

## Let's Talk about Food Safety Awareness and Education – Food Safety Scientists Weigh in on Netflix's Documentary *Poisoned*

Shauna C. Henley, University of Maryland Extension, Cockeysville, MD 21030, USA

**The Food Safety Brat Pack, back story.** Soon after the Food Safety Education Professional Development Group Meeting at the International Association for Food Protection's Annual Meeting in Toronto, Canada in 2023, a small group of educators (n=11), student (n=1), regulators (n=3), and industry (n=6) of younger professions could not stop buzzing about the Netflix's Documentary *Poisoned* (13), and how the documentary highlights food safety in a medium we professionals do not often see for the general public. However, our "Food Safety Brat Pack" felt the documentary could start a discussion about food. What started as an informal email, shared Google document, and a 1-hour group meeting, led to a drafted review.

**The review.** As a group of food safety educators, student, regulators, and industry young professionals, we spend much of our time talking to interested individuals about the safer ways to grow, process, purchase, prepare, consume, and store foods. There are ebbs and flows, usually connected to something capturing the public's attention to the topic. Netflix's *Poisoned* was released in August 2023 (13), and tells the story of pivotal points in the history of our food system and current efforts meant to make it "safer." *Poisoned* gave many people a starting point to understand and discuss our current food system and how to evolve it for the next generation. In 2024, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) finalized one policy and proposed another intended to keep poultry – raw breaded stuffed chicken and other raw poultry products – contaminated with *Salmonella* from entering commerce (23). As we're writing this article, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) closed its Boar's Head deli meat investigation due to the presence of *Listeria* which has caused 61 illnesses, 60 hospitalizations, and 10 deaths across 19 states (17).

Your food and drink can be contaminated at any point in the food supply chain – from the growing field, processing plant, retail store, transportation, and at home. Germs that make us sick can contaminate food no matter the education or experience of the home cook, no matter if food is organic or non-organic, grown at home or larger scale production at the farm, processing plant, or restaurant. Food poisoning is more than a tummy ache; it can turn into hospitalization, lifelong symptoms, and death. Food poisoning is preventable, and safe food handling is a shared responsibility from farm-to-fork.

### 5 Points *Poisoned* Got Right

1. **Food poisoning can be severe/deadly and taken seriously**, especially among young children (under

5 years), older adults (60 years and above), pregnant people, and the immunocompromised (e.g., diabetes) who are at higher risk (19).

2. **Jack-in-the-Box significantly impacted food safety policy and regulations.** *E. coli* became a reportable disease to state health departments, influencing industry-wide practices.
3. **Food regulatory oversight is complex** when comparing regulations at the local (e.g., city, county), state, and Federal (e.g., Food and Drug Administration, USDA, CDC, Environmental Protection Agency) levels.
4. **High-risk food commodities were highlighted.** Foods like raw/undercooked meat, poultry, seafood, cut melons, leafy greens, and sprouts pose a higher risk to public health compared to other food items. You may take extra precautions when purchasing, transporting, preparing, and consuming these products.
5. **Use a food thermometer (3).** **Temperatures are a science-based, reliable way to know your food is cooked safely.** Using sight (e.g., color), smell, touch, and taste to know when food is done is unreliable and not recommended.

### 5 Points *Poisoned* Missed

1. **Food safety regulations are ever-evolving.** In 2011, the Food Safety Modernization Act was signed into law, causing a cultural food safety shift of reaction to prevention. This is the most significant piece of food legislation since the early 1900s (2, 12).
2. **Food systems are very complex**, and not often linear from farm-to-fork (18). Regulatory differences between the United States vs. the European Union allows for different policies in their food systems to reduce illnesses and outbreaks (5). Local foods are not inherently safer, such as having a backyard flock (16).
3. **Some uncooked foods are linked to more foodborne outbreaks than other foods, such as romaine lettuce...** Some foods make better homes for germs to grow; how food is grown and/or processed can increase foodborne risks (7, 15).
4. **Food safety research relies on government grants (public) in addition to foundation and industry funding (private), but government grants are limited.** Current political oversight is complicated and when accounting for congressional approvals, this makes federal funds for research limited.
5. **Testing for germs is not always easy and fast.** Getting samples to a laboratory can take time, and it can take

days for germs to grow for scientists to know (and confirm) what the results mean for public health.

## 5 Things Consumers Can Do Based on the Documentary

- 1. Most counties and cities have a Cooperative/ Extension office (21)**, where local experts help educate farmers, manufacturers, retailers, and home consumers on safe food-handling practices and other related topics (8). Services are offered to the public at a low or no cost. Find your local Extension office (22).
- 2. Make informed decisions** about the foods you eat and serve your loved ones on:
  - a. How do Government Programs and Policies Influence Consumers' Food Choices? (24)
  - b. How to read Food Packaging Labels for Nutrition and Food Safety (20).
- 3. Identify and follow trusted experts and resources.** Not all social media and websites give science-based advice; learn what to look for in credible resources (14). False authority is when someone has credentials, like Dr. Oz, but is NOT an expert in food safety.

**4. Celebrate food safety—everyday.** September is National Food Safety Education Month; Global Handwashing Day is on October 15th; and World Food Safety Day is on June 7th. Visit [FoodSafety.gov](https://www.foodsafety.gov) for everyday food safety information (4, 6, 11).

## 5. Get involved – food safety is everyone's business!

- a. Advocate (1).** We all have a right to give voice to a cause where we want change – more federal dollars available for research and advocate for a shift in how research is funded.
- b. Voice your concerns** on the Federal Registry (10). Learn about legislative measures and the authority conferred by Congress outlined in the Code of Federal Regulations (9).

If you have not watched *Poisoned*, watch it (or read, listen to it), and then get more interested in where your food comes from. We have shared some documentary highlights, missed opportunities – next steps, and approaches for how you can get involved to keep our next bite safe.

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