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Americans' Perceptions of Food Safety: A Comparative Study on Fresh Produce and Meat Products

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An examination of public food-safety perceptions relating to the fresh produce (spinach and lettuce) and meat (beef and chicken) was conducted during the 2006 nationwide spinach recall. We apply the random utility discrete-choice model to the survey data to test the hypothesis that the public perceptions of food safety are invariant to the type of food (fresh produce and meat).

Results from the study show that Caucasians generally perceived the fresh produce and meat as safe. Young people, people with a high school degree or less education, and those earning \$50,000 or less are more likely to view the fresh produce and meat as unsafe. Trust in regulatory agencies at the state and federal levels influenced food-safety perceptions. The skepticism with which the public

viewed food corporations (processors, transporters, wholesalers or retailers) affected food-safety perceptions negatively; confidence and trust in the USDA as a regulatory agency and in conventional farmers contributed toward fresh produce being viewed as safe for consumption. In addition, low levels of objective knowledge about food pathogens and the resulting illnesses contributed to negative food-safety perception. To this end, resources should be directed toward public education and outreach efforts on overall food-safety targeting youths, low-income groups, minority races, and those with high school education or less education. There is also a need for regulatory agencies to change their image, given current low levels of public trust in their role of safeguarding the food supply.