



Why America's Food is Still Not Safe

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Each year, 48 million Americans suffer from illnesses caused by dangerous microbial pathogens lurking in the food they eat. For most people, food poisoning just leads to temporary stomach aches or diarrhea. But the effects can be much more serious. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 125,000 Americans are hospitalized and 3,000 die each year from pathogens in our food. Estimates of the cost of food borne illness exceed \$75 billion a year – taking into account the cost of health care and lost time on the job for people who get sick. The actual suffering and economic cost could be much greater, because many incidents of mild illness caused by tainted food go unreported.

That eating dinner can result in disability or death comes as a shock to most Americans. Most of us believe that the United States fixed these problems more than a century ago, after Upton Sinclair's famous book, *The Jungle*, revealed the ghastly facts about unsafe methods of commercial food processing for a mass market economy. But in fact, the rules and regulations we assume will protect us are inadequate. Duplication and gaps in government responsibilities leave Americans highly vulnerable to a variety of risks from industrial food production.

Government must have more effective tools to prevent food borne illness. Problems of administrative overlap must be remedied so that we can manage the risks of our modern food system. Successful reform also requires that we reframe the food safety issue so that industry and government accept greater responsibility for illness outbreaks when they occur – rather than place much of the responsibility for food safety on consumers themselves.

Why Food Safety Administration Often Falls Short

In 1906, Congress took important steps toward protecting consumers by passing both the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act. The two laws divided authority for food safety between the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration. Since then, authority and oversight have fractured even further.

Today, responsibility for ensuring U.S. food safety is scattered across at least 12 federal departments and agencies. Responsibilities are divided in ways that make little sense, and resources often do not match responsibilities. Here are some telling examples:

- Five different agencies share authority over frozen pizza, with responsibilities divided according to the type of food topping. Cheese pizza facilities are inspected by the Food and Drug Administration, while companies that make pepperoni pizza are assigned to the Food Safety Inspection Service in the Department of Agriculture.
- Federal rules require on-site inspectors to be stationed at all meat-processing plants, and the Food Safety Inspection Service employs more than 7,000 inspectors to carry out this task. Meanwhile, other food-processing facilities do not require on-site inspections, so fewer than 3,000 inspectors monitor 65,000 domestic plants and oversee food imports. More than half of all the facilities in the United States have gone five or more years without a single inspection.

>In 2010, Congress passed the Food Safety Modernization Act to begin to address longstanding problems. The Food and Drug Administration now has the authority to order mandatory recalls of tainted food (previously the recalls were voluntary). It can also conduct more frequent inspections and exercise greater control over imported foods.

But serious risks remain. For example, animals consume 80 percent of antibiotics in the United States, mostly in low doses intended to increase the quantity and speed of meat production. Despite mounting scientific evidence that routine use of antibiotics results in dangerous, drug-resistant strains of bacteria, the government has been slow to act. In 2012, the Food and Drug Administration finally acknowledged that giving antibiotics to healthy animals poses a threat to human health. Rather than regulate antibiotic use, the agency fell back on a set of “voluntary” guidelines to urge the industry to regulate itself.

Dubious political practices create obstacles to ensuring food safety. The food industry enjoys tremendous influence over the way government regulates safety. A revolving door enables food industry officials to move back and forth between companies and government bureaus and congressional offices throughout their careers. Presidential appointees come and go, and administrations often bring in individuals with industry experience to oversee rules and regulations that affect their former employers. Campaign contributions keep the machine well oiled, guaranteeing industry access to Congress and the executive branch.

What Must be Done

Fixing food safety in the United States requires new efforts from government and citizen advocates alike.

- Instead of using multiple agencies to assess risks and monitor food production, a smarter alternative would concentrate functions in those parts of the government that can do the job best. For instance, the Food Safety Inspection Service could take charge of all inspections, freeing the Food and Drug Administration to focus its energies on assessing the risks of food pathogens.
- Food-safety advocates must inform and arouse citizens, changing the way we talk and think about the issue. Today, industry and government often try to shift responsibility to everyday consumers – for example, by claiming that people can protect themselves by keeping clean kitchens, or by suggesting that food borne illness is an unavoidable feature of the world we live in. But increasingly, people get sick because they are exposed to unsafe products. Food advocates need to get this message out, and make the case for strong public regulations to reward companies that provide the safest food and allow adequately empowered public officials to root out harmful industry practices well before people get sick or die.

America knows enough to make our food safe. We just need to remove political obstacles and overcome governmental inefficiencies to get the job done.

Read more in Adam Sheingate, “*Still a Jungle.*” *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas* 25, no. 9 (2012): 48-59.