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Changing Families,  
Changing Food.

# Food, eating and social trends

## Researchers

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## Summary

The 'Food, Eating and Social Trends' (FEAST) project was designed to construct a time-line and international comparator dataset concerning the consumption and availability of food. The time-line covered the latter half of the

last century and the international coverage was global, at least for more recent years. Analysis of the data informs our understanding about changing families especially for rich nations in recent years.

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## Research questions

- Can international datasets such as the FAO food balance sheets and ILO data on food prices by type, year and country be used for this project?
- Can British surveys such as NFS, FES and FRS be sampled around census years from the mid 20th century onwards to provide a detailed timeline of consumption by family in Britain coincident with the main data on changing family structure?
- Can we measure a globalisation or convergence of world food consumption in the last century (in addition to counter global patterns)?
- Can we use evidence of food consumption to define class groupings in Britain?

## Research design

The project involved the statistical interrogation and mapping of existing quantitative international and national datasets on agriculture, food consumption and demographic trends. The main data-sets analysed included the FAO Food Balance Sheets (1961-2003) and the British National Food Survey (1975-2000). The first project, which addresses the globalisation of food, focuses on the supply and consumption of regionally-specific oils and fats as proxies for viewing changes in cuisine around the world. The second project uses UK food survey data to establish patterns in eating habits at Christmas compared to the rest of the year, to investigate the role of such 'ritual feasting' as a means of entrenching or concealing differences in social class.

## Key findings

The main research findings focused on two specific areas:

### 1 Globalising world cuisine: oil for food

- Research on the supply and consumption of oils and fats since the 1960s contradicts simplistic perceptions that the globalisation of food involves the homogenisation of diet around the world. Instead, our analysis suggests that whilst some convergence in the consumption of oils for food has taken place (from animal fats to vegetable oils, particularly soya and rape oil), this is being countered by increased global inequality between the wealthiest parts of the world, as importers of diversity (e.g. olive oil in western Europe) and the least affluent regions (e.g. parts of war-torn Africa) as the most resistant areas to homogenising trends.
- The net effect of globalization on the availability of fats and oils is to both homogenize consumption for the world's majority, whilst simultaneously increasing

consumer choice for the wealthier minority. Although there are undeniably health benefits from consuming more vegetable oils as opposed to animal fats, the causes of this transition are more likely to have resulted from the relative cheapness of certain vegetable oils as opposed to middle class health concerns.

### 2 Christmas feasting and social class

- While UK expenditure on food in December is consistently higher than for the rest of the year, significant social class differences remain, not least in the consumption of healthy food and alcohol. For the intake of fresh fruit and vegetables, December represents the most unhealthy month of the year for most people in Britain, as well as being a period of excessive alcohol intake for the lowest social classes.
- Although most households spend significantly more per week in December on traditional Christmas foods such as turkey, Brussels sprouts and dried fruit, this custom is rapidly declining (with the exception of turkey). At the same time, there has been increased emphasis among all social classes on convenience food and ready meals, although the middle classes are leading the way when it comes to expenditure on turkey, perhaps through 'premier' cuts, organic and free-range birds.
- Despite a widening gulf between the middle and working classes from the mid-1980s in general food expenditure, this gap has paradoxically lessened in recent years at Christmas, possibly as a result of greater willingness by people closer to the poverty line to go into debt to provide a full Christmas meal. However, inequality in the consumption of fruit and vegetables between social classes remains (with the lower classes eating less), in spite of an overall reduction in fruit and vegetable intake.

## Publications

Pitts M, Dorling D and Pattie C. (2007) Oil for food: the global story of edible lipids. *Journal of World Systems Research* 13: 12-32.

Pitts M, Pattie C and Dorling D (2007) Christmas feasting and social class. *Food, Culture and Society* 10: 407-24.