

Student Perceptions of Food and Climate Change



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BACKGROUND

“Food selection” is not only an area where consumers can have an impact on improving their health, but it is also an area where they can reduce their carbon footprint.¹ Reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the EAT-Lancet Commission have recommended a shift from a meat-centric diet to a plant-based diet in order to meet sustainability and carbon emission goals.^{2,3} The recommended plant-based diet should include minimally processed foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, and legumes.³ Little is known how younger generations are responding to environmental issues in the nutritional sense. The intentions or willingness of college students to adopt various food practices to minimize their carbon footprint, and to what extent, is not well studied.

OBJECTIVES

My goals were to determine the attitudes and perceptions of food and climate change of college freshmen attending a military college, and to examine ways they are willing to change their diet.



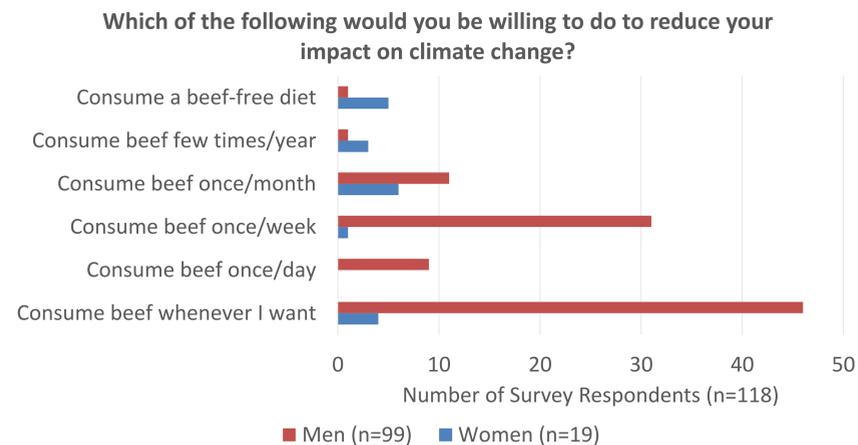
A cadet accesses the salad bar, a main area of the dining hall that offers plant food sources.

METHODS

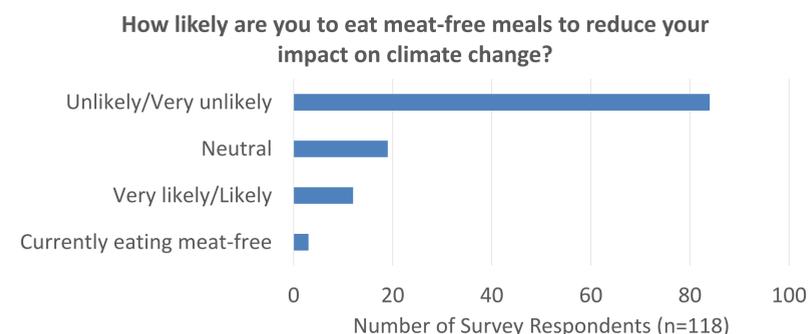
College freshmen (99 males, 19 females; ages 18 - 21) attending a military school were selected from a required health class to participate in a 60-item questionnaire (surveyMonkey.com), before any topics regarding nutrition were taught. Data collected included eating habits, willingness to adopt various diets, concerns regarding food availability, and knowledge and perceptions of climate change.

RESULTS

Many students surveyed (83%) felt they have an average or better understanding of climate change, however, only 44% agreed that selecting certain foods contributes to climate change. Over half the students surveyed were concerned how climate change will impact them. A majority of those surveyed consume beef either daily (36%) or weekly (57%). The primary reason for eating beef was to meet protein requirements, and most respondents (73%) felt adopting a plant-based diet would not sufficiently meet those needs. Despite cattle having a large carbon footprint, respondents want to be able to consume beef (42%) and dairy (48%) whenever they want, without restrictions. Women were more willing than men to reduce their beef and dairy consumption to lessen their carbon footprint, however, only a small percentage of women made up the survey population (n=19). Survey respondents were more willing to replace beef with poultry, fish, or game rather than adopt a vegan, vegetarian, or partially plant-based diet.



Above: Students (men=46, women=4) prefer to have no dietary restrictions on their beef consumption, however women appear to be more willing to eat less beef than men. **Below:** Most respondents (n=84) state they are unlikely to incorporate meat-free meals into their diet.



Cadets experience new food dishes at a dining opportunity off post.

CONCLUSIONS

Generation “Z,” those born between 1995 and 2010, will contribute to approximately 40% of consumer purchases in the future.⁴ The purchasing power of this demographic could have a substantial impact on the environment. Students from this study may benefit from educational outreach that provides them with a better understanding of how food selection can impact climate change, and how protein requirements can be met even when meat is partially or fully replaced with various plant sources. Future studies should consider which modes of outreach are most likely to result in dietary changes in this demographic. Attention to factors like gender may need to be considered when developing and implementing educational outreach for dietary changes.

LITERATURE CITED

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