Time Capsule of America's Food System

By Michael F. Jacobson[1]

In 1975, Catherine Lerza and I, of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, edited *Food for People Not for Profit* (Ballantine Books), a comprehensive book about America's food system. Now, some five decades later, it is fascinating to see what people were concerned about back then (and what they missed) and how those issues were resolved, ignored, or worsened. Did diet-related diseases become more or less prevalent; did industry become more or less consolidated and competitive; what food policies have been improved or degraded?

I have been astonished by some of the changes…and also astonished by some of the things that did *not* change. Some highlights:

- Since 1975 the price of milk (adjusted for inflation) has dropped in half!
- Since 1980, obesity in adults soared from 12 to 40 percent and in youths from 6 to 22 percent.
- Over the past 50 years, fresh vegetable consumption barely budged, though fresh fruit consumption increased by about a fourth.
- Calories from eating out soared from 18 percent of total calories to 32 percent.
- Consumption of refined sugars is only about 10 percent greater than in 1975.
- Ultra-processed foods (formerly called junk foods) are mostly high in added sugars, saturated fat, or salt. Between 1999 and 2018 those foods climbed from 61 percent to 67 percent of youths' diets[1] and from 53 percent to 57 percent of adults' diets.[2]
- We are eating one-third less beef, more than twice as much poultry, and one-fourth more pork.
- Heart disease deaths (per 100,000 people) declined by a remarkable 77 percent and stroke deaths by 55 percent.
- One supermarket chain—Walmart—sells one-fourth of all groceries.
- The four biggest firms control 85 percent of beef processing, 70 percent of pork processing, and 54 percent of poultry production.[3]

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Some other notable changes:

- organic foods are a major segment of the food industry;
- baby foods are no longer adulterated with water, sugar, and starch;
- food labels now provide detailed nutrition information;
- bioengineered crops were unknown 50 years ago but now constitute the vast majority of corn, soybeans, canola, and cotton;
- partially hydrogenated vegetable oil (with its artificial trans fat) has been banned because it causes heart disease.

- On the other hand:
  - the marketing of junk foods for children remains unregulated;
  - only a few American cities (but many countries) tax sugar drinks;
  - nutrition education is still a minor after-thought in medical schools;
  - the government has failed to restrict sodium in processed and restaurant foods, leading to as many as 100,000 premature deaths annually.

Explore the numbers and graphs below and see what surprises you!

Note: in measuring costs, deaths, and other data, assessment methodologies might have changed over the years. Also, the figures for the amounts of the foods we eat are adjusted for losses from the farm to the store, but do not include losses once the foods are purchased by consumers. Actual consumption is probably about one-third to one-half less than shown.

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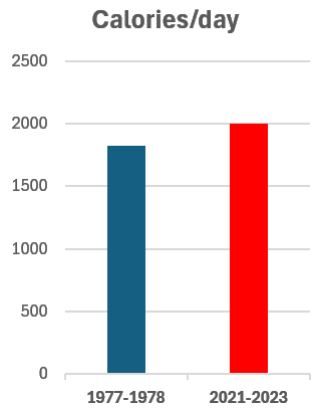
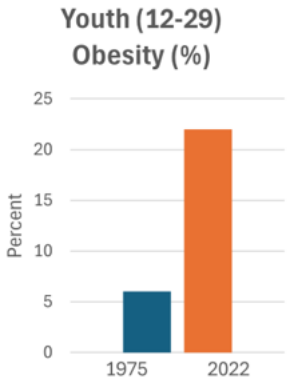
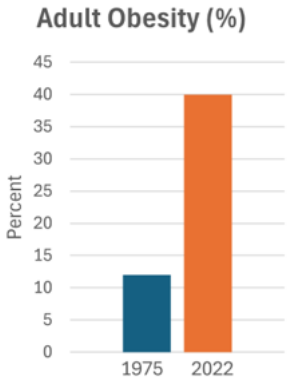
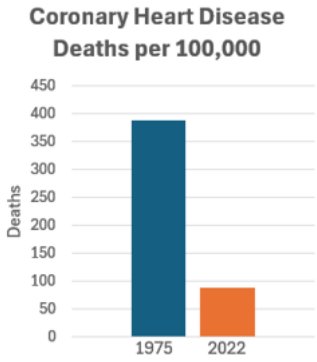
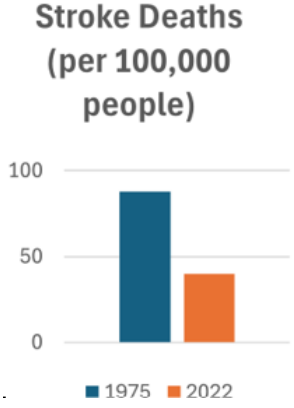
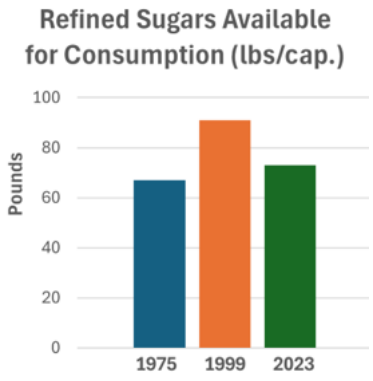
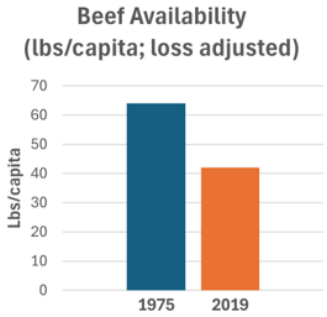
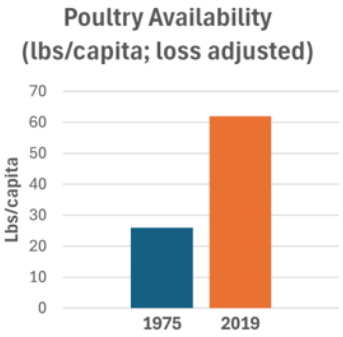
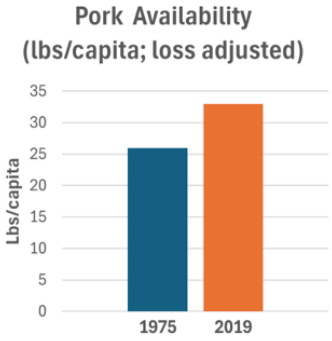
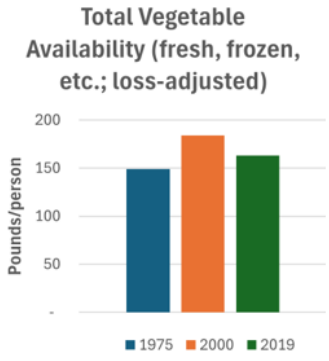
***Sections*: Nutrition & Health Food Consumption Miscellaneous**

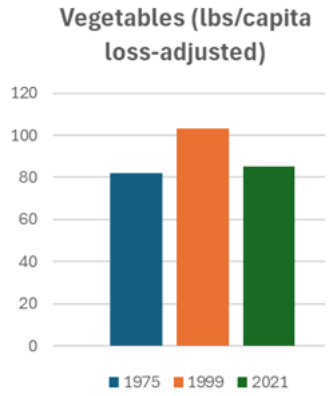
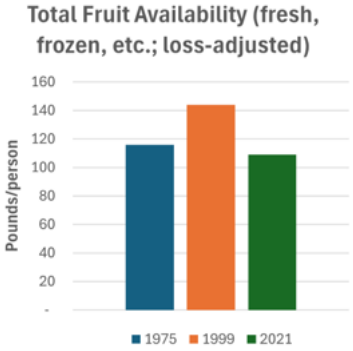
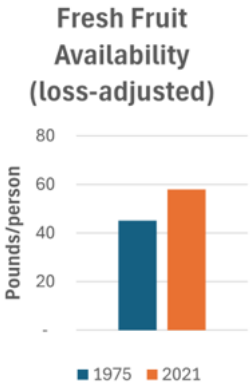
Food Industry Farming Anti-hunger Programs Public Awareness

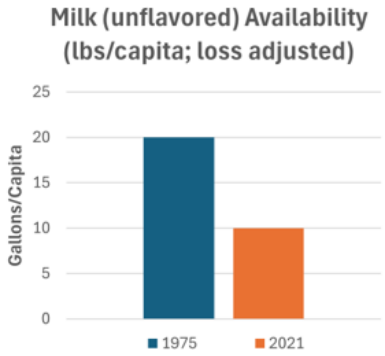
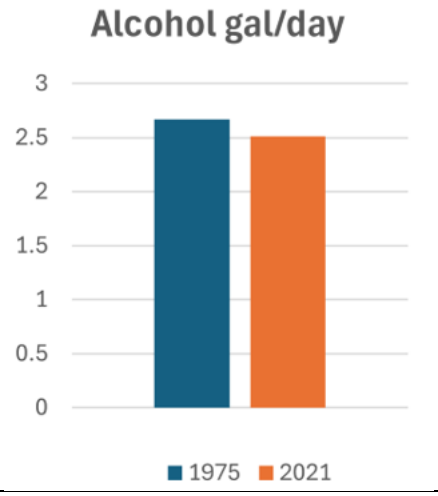
Concern	~1975	~2025
Nutrition & Health		
Calorie consumption per day (all ages)	1,826 calories[4]  	1,999 calories (2021-2023)[5]

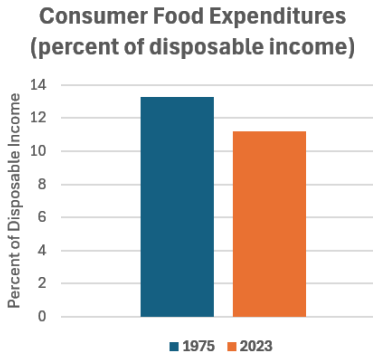
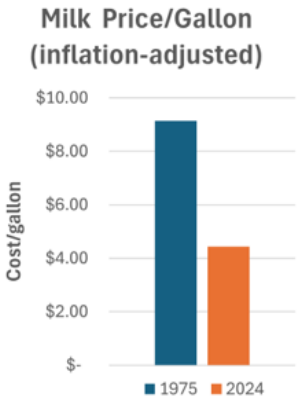
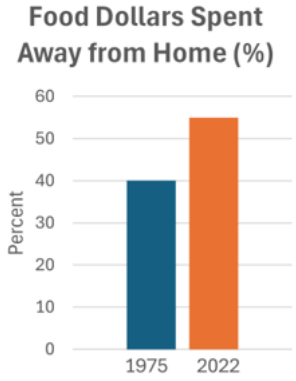
Obesity rates	Youths (12–19): 6%[6] Adults: 12%[7] 	Youths 12–19: 22%[8] Adults: 40%[9] (includes 10% severely obese) 
Coronary heart disease deaths (per 100,000 people)	388 (that was after a 25% decrease between 1950–1975)[10]	88 (2022; 77% decline due to medications (statins), reduced smoking, healthier diets)[11] 
Stroke deaths (per 100,000 people)	88 (1975)[12]	40 (2022)[13] (55% decline, due to medications, reduced smoking, diet) 

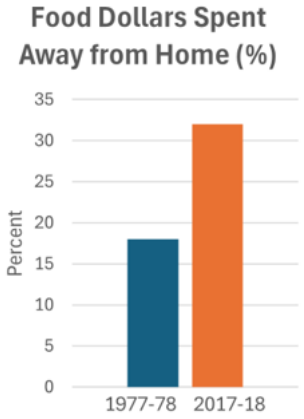
Diet-related conditions and diseases treated by Rx drugs	Hypertension, stroke, diabetes	Hypertension, stroke, high blood cholesterol, coronary heart disease, diabetes, obesity
Trans fat – formed when polyunsaturated vegetable oils are partially hydrogenated	No concerns about safety[14]	Banned in 2018 because studies done since the early 1990s showed that artificial trans fat was causing tens of thousands of deaths annually.[15]
Salt (sodium chloride) – a cause of high blood pressure, heart attacks, and strokes	3,232 mg/day[16] (1999-2000) Recognized as a problem, but no regulations or restrictions	3,400 mg/day[17] Excess sodium kills as many as 100,000 Americans annually. Sodium now listed on Nutrition Facts labels. FDA urges industry to reduce sodium in products, but did not set limits or require warning labels on high-sodium foods.[18]
Federal nutrition advice	Eat a variety of foods. Avoid too much fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sugar, sodium, and alcohol. Eat foods with adequate starch and fiber.[19]	A healthy diet includes vegetables, fruit, grains (especially whole grains), dairy (fat-free and low-fat) and plant versions, protein foods (lean meat/poultry, eggs, seafood, beans, nuts, soy foods), oils (from vegetables, seafood, nuts). Limit foods and beverages higher in added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium, and limit alcoholic beverages.[20]
Nutrition education in medical schools	Modest recognition of the need; mostly focused on currently unimportant nutrient deficiency diseases	Broad recognition of the need, with modest progress and greater focus on disease prevention and cooking[21]
Food Consumption		
Refined sugars availability (including corn syrups)[22]	67 lbs per person. Major concern was caries. 	73 lbs per person (2023) (peak was 91 lbs in 1999); recent decline mostly due to reduced drinking of carbonated sugar drinks. Health concerns include obesity, diabetes, heart disease, caries.

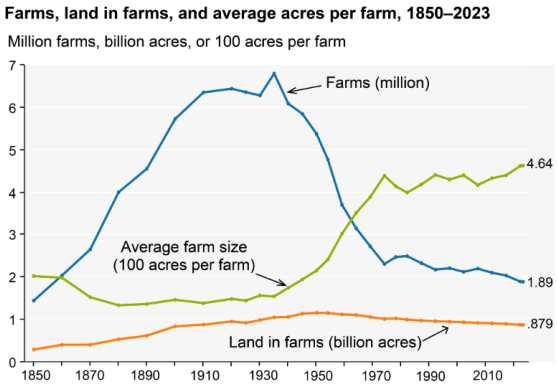
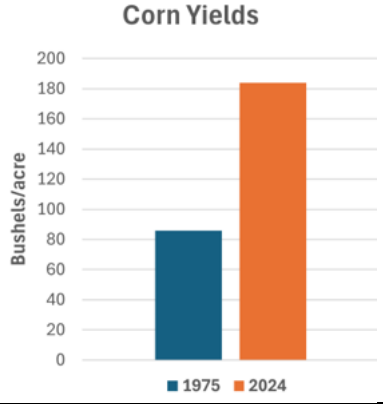
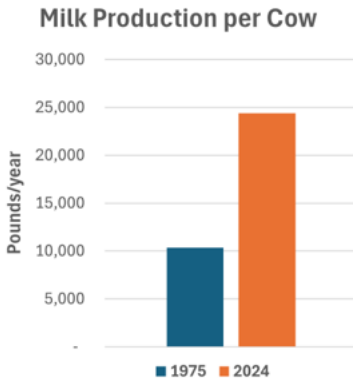
Beef availability (loss-adjusted)[23]	64 lbs/person	42 lbs/person (2019) 
Poultry availability (loss-adjusted)[24]	26 lbs/person 	62 lbs/person (2019)
Pork availability (loss-adjusted)[25]	26 lbs/person	33 lbs/person (2019) 
Total vegetables (loss-adjusted)[26]	149 lbs/person	163 lbs/person (2019; includes 47% (17 lb) decline in fresh potatoes) (peak was 184 lbs in 2000) 

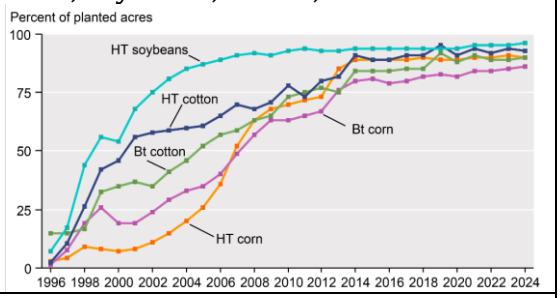
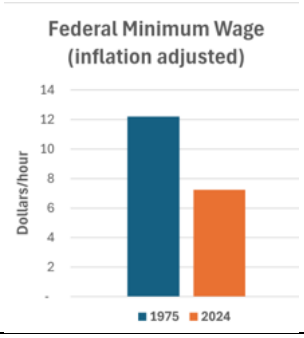
Fresh vegetable availability (loss-adjusted)[27]	82 lbs/person	85 lbs/person (2021) (peak was 100 lbs in 1999) 
Total fruit (fresh, frozen, juice, dried; loss-adjusted)[28]	116 lbs/person 	109 lbs/person (2021) (peak was 144 lbs in 1999)
Fresh fruit availability (loss-adjusted)[29]	45 lbs/person 	58 lbs/person (2021)

Milk (fluid) availability (loss-adjusted)[30]	20 gal/person	10 gal/person (2021) 
Alcoholic beverages (total of beer, wine, liquor)[31]	2.67 gal alcohol/person; 61,000–95,000 deaths[32]; $43 billion ($78 billion in 2024 dollars) in economic costs (does not include pain and suffering)[33] 	2.51 gal alcohol/person (2021); 178,000 deaths (2020-21; in a 55% larger population)[34]; $249 billion in economic costs (2010; $360 billion in 2024 dollars; does not include pain and suffering)[35] or $2.05 per drink (2010[36]; $2.98 in 2024 dollars)
Miscellaneous		
Baby foods	Major brands of strained foods contained less than 50% fruit and more than 50% fillers (water, sugar, modified starch).[37]	Strained foods are 100% fruit. Several companies are marketing healthier and organic baby foods.

Percent of income consumers spend on food	13.3%[38]	11.2%[39] 
Food Prices[40]	Whole milk: $1.57 per gallon ($9.14 in 2024 dollars) Eggs: 70¢ per dozen ($4.06 in 2024 dollars) Ground beef: 99¢ per pound ($5.75 in 2024 dollars) 	Whole milk: $4.43 per gallon (organic: $9.68)[41] Eggs: too volatile to specify because of bird flu Ground beef: $5.63 per pound[42]
Food dollars spent away from home[43] – meals tend to be high in calories, sodium, and saturated fat and low in fiber.[44]	40% (1975)	55% (2023) 

Percent of calories from foods purchased away from home[45]	18% (1977–1978)	32% (2017–2018) 
Food labeling	Ingredients, but not nutrients, were required to be listed on most foods.	Nutrition Facts labels required on all foods since 1994.[46] Chain restaurants with over 20 units must list calories on menus. (Several countries require warnings on foods high in calories, sodium, added sugars, saturated fat.)
Major national campaigns to encourage people to eat healthier diets	None	None
Food Industry		
Production and advertising of unhealthy foods aimed at kids	Widespread, no limits	Modest voluntary limits[47]; some companies have improved the nutrient and safety profiles of their products
Retail grocery industry	20 grocers held 40% of the market[48]	Four companies – Walmart, Costco, Kroger and Ahold Delhaize – control 65% of the retail market.[49] Walmart alone held 24% of the market (2023).[50]
Control of market by top four companies[51]	Beef: 36% Pork: 34% (1980)[52] Chicken: <30%[53]	Beef: 85% Pork: 70% Chicken: 54%
Junk food taxes	Not an issue	Several cities (Berkeley, Oakland, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Seattle, others) tax sugar drinks to reduce consumption and raise revenues, but there is no state or national tax.[54]

Farming		
Farms: size, number, acreage[55]		
Corn production	86 bushels/acre[56] (1975) 	184 bushels/acre[57] (2024)
Milk production per cow (annual)	10,360 lbs (1975)[58]	24,395 lbs (2024)[59] 
Beef cows, average weight	1,047 lbs[60]	1,382 lbs (2020)[61]
Methods for increasing crop and animal productivity and other traits	Hybridization/crossbreeding; mutagenesis (via irradiation and chemicals)	Hybridization/crossbreeding, mutagenesis, genetic engineering, CRISPr

Bioengineered crops[62]	Corn, soybeans, cotton, canola: 0%	Corn, soybeans, cotton, canola: >90% 
Organic food	Minuscule market share, low quality, no official definition of "organic"	High-quality certified organic food is available at all major retailers. In 2021 under 1% of cropland was organic[63] but 6% of food sold ($60 billion/year[64]) was organic.[65]
Anti-hunger Programs		
SNAP (Food Stamp) program	$5.1 billion ($33 billion in 2024 dollars)	$122 billion (2024)[66]
School foods	Meals often high in salt, saturated fat, refined grains. Candy and soft drinks readily available in cafeterias and vending machines.	Limits placed on calories, saturated fat, added sugars, and sodium in school foods.[67] Ban on junk foods in cafeterias and vending machines.[68]
WIC (Women, Infant, Children) Program[69]	Permanently established in 1975.	Benefits 6.6 million mothers and children; $7 billion (2024)[70]
National minimum wage	$2.10[71] ($12.22 in 2024 dollars)	$7.25/hour[72] 
Public Awareness		
Matters Rarely or Not Discussed	Vegetarian/vegan diets Trans fat Organic foods Farm animal welfare Health equity Plant-based milk and meat Genetically engineered crops and animals	??

	Antibiotic-resistant bacteria in food Ultra-processed foods Packaging contaminants Microplastics Web-based food shopping and restaurant reservations Regenerative agriculture Walmart, Amazon Obesity and diabetes epidemics	

Endnotes

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