

January 2021

COVID-19 and food: the search for food security at the heart of households

The image of empty supermarket shelves is one of those that will remain from the announcement of the first containment. The Europeans practiced the «Hamsterkauf» as named by the German speakers: they stocked up on hamsters. This rush on food supplies, especially rice and pasta, shows that even before thinking about the disease, for many people, the first thing they worried about was the risk of running out of food. A striking phenomenon at the center of affluent societies. Food stores were suddenly highlighted as «essential» and food with it. In times of confinement, it becomes central again: one can no longer delegate it or forget its role, as is often the case in the West, due to its easy access and urban lifestyles. The major role of food is exacerbated: setting the rhythm of a daily time that stretches to infinity, regulating emotions, at the center of constrained social interactions and anxieties about the risk of food insecurity. Research in the human and social sciences has set out to dissect how the pandemic has shaken our relationship to food. Several studies listed in the World Pandemic Research Network database already shed edifying light.

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of the Paris Institute for Advanced Study and the RFIEA Foundation*



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All bakers?

In France, baking at home, «making your own bread» in particular, will have constituted a striking social fact during the confinement period, resulting in a relative shortage of flour and yeast on the shop shelves. According to [the CNRS survey Manger au temps du coronavirus](#) listed on WPRN, this phenomenon is surprising given the continued openness of bakeries and supermarkets, and cannot be reduced to the objective of limiting social interaction during shopping. Beyond the pleasure of the table (fresh bread and pastries are emblematic), the researchers put forward the hypothesis that the confinement triggers re-identification dynamics around gestures and products that are strongly symbolic of cultural and social ties. Moreover, as Abdu Gnaba, author of [Anthropologie des mangeurs de pain](#) explains: «We are going through a crisis. Sanitary, that's for sure, but also an identity crisis. From one day to the next we find ourselves cut off from the world and our habits. In our culture, bread is reassuring, stable. To lack it is synonymous with terror (...) There is also a very strong link between bread and autonomy. It is the first food that babies eat in perfect autonomy, or the one that older children can go buy alone. »

A desire to become more food self-sufficient

[The CNRS study](#), which is based for its first phase on nearly 800 testimonials, underlines this: another social phenomenon that is characteristic of containment is the regaining of control over one's own food security. Citizens with the capacity to produce at home have turned to self-production (gardening and micro-livestock farming). Many have become more involved in cooking, others have begun to share their culinary productions with friends and neighbors. According to the findings of the study, these practices are part of a desire to become more food self-sufficient. Many consumers have taken an active, sometimes inventive, role in gaining direct access to products. Confinement has reinforced short-circuit ordering systems, both through formal and informal arrangements (grouped orders between neighbors, calls between regular market customers and producers to buy directly, volunteer citizens offering their help to small producers in need of labor to reduce the number of deliveries - for example, by acting as relays and selling products to their neighbors). The direct relationship between consumers and producers has developed. In the United Kingdom, according to a [YouGov survey](#) conducted by WPRN, three million people tried for the first time an organic vegetable basket or ordered food directly from a local farm, both to obtain the food they needed and to support local production. [The WPRN survey](#) indicates that the stability over time of these new short-circuit practices remains an open question, with recent months suggesting a return to pre-confined consumption patterns. But what about organic?



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Containment has accelerated the transition to organic and zero waste

Preliminary results from [a study of ten European countries](#) show that during the pandemic, in most countries, more organic products were purchased and less food was thrown away (however, the majority of households consumed less fresh food than usual). Contrary to the expected results, it was not in the countries of Central and Northern Europe that the change in these directions was the greatest, but in the countries of Southern and Eastern Europe and Western Europe. The researchers' hypothesis is that the latter countries had not yet reached as high a level of organic purchases as the former and that they were less concerned about food wastage: the changes in diet caused by the pandemic would have pushed them to catch up. Another part of [this study from Denmark, Germany and Slovenia](#) also points out that the type of food purchased often differed according to the degree of income loss during the pandemic. Those who experienced large income losses tended to switch to more affordable foods and away from fresh foods, while those who experienced small losses compensated more for isolation by increasing their consumption of prepared meals, sweets and alcohol. Food played an important role in regulating emotions during this confinement.

Discipline or emotional comfort: an ambivalent relationship to food

In Spain, [a study conducted in Catalonia](#) on WPRN highlights the implementation of preventive practices related to the search for «healthy food» aimed at being «healthy», protecting the immune system and/or minimizing the emergence of other diseases. Concerns about fitness and weight, particularly those derived from the internalization of aesthetic standards of thinness, have emerged or intensified, reinforcing disciplinary practices. This oscillated with moments of indulgence: an increase in the consumption of alcoholic beverages, pastries, snacks or products whose consumption is usually controlled. This was a way of managing time («filling in» temporary availability and «boredom»). But this consumption also represented a way out, a way to manage social discomfort, disciplines (legal, social, moral and physical) and various uncertainties about the risk of the virus, the evolution of confinement and the numerous - often contradictory - pieces of information circulating in the media and on social networks. Food has thus become a means to ensure a minimum amount of pleasure, to escape, to give oneself emotional shelter.



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Food has become a key element in the emotional health of the respondents, through which they have channeled or subverted these processes of discipline and individual control. However, this transgression of the rules was also experienced under the sign of guilt: moments of relaxation therefore also became dosed and controlled. Behind these adaptations and disciplinary practices, [the Spanish study](#) emphasizes that one senses a moral of confinement: to know how to reinvent oneself, to control oneself, in a context of imbalances and uncertainties. Economic precariousness has added an additional source of anguish to this situation.

An explosion in the demand for food aid

In France, many households «plunged» below the food distress line, through loss of income or increased expenses (for example, for families whose children had free access to the canteen). [The CNRS survey](#) underlines that this is evidence of a massive influx of people who have until now managed to feed themselves without outside help, and that these people are new audiences for food aid organizations. [A study conducted at Princeton University](#), listed on WPRN, reveals that the number of applications to the U.S. food voucher program has also soared (for example, they have increased fivefold in Vermont). Between April and June, as a result of the pandemic, more than half of those already in the program reported skipping meals and relying on relatives or associations to eat. Worldwide, the figures are even more alarming. According to the [UN report *The impact of COVID-19 on food security and nutrition*](#), between February and June 2020, measures introduced to curb the spread of COVID-19 may already have pushed up to 45 million people into acute food insecurity, the majority of them in South and Southeast Asia (33 million), and most of the rest in sub-Saharan Africa. In India, in the first four weeks after the announcement of the containment, poor households lost 88% of their average weekly income compared to the previous year, and had to reduce meal portions and consume less food (study conducted by Virginia Tech, listed on the WPRN.) Central Africa, already affected by droughts, has seen its production fall as a result of measures imposed to contain the spread of the virus. The UN report highlights the dramatic impact that the crisis could have on global food security.



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Food crisis, resilience, experimentation

By putting pressure on our systems, the pandemic revealed their strengths and weaknesses. Food is no exception. While inequalities have increased, throwing millions of people into food distress, containment has also enabled experimentation, the emergence of new practices and the demonstration of human resilience and creativity. How will these phenomena evolve in 2021? Several studies listed on the WPRN, notably the one covering ten European countries and the one of the CNRS mentioned above, continue to monitor the situation.

Is there a risk of a shortage in France?

As the CNRS points out in its study [Eating in Coronavirus Time](#), in France, the difficulties have not concerned the actual availability of food but rather the ability of the supply chain capacity to adapt to a sudden, one-off increase in demand (increase in the number of customers and increase in the average basket). This caused the supply systems to be put under strain, requiring the emergency recruitment of personnel for transport, storage, shelving and sales. The study concludes that the supply chain has on the whole been agile and resilient to the crisis. It underlines the capacity of territorialized food circuits to respond almost instantaneously to this explosion in demand thanks to the reinforcement of existing systems and the emergence of new systems.

This note is based on a number of resources from the World Pandemic Research Network

Maréchal, Gilles. «Eating in the age of the coronavirus».

<https://wprn.org/item/419752>

This Terralim-CNRS survey analyzes feedback from experiences in the field of food during containment. It is based, for its first phase, on nearly 800 testimonials collected from March 16 to June 11, 2020. It aims to gather and disseminate data and know-how concerning reactions to the crisis, but also to generate, formalize and initiate participatory action research processes on the themes identified. The team brings together university researchers, associations working on food systems, local associations and social economy enterprises.

MacMillan, Tom. «UK food behaviour and attitudes YouGov poll».

<https://wprn.org/item/412052>

Conducted by the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission, in collaboration with the Food Foundation, this YouGov survey asked about 4,000 British citizens about changes in eating behavior after about two weeks of confinement and their hopes after the end of the epidemic. The conclusion that only 9% of respondents wanted everything to return to the way it was before the epidemic was widely reported in the UK.

Millard, Jeremy. «Our relationship with food during the covid-19 pandemic».

<https://wprn.org/item/422252>

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Food-Covid-19 network of food experts and researchers launched an online survey to gather initial information on how households have changed the way they obtain, prepare and consume food. The data collected also covers behavioural changes resulting from variations in national containment measures and other restrictions, such as physical closures of workplaces, canteens, cafés and restaurants, schools and childcare institutions, changes in the frequency of household food purchases, individuals' perception of the risk of COVID-19, income losses due to the pandemic and socio-demographic factors. In total, approximately 8,000 valid responses were obtained, with most national surveys using quota sampling to ensure that samples were generally representative of national populations.



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Appendix

Maria Clara Gaspar, Marta Ruiz, Arantza Begueria, Sarah Anadon, Amanda Barba y Cristina Larrea-Killinger «Comer en tiempos de confinamiento: gestión de la alimentación, disciplina y placer» in Fradejas-Garcia, Ignacio. «Etnografías de la pandemia por coronavirus».

<https://wprn.org/item/464452>

A special issue of the journal analyzing the social dimensions of the pandemic. Published in July 2020, it includes sixteen peer-reviewed articles based on empirical anthropological research in Spain, Italy, Morocco, Mexico, Argentina, Colombia and Ecuador. The methodology used is mainly qualitative (interviews, online/offline ethnography, etc.) but also combines with quantitative methods (online surveys) to develop mixed methods. The article cited in this note, «Comer en tiempos de confinamiento: gestión de la alimentación, disciplina y placer», aims to analyze the experience of confinement caused by the state of emergency in Spain through the dietary practices and representations of adult women living in urban areas of Catalonia. The majority of them are women with higher education and professional experience, who did not stop working at the time of confinement.

Enriquez, Diana. «Covid-19's Socio-Economic Impact on Low-Income Benefit Recipients: Early Evidence from Tracking Surveys».

<https://wprn.org/item/466652>

This research at Princeton University aims to understand the effects of the crisis on the already precarious American population before the start of the health crisis. Research on other crises and natural disasters documents the disproportionate impact of such shocks on the most disadvantaged segments of the population. Five online surveys have measured perceived and actual housing insecurity, food shortages, the accumulation of new debt and recent job losses. Food insecurity and debt accumulation increased between April and June 2020, and job losses worsened. These results provide the first systematic evidence of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on poor Americans and related racial disparities.

Gupta, Anubhab; Zhu, Heng; Doan, Miki Khanh & Al. «Economic Impacts of the COVID-19 Lockdown on the Poor».

<https://wprn.org/item/476552>

In India, containment affected 1.3 billion people. Prior to the pandemic, this Virginia Tech study had already been tracking the financial activities of a sample of poor households in rural India on a weekly basis for a year. Using this unique high-frequency weekly data and supplementing it with telephone surveys of the same households for four weeks after the announcement of the lockout, the study econometrically estimates the impacts of the lockout on the poorest Indian households.