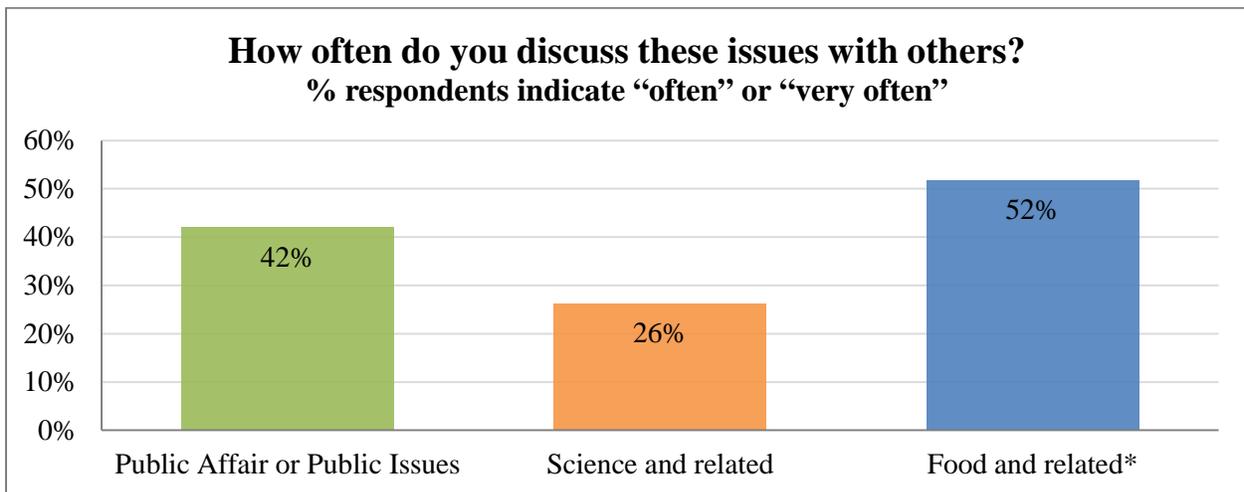


Figure 5. Percent of participants ($N=932$ to $N=935$) reporting they “often” or “very often” discussed public, science, and food related issues with others. Respondents indicated that they frequently discussed food and related issues with others. (5 point scale, from 1=“Never” to 5=“Very often”; Missing values excluded.)

** $p < 0.05$: Number of respondents very/often discussing food issues was sig. more than other issues.*

Around half of participants (52%) indicated they frequently discussed food and related issues with others (Figure 5). The number of respondents who reported “often” or “very often” discussing food and related issues was also significantly higher than those who reported frequently discussing either public affairs/issues or science and related issues. Participants frequently talked about food issues more so than other science or public issues.

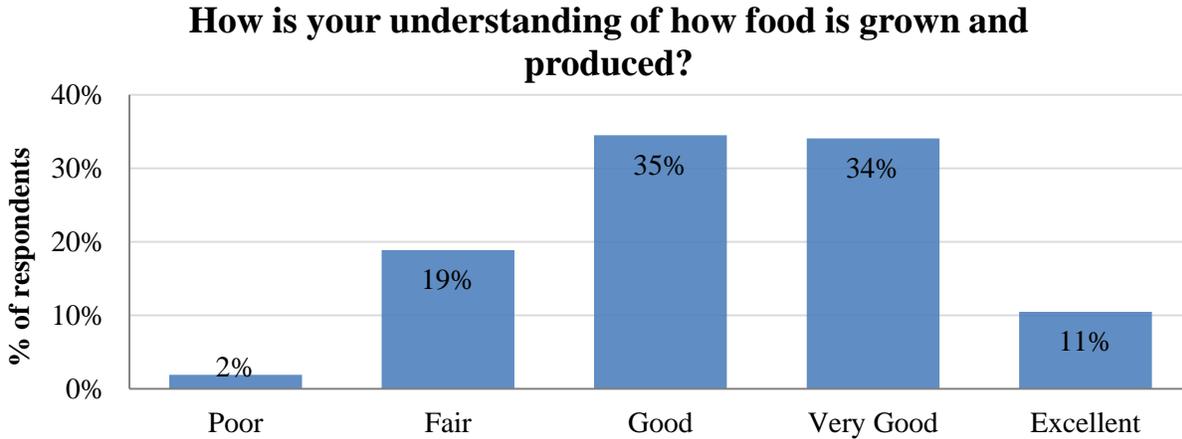


Figure 6. Respondents’ (N=940) understanding of food production and growth. The majority of respondents rated their understanding of food production as at least “Good.” (5 point scale; Missing values excluded.)

The large majority of survey participants reported they had a fairly high understanding of food growth and production, with around a third rating their understanding as either “good” (35%) or “very good” (34%) and an additional 11% as “excellent.”

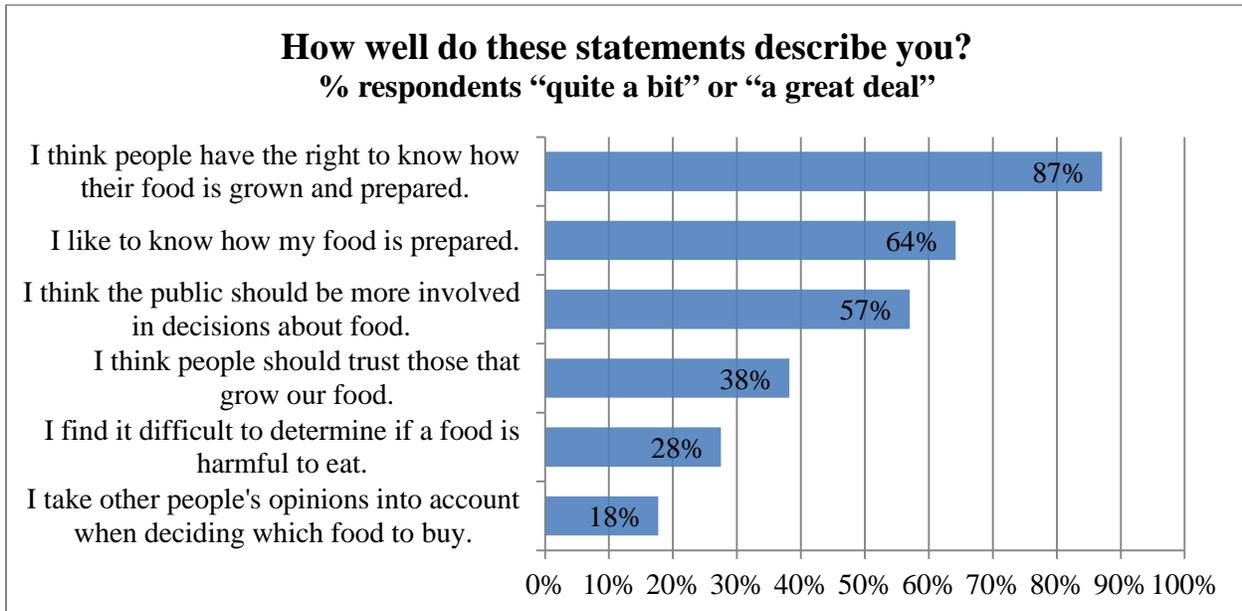


Figure 7. Respondents’ (N=923 to N=929) attitudes toward food. Most participants identified “quite a bit” or “a great deal” with statements related to food rights. (5 point scale, from 1=“Not at all” to 5=“A great deal”; Missing values excluded.)

Participants had strong attitudes toward statements related to food rights. The majority of respondents indicated they strongly identified with statements concerning people having the right to know how food is grown and prepared (87%) and personally knowing how food is prepared (64%). Most respondents also felt that the public should be more involved in food decisions (57%). Of note, more than a fourth of respondents strongly felt it was difficult to determine if a food is harmful (28%). Additionally, more than a third indicated that people should trust those that grow food (38%).

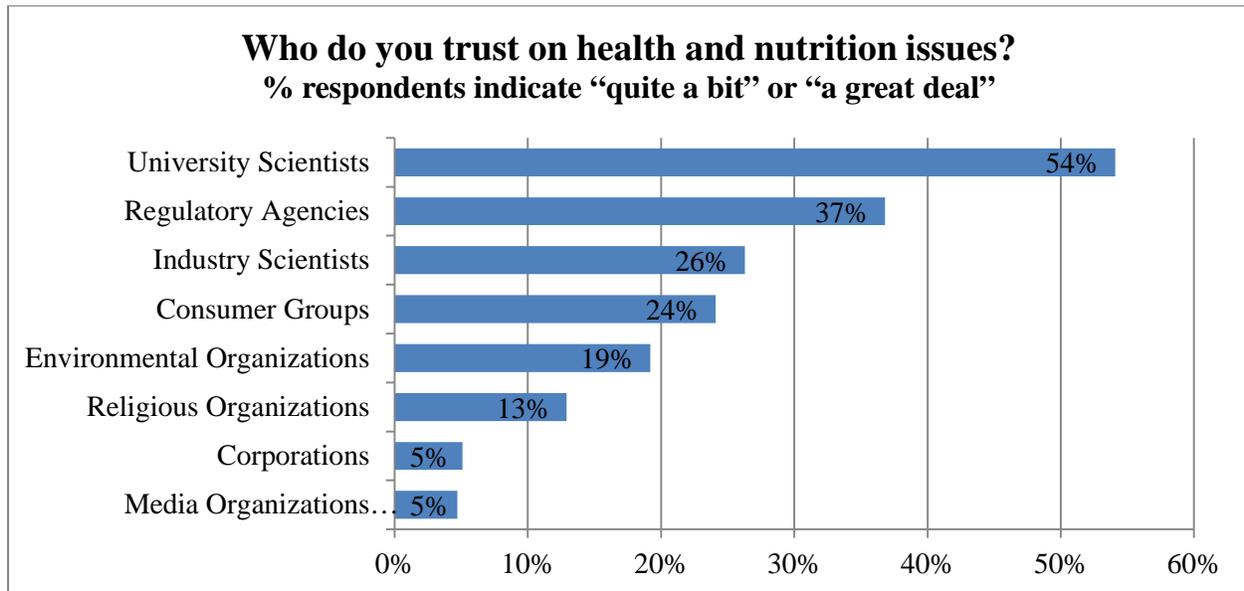


Figure 8. Percent of respondents ($N=897$ to $N=925$) with “quite a bit” or “a great deal” of trust in various organizations on health and nutrition issues. Few organizations garnered high levels of trust from considerable portions of respondents. (5 point scale, from 1=“Not at all” to 5=“A great deal”; Missing values excluded.)

The majority of organizations were not highly trusted by respondents with respect to health and nutrition issues. Around a fourth of respondents reported highly trusting industry scientists (26%) and consumer groups (24%). Most other organizations were highly trusted by fewer respondents, including corporations (5%) and media organizations (5%). Alternatively, more than a third of respondents highly trusted regulatory agencies (37%), while over half of respondents (54%) reported having high levels of trust in university scientists.

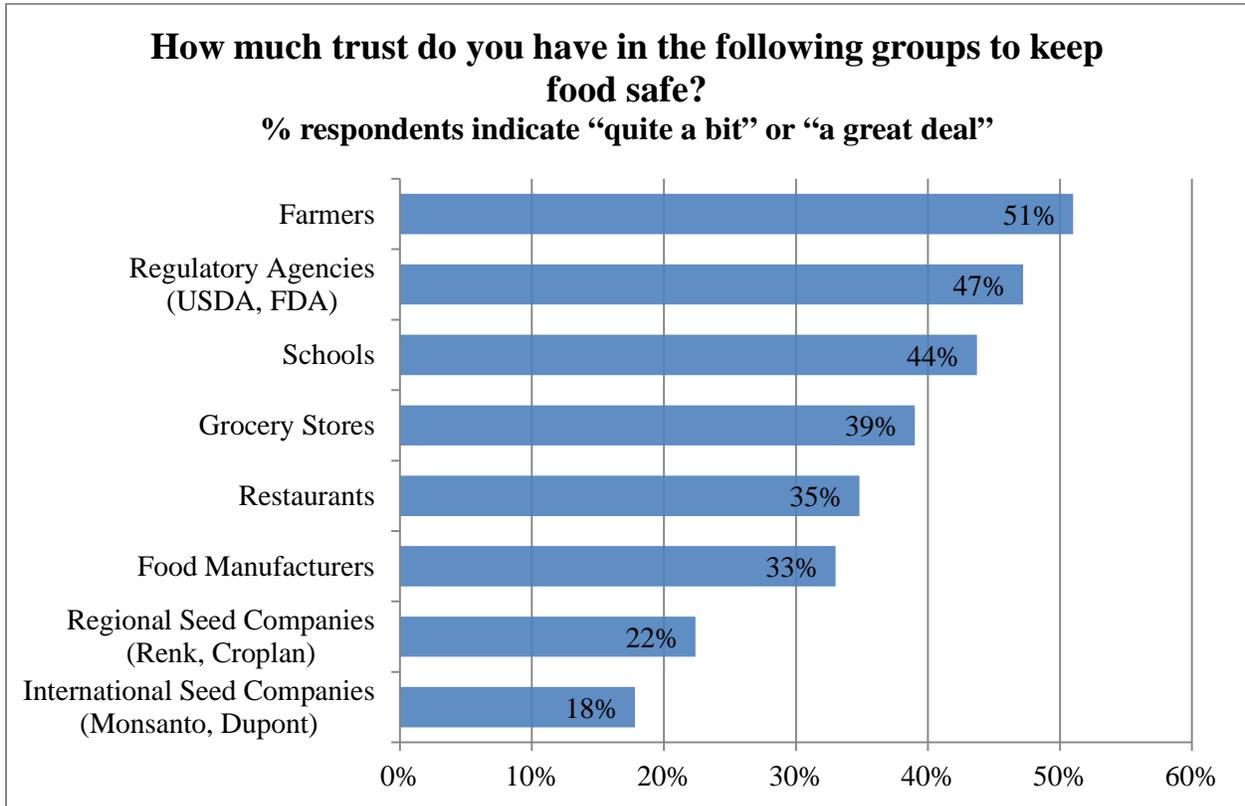


Figure 9. Percentage of respondents ($N=898$ to $N=927$) with “quite a bit” or “a great deal” of trust in various organizations to keep food safe. Participants reported high levels of trust in food providers. (5 point scale, from 1=“Not at all” to 5=“A great deal”; Missing values excluded.)

Compared to health and nutrition issues, more participants had higher trust in organizations to keep food safe. Large portions of participants highly trusted food providers, including farmers (51%), schools (44%), grocery stores (39%), and restaurants (35%). Additionally, around half of participants reported highly trusting regulatory agencies (47%). Notably, fewer respondents indicated they highly trusted regional (22%) and international (18%) seed companies.

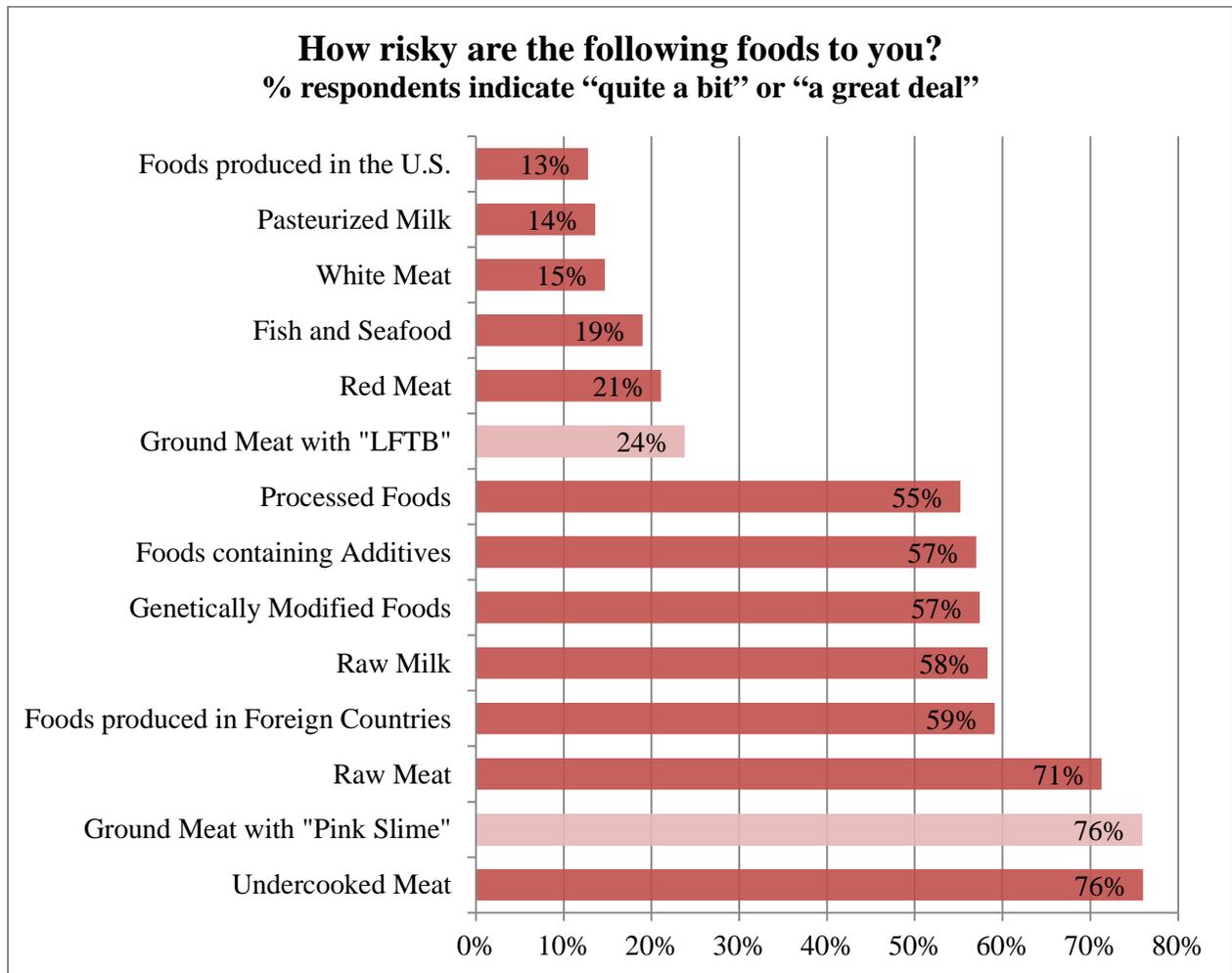


Figure 10. Percent of respondents ($N=921$ to $N=936$) who indicated that various foods were “quite a bit” or “a great deal” risky to them. A large number of foods were considered highly risky. (5 point scale, from 1=“Not at all” to 5=“A great deal”; Missing values excluded.)

**Note: LFTB=Lean Finely Textured Beef; “Ground Meat” categories were divided across the sample, $N=474$ and $N=448$, respectively*

A number of foods were considered highly risky by a majority of respondents, including undercooked meat (76%), raw milk (58%), and processed foods (55%). Participants were randomly divided into two survey conditions, with approximately half receiving the statement wording “Ground Meat with Lean Finely Textured Beef (LFTB)” and the other half “Ground Meat with Pink Slime.” Importantly, ground meat was viewed as highly risky by considerably more participants in the “pink slime” condition (76%) compared to the “LFTB” condition (24%). Over half of participants (57%) viewed GMO foods as highly risky.

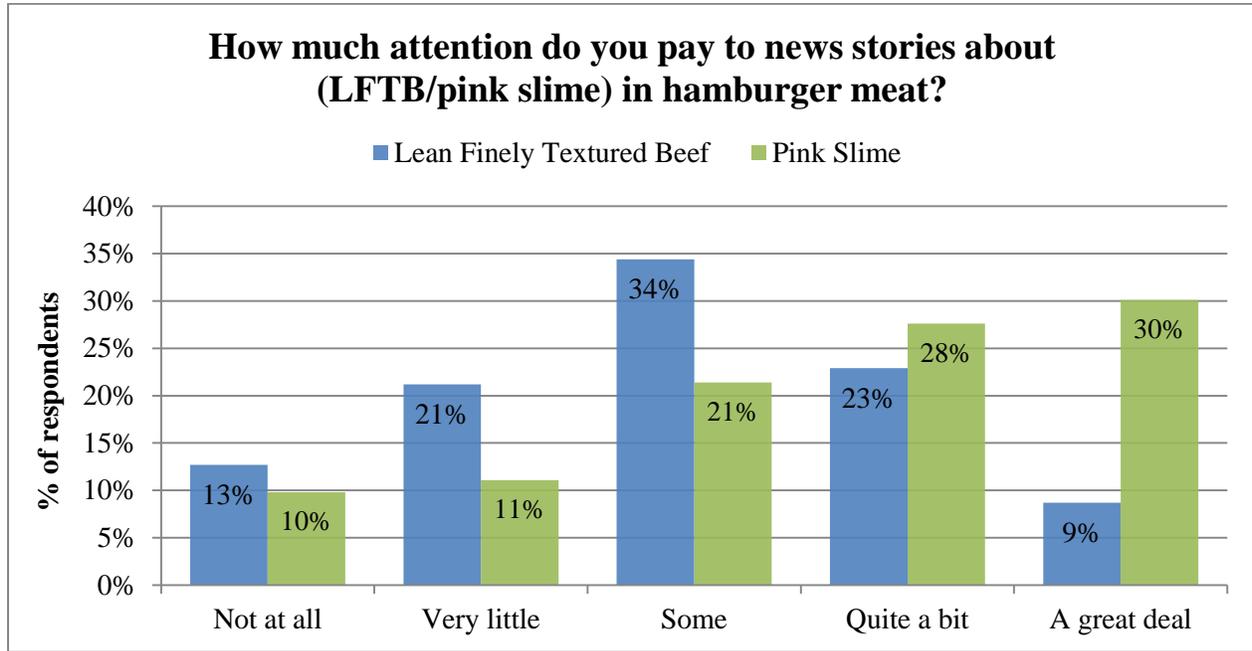


Figure 11. Respondent attention to news stories about either Lean Finely Textured Beef (LFTB) ($N=471$) or pink slime ($N=449$). News stories about pink slime received more attention from participants. (5 point scale; Missing values excluded.)

Attention to news stories about hamburger meat varied based on whether participants were in the LFTB or pink slime condition. Over half of participants in the pink slime condition (58%) reported paying high levels of attention to hamburger meat news stories, while participants in the LFTB condition (34%) reported paying moderate attention.

Conclusion

Overall, the Wisconsin resident survey respondents paid high levels of attention to health and nutrition news and food related entertainment media. Among other factors, a notable portion reported that GMO free food was important, while most did not report frequently eating GMO foods. Food and related issues were discussed frequently and respondents reported having a high understanding of food. Likewise, respondents felt strongly that they had a right to food knowledge.

Turning to trust, participants indicated they had lower trust in organizations related to health and nutrition issues compared to keeping food safe. In particular, they trusted university scientists and regulatory agencies with respect to health and nutrition issues, but not corporations and the media. Food producers (such as farmers and grocery stores) and regulatory agencies were trusted to keep food safe.

The majority of Wisconsin resident respondents viewed GMO foods as highly risky. Lastly, there was a difference in risk perceptions when using the phrase “lean finely textured beef (LFTB)” or “pink slime,” with participants viewing higher risk for pink slime and paying more attention to new stories.

About the survey

The survey was mailed to a random sample of 2,000 Wisconsin residents' addresses. Administered from April 15 to July 7, 2015, the survey had a final response rate of 50.3% ($N=948$). Within the survey, approximately half of the participants were asked select questions containing the phrase "pink slime" ($N=463$, 48.8%), while the other half saw "lean finely textured beef" ($N=485$, 51.2%). Participants were middle age ($M=56.4$, $SD=16.5$) on average and more female (63.2%), with the median level of education as "Some college, technical or trade school" and income as "\$40,001 - \$60,000."

Suggested citation

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