

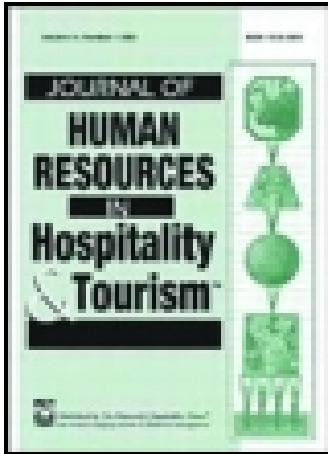
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# Food Safety in Fast Food Restaurants

Lauren Dundes  
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**ABSTRACT.** Given that health department inspections of fast-food restaurants may not be sufficient to ensure compliance with food safety regulations, managers must be vigilant in ensuring conformity with practices that safeguard public health. This case study of one fast-food employee's experience at three different fast-food restaurants suggests that employees' training and supervision require more attention to safety procedures. Greater manager accountability for employee noncompliance and an increased emphasis on employee education could help fast-food restaurants minimize threats to public health and strengthen the fast-food industry.

**KEYWORDS.** Food safety, sanitation, fast-food cleanliness

## *INTRODUCTION*

Although about a quarter of Americans eat fast food every day, with 2001 sales reaching over \$110 billion in the United States alone (Schlosser, 2002), few worry about the safety of the food. Most consumers operate under the assumption that health inspectors' visits to fast-food restaurants

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prevent and correct risks that can arise from unsafe practices that food handlers are trained to avoid. Yet little data are available that document the extent to which hazardous practices occur. Research in this area generally focuses on managerial strategies to improve inspection scores (e.g., Cotterchio et al., 1998; Mathias et al., 1995), rather than on everyday behind-the-scenes operations (e.g., Dundes, 2002). In fact, we possess very limited knowledge about the practices of employees who actually prepare the food, a topic that is explored in this case study, which details the observations of a college student with extensive work history in the fast-food industry.

### **BACKGROUND**

Most American restaurants' health violations stem from human error resulting from improper training (Restaurants and Institutions, 2003). Common problematic violations include improper food-holding temperature and inadequate hygiene practices, sanitation, and hygiene facilities (Phillips et al., 2006), which rank among the top restaurant food safety violations (Food Safety Educator, 2000). Although some fast-food chains certify their employees through ServSafe (a curriculum developed by the National Restaurant Association), it may be impractical to implement this curriculum for all employees, given that there are estimated to be 3.5 million fast-food workers who also have the highest rate of turnover in the American economy (with a period of employment averaging three to four months) (Schlosser, 2002). In addition, because the fast-food industry pays the minimum wage to a higher proportion of its workers than any other American business, this largely low paid, young, and unskilled workforce may be less able and motivated to understand the importance of food safety rules. According to Schlosser (2002), these factors may partially explain why so few fast-food employees receive training.

While the extent of health code violations remains unknown, a 12-month investigation of fast-food violations in 2003–2004 found a range of 45 to 126 critical violations for every 100 inspections. Although not all violations resulted in illness, this investigation uncovered a case of a malfunctioning ice cream machine contaminated with staphylococcal enterotoxin that was deemed responsible for causing illness in about 120 customers (Thompson, 2005). Yet these snapshot results must be interpreted with caution because the data are limited to what is uncovered during infrequent inspections when employees may alter their modus operandi to be in compliance with

health codes. We tend to rely on such inspection data, however, given that few individuals working in the field are motivated to disclose infractions that they commit or witness in day-to-day operations. A rare study of food handlers' performance (in Wales) corroborates that even trained employees deviate from proper food safety protocol, particularly when under pressure from a lack of time or resources, or staffing shortages (Clayton, 2002).

## **METHODS**

The exploratory data presented in this case study detail the experiences of one college student informant whose work in fast-food restaurants became known to the senior author during the course of her academic duties. In order to determine the kinds of food safety violations that can occur in fast-food restaurants, the authors asked their informant, an African-American woman identified by the pseudonym "Jackson," to retrospectively notate food safety infractions she observed during the course of her employment at three different fast-food restaurants (identified only as restaurant A, B, or C) and a cafeteria-style establishment in Maryland, over a six year period, beginning when Jackson was in high school and continuing through four years of college (from 2000–2005). Jackson worked for six months at Restaurant A for 25–30 hours per week; she was employed for about 35 hours per week at Restaurant B over the course of three years; she worked at Restaurant C for 30 hours per week for one year, and she worked about 20 hours per week for four months at a cafeteria-style establishment. As a result of her extensive experience working in the fast-food arena, Jackson gained familiarity with food handling rules. She was therefore able to recall instances when food safety rules were ignored or improperly followed. These data were divided into four key areas of food safety: employee training, food holding temperature, cross-contamination, and hand washing.

## **RESULTS**

### ***Training***

Inadequate training was an issue at Jackson's first high school job at Restaurant A where she worked 25–30 hours per week at age 16 for 6 months. Her training consisted of watching about eight tedious 30-minute

tapes on food safety, which included information about hand washing, sanitation, drink making, and cross-contamination. Her peers commented to her that they found the tapes to be extremely boring, and there was no effort to ensure that the employees understood or retained the information. In this restaurant, however, she at least had an orientation designed to alert employees to potential food safety hazards they could prevent. At her next job at Restaurant B, where she worked about 35 hours per week for 3 years, orientation and training consisted of an employee showing her how to make a single menu item and how to use the register. The managers showed no concern for food safety; "They were just there to run the store and they let the employees do whatever they chose," Jackson reported. Jackson saw many violations there because not only were the untrained employees unaware of their mistakes, but they also were totally unconcerned about food safety. During her tenure, Jackson never saw an employee fired or even written up for the numerous violations that she noted her managers witnessed. In fact, the managers themselves engaged in safety violations. Once she saw her manager forcefully sneeze into a difficult customer's food before serving it to him.

At her next job at Restaurant C, where she worked for 30 hours per week for about one year, she received no training or orientation. Food handlers' complaints about food safety problems to her managers were ignored. Interestingly, some of the managers only carefully followed food safety guidelines when they wanted to eat the food themselves, in which cases they cooked it for themselves, suggesting that they knew that proper food safety procedures were not the norm.

At her last job preparing food at a cafeteria-style establishment, where she worked for about 20 hours per week for four months, Jackson had an orientation but no training. She was given a manual that laid out rules for food safety, but she did not read it because there was no one who checked to verify that she had done so.

### ***Food Temperature***

Whether it is an internal temperature high enough to destroy harmful bacteria or a holding temperature ( $140^{\circ}+$  for hot foods and  $41^{\circ}$  or less for cold foods), food temperature is a critical component of health inspections. Yet at every fast food job Jackson held, the regulation of food temperature was always placed "on the back burner." First, Jackson noted the defrosting and then refreezing of unused shrimp (at Restaurant C) and chicken tenders after they had been sitting at room temperature (at the cafeteria). A more

chronic problem was the failure to ensure food was at an appropriate temperature (which never occurred during Jackson's tenure at Restaurants A and C). Although the cafeteria did try to monitor food temperature, these efforts stopped as soon as employees got busy. Employees tired of the whole process of having to check and record the temperature of the food. Occasionally Jackson saw this result in customers receiving undercooked chicken tenders and burgers.

At Restaurant B, employees rarely checked the temperature of the food. It happened only every few weeks, whenever the manager thought of it, even though the "secret shoppers" consistently docked them points for serving lukewarm food, relevant to the food's palatability rather than food safety. (Secret shoppers are hired by businesses to provide snapshot feedback on food quality [including temperature], service [speed and courtesy], cleanliness, etc. of individual establishments.) Even when her restaurant received a very low score from a secret shopper because the food was made incorrectly and was not hot enough, the company never sent anyone out to check on the store. Instead, they just asked the District Manager to confer with the Store Manager, who then talked to the crew to let them know their failings so that they could improve their next score. What Jackson noted, however, was that at Restaurants B and C, they neither changed their procedure nor corrected problems, but rather simply tried to serve the best quality food the next time they thought they were under the scrutiny of a secret shopper.

At Restaurant C, employees were supposed to label the holding time of the fried chicken and other food, yet employees would log how long the food had been sitting only when the district manager or the health inspector visited. When health inspectors did make their unannounced visits, they first went straight to the back of the restaurant to check the food storage area. In the meantime, Jackson's manager would tell everyone what they should be doing during the inspector's visit, which first and foremost included making up appropriate holding times.

### ***Cross-Contamination***

While Jackson saw evidence that her managers were vigilant about cross-contamination, their concern was manifested in urging employees to wear gloves without emphasizing removal of the gloves every time employees went from handling raw to cooked food. When working at the cafeteria, Jackson observed the grill cook use the same gloves to handle bloody burgers and steaks as hamburger buns. Only rarely did Jackson

see the cook realize her error and correct it. While working at Restaurant A, the fry cook would use gloves to batter the raw chicken and put it into the grease and would use those same gloves to cinnamon the apple pies. Another example of cross-contamination occurred at this restaurant because of improper use of containers used for raw chicken. Uncooked seasoned chicken is stored in large, color-coded tubs. In the absence of enough clean tubs, employees frequently rushed to quickly rinse out (with water and no soap) the raw chicken tubs before using them to prepare coleslaw and other side dishes.

### ***Hand Washing***

A common violation was employees' failure to wash their hands. Although every fast-food restaurant has signs posted saying that employees need to wash their hands after using the bathroom and again before they step on the line to prepare food, Jackson never saw a manager enforce this regulation. This is especially critical at establishments like Restaurant B that do not require gloves (unless the customer requests it). Jackson commonly saw employees move from handling money at the register or smoking a cigarette outside to preparing food for customers at Restaurant B, infractions similar to those reported to a health department at a Taco Bell in Ohio (Guerra, 2000).

## ***DISCUSSION***

Jackson's observations indicate that we may need greater oversight over the management of fast-food restaurants or to provide incentives for employees to comply with food safety codes and for managers to oversee their employees' compliance. While Dairy Queen (DQ) responded to a recent critical Dateline report by stating that every DQ operator must post hand-washing procedures by each sink (Thompson, 2005), the question remains about the extent to which employees comply with such procedures. In addition, even though both KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken) and Taco Bell ensure that every restaurant has a certified food safety manager, performs food safety audits two to three times per day, and carries out formal audits at least twice a year (in addition to inspections by the local health department), such provisions cannot guarantee that all employees follow safe food-handling practices, particularly if they do not understand the importance of such procedures.



Our anecdotal evidence indicates that training of fast food employees is not a priority, despite the obvious benefits of food safety-related knowledge (Rodgers, 2005). Employees have little understanding of the rules or the significance of the rules, especially when their first language is not English, as is the case with at least one out of every six restaurant workers (Schlosser, 2002). While it is important not to overwhelm employees with information, they need to understand how deviation from the health codes can cause illness. More frequent surprise visits from district managers who imposed sanctions for noncompliance of health codes might decrease violations as could mandated restaurant manager training and certification programs (see Cotterchio et al., 1998). Furthermore, food service education for food handlers may decrease time and temperature violations (Mathias et al., 1995). In the absence of such education and training, surveillance provides an additional option. Towards the end of her period of employment at one of the fast food restaurants where Jackson worked, the owners implemented a surveillance system that seemed to spur employee compliance very effectively: the installation of video cameras (recording images and sound) to monitor behavior in their absence. When employees realized that owners were using the information to catch and correct violations, they were much more meticulous about following designated procedures.

### ***LIMITATIONS***

The validity of our data is limited considerably by reliance on just one observer in only four different fast food establishments, in contrast to the 61 million meals served every single day in more than 200,000 quick service restaurants (Thompson, 2005). Unfortunately, we lack data about the rate of infractions (that is, the number of violations in a particular time period, e.g., infractions per hour or per day). Instead, the data serve only to suggest the types of problems that do occur that might require greater vigilance.

We are also unable to state whether Jackson's observations are similar to those of others working in the field, particularly given the absence of literature documenting the types of experiences that Jackson discloses in this case study. Furthermore, we are dependent upon what Jackson happened to notice as well as her memory of what she saw. In addition, without formal training in food safety, Jackson relied on her powers of observation to determine infractions. She was susceptible to both under- and over-reporting of food safety violations. An advantage of the retrospective design, however,

is the avoidance of observer bias. Had she been collecting data at the time of her employment, Jackson's increased vigilance might have unwittingly altered compliance with food safety practices.

Further studies should include systematically collected data from a greater number of employees at different levels of responsibility in order to gain a more thorough assessment of what goes on out of the sight of customers. A checklist of infractions should be provided, which could be completed on a regular, time-controlled basis or in privacy at home at the end of each shift. Ideally, video surveillance would more completely capture food safety violations, but consent might be difficult to obtain and the behaviors may not reflect the modus operandi of food handlers who are not so closely monitored. Although difficulties are inevitable in conducting research in this area, we need further studies of the behind-the-scenes operation of fast food restaurants that can help managers devise effective strategies to increase compliance with food safety measures.

### CONCLUSIONS

Despite the limitations of this case report, these observations suggest the need for improved training and supervision of fast-food employees. With the high turnover of fast-food employees, we cannot expect managers to teach food science, but rather to ensure that employees understand that the rules for food handling are not simply for appearances, but rather impact public health.

While health inspections are designed to monitor food safety in fast-food establishments, the infrequency of such visits leaves compliance to managers whose focus on food safety is often secondary to sales. Jackson's anecdotal experience indicates that some managers are not ensuring that their employees understand health codes that protect consumer health nor are they prioritizing employee compliance with such codes. Given that we cannot rely on periodic health inspectors' visits to reduce food safety violations, greater manager accountability for employee noncompliance and an increased emphasis on employee education could help fast-food restaurants minimize threats to public health.

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