

# Most people feel guilty about discarding food, but say it would be hard to stop

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Credit: Maliz Ong

Even though American consumers throw away about 80 billion pounds of food a year, only about half are aware that food waste is a problem. Even more, researchers have identified that most people perceive

benefits to throwing food away, some of which have limited basis in fact.

A study published today in *PLOS ONE* is just the second peer-reviewed large-scale consumer survey about [food waste](#) and is the first in the U.S. to identify patterns regarding how Americans form attitudes on food waste.

The results provide the data required to develop targeted efforts to reduce the amount of food that U.S. consumers toss into the garbage each year, said study co-author Brian Roe, the McCormick Professor of Agricultural Marketing and Policy at The Ohio State University.

The researchers developed a national survey to identify Americans' awareness and attitudes regarding food waste. In July 2015, it was administered to 500 people representative of the U.S. population.

The study found that 53 percent of respondents said they were aware that food waste is a problem. This is about 10 percent higher than a Johns Hopkins study published last year, Roe said, which indicates awareness of the problem could be growing. "But it's still amazingly low," he said. "If we can increase awareness of the problem, consumers are more likely to increase purposeful action to reduce food waste. You don't change your behavior if you don't realize there's a problem in the first place."

Among other findings, the study identified general patterns that play a role in people's attitudes regarding household food waste.

"Generally, we found that people consider three things regarding food waste," said doctoral student Danyi Qi, who co-authored the study.

"They perceive there are practical benefits, such as a reduced risk of [foodborne illness](#), but at the same time they feel guilty about wasting

food. They also know that their behaviors and how they manage their household influences how much food they waste."

In particular, the survey revealed patterns in how Americans think about food waste:

- Perceived benefits: 68 percent of respondents believe that throwing away food after the package date has passed reduces the chance of foodborne illness, and 59 percent believe some food waste is necessary to be sure meals are fresh and flavorful.
- Feelings of guilt: 77 percent feel a general sense of guilt when throwing away food. At the same time, only 58 percent indicated they understand that throwing away food is bad for the environment, and only 42 percent believe wasted food is a major source of wasted money.
- Control: 51 percent said they believe it would be difficult to reduce household food waste and 42 percent say they don't have enough time to worry about it. Still, 53 percent admit they waste more food when they buy in bulk or purchase large quantities during sales. At the same time, 87 percent think they waste less food than similar households.

In studying these patterns, the researchers see several areas in which to focus educational and policy efforts.

"First, we can do things to chip away at the perceived benefits of wasting food," Qi said. "Our study shows that many people feel they derive some type of benefit by throwing food away, but many of those benefits are not real."

For example, removing "Sell by" and "Use by" dates from [food packages](#) could significantly reduce the amount of good food that is trashed, the researchers said.

"Only in rare circumstances is that date about food safety, but people are confused about the array of dates on food packages," Roe said. Recent efforts to create uniform national standards for such labels have received bipartisan support. In addition, the researchers see an opportunity to help consumers understand the negative environmental impacts of food waste. Food waste is the largest source of [municipal solid waste](#) in the U.S. and the most destructive type of household waste in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, the researchers report.

"Helping people become more aware of that wouldn't be a silver bullet," Roe said, "but it could sway 5 to 10 percent of people who are generally willing to change their behaviors to improve the environment but who have never put two and two together about the damaging impacts of food waste."

Finally, researchers believe better data on measuring household waste could lead to improvements.

"Basically, right now everybody thinks they are doing as good as or better than everybody else," Roe said. "It's somebody else that's creating food waste."

To combat that problem, Roe, Qi and other members of Roe's research group are developing a smart phone app to better measure household food waste. Roe is seeking federal grants and private support to fund the project, a collaboration with the Pennington Biomedical Research Center at Louisiana State University. The LSU group developed the SmartIntake app several years ago to help participants in food intake studies report what they eat more accurately.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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