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U.S. Household Food Spending Post COVID-19 and the Implications for Diet Quality

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What Is the Issue?

A combination of uncommon and economically impactful events (i.e., the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, food price inflation, and pandemic-related stimulus) induced significant changes in where and what foods consumers purchased in the United States. Research suggests that prior economic shocks had lasting impacts on food consumption patterns and diet and health-related outcomes. However, the recent events differed from previous economic shocks, and the lasting diet impacts are unclear. This report examines changes in household food spending across different socioeconomic groups and across time during this period (2016–22).

What Did the Study Find?

As households trended back to prepandemic food spending patterns (2016–19), some food purchasing behaviors persisted in 2022, a year marked by record food price inflation. Compared to 2016–19, inflation-adjusted food spending in 2022:

- Was lower at limited-service and full-service restaurants (where food tends to be higher in calories, sodium, and fat).
- Was higher at supermarkets and other stores, led by more fruit and vegetable spending (which are recommended for increased consumption in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans)—as well as more spending on prepared meals and salads, desserts, and savory snacks and sweeteners (these foods tend to be higher in saturated fats, sugar, and sodium).
- Indicated generally small changes in predicted dietary energy and nutrient composition, except for increases in sugar related to the increased consumption of beverages and other foods (savory snacks, sweeteners, etc.) purchased from supermarkets and other stores.

Compared to 2016–19, differences in food spending patterns across socioeconomic groups were generally stable across 2020 and 2022, with some notable exceptions:

- As historically high food price inflation decreased the purchasing power of U.S. households in 2022, overall food spending was flat or declined for most households, except those on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).
- Differences in food spending at supermarkets and other stores between SNAP households and low-income non-SNAP households widened in 2020, which was further exacerbated during high food price inflation in 2022.

Regardless of year, differences in food spending were associated with race, ethnicity, urbanicity, income, and season, consistent with well-documented lasting differences in dietary intake and diet quality across socioeconomic groups and times of year.

- Compared to other seasons, households tended to spend more in the fall season on desserts ($17 more per capita) and savory snacks and sweeteners ($22 per capita), coinciding with the major holidays of Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.
- Urban households spent more on fruits and vegetables compared to their rural counterparts.
- Lower income households not on SNAP spent $209 less per capita on food from supermarkets and other retail establishments compared to households participating in SNAP.

How Was the Study Conducted?

This report used the Consumer Expenditure Diary Survey to examine food purchasing behaviors between 2016 and 2022. Food spending at supermarkets and other stores was grouped into 12 categories to closely align with components of the 2020–25 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The categories are grains, processed red meats, nonprocessed red meats, poultry and seafood, dairy, fruits, vegetables (including beans and peas), oils, beverages, desserts, prepared meals and salads, and other foods (e.g., savory snacks, sweeteners, table fats, etc.). Food spending at restaurants is classified into limited service, full service, and other (e.g., meals and snacks at employers or schools, vending machines, and mobile food vendors). Inflation-adjusted food expenditures were estimated by adjusting nominal expenditures using regional Consumer Price Indexes. Marginal effects that were based on a two-part model measured the association between household food expenditures and different time periods; income and SNAP participation; race and ethnicity; household size; household structure; geography; and age.