



**Multinational Meat Farms  
Could Be Making Us Sick**  
*The American Conservative April 21, 2020*

**The pandemic highlights the gruesome  
animal abuses at US factory farms**  
*The Guardian August 3, 2020*

**Meat Plant Closures Mean Pigs  
Are Gassed or Shot Instead**  
*The New York Times May 14, 2020*

**Advocates push for more farmworker  
protections as coronavirus cases surge**  
*CNBC July 26, 2020*

# COVID-19's Impact on Public Attitudes Toward Industrial Animal Agriculture

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**ASPCA**<sup>®</sup>

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic that began in spring 2020 has led to wider recognition – and more scrutiny – of the direct connection between the mistreatment of animals and devastating effects on human populations.

A prime example of this is the intensive confinement of pigs, chickens and cattle raised for food in industrial animal agriculture facilities. Humans have effectively manufactured the ideal environmental breeding grounds for future public health crises by crowding stressed animals together in constant contact with their own waste.

This industry has also been in the spotlight as it faltered and strained under the pressure of market disruptions brought on by the COVID-19 crisis. There have been massive outbreaks at slaughterhouses due to unsafe working conditions, resulting in hundreds of workers dying and thousands more sickened by the virus in the past few months. As a result of slaughterhouse closures, animals backed up on farms and hundreds of thousands were killed en masse using inhumane “depopulation” methods.

A new public poll by Lake Research Partners, conducted roughly six months into the 2020 pandemic, analyzed whether this particular crisis – and the resulting media stories about the industry’s failure to protect workers and animals – has increased public awareness and concern about industrial animal agriculture, changed consumption choices or impacted support for public policies to reform the industry.



## Key Findings

- **The public is widely concerned about industrial animal agriculture.** Nearly 9 out of 10 Americans (89%) are concerned about industrial animal agriculture – citing animal welfare, worker safety and/or public health risks.
- **The public believes inhumane treatment of farm animals is tied to human health and safety risks.** Two-thirds (65%) of respondents believe that poor working conditions increase the mistreatment of farm animals. More than half (57%) believe that the inhumane treatment of farm animals increases public health risks.
- **Stories about industrial animal agriculture during the pandemic shifted public sentiments.** Those who heard about COVID-19-related worker safety, public health and farm animal treatment issues reported significantly higher levels of concern about the industry, with approximately 80% reporting concern about each of the issues (up 20 points over respondents who were not exposed to this information). Newly informed participants were also more likely to change animal product consumption habits and were more supportive of reforming the industry.
- **Most consumers moved away from factory-farmed products during the pandemic.** 61% of consumers changed their purchasing habits around meat, eggs and dairy products in the past six months to either consume less, buy higher-welfare products or buy more frequently from local farms.
- **There is strong, bipartisan support for government intervention to reform industrial animal agriculture.** 82% of respondents believe that the government should mandate slower slaughter speeds to protect workers, animals or public health. Regardless of political party, the majority of respondents (61%) support reserving government funds for farmers whose practices are more humane, safe for workers and reduce the risk of future pandemics.
- **Farmers and their families have the highest levels of concern about industrial animal agriculture.** Respondents with backgrounds in agriculture (or with family members who work in agriculture) were more concerned (by more than 10 points on certain issues) about industrial animal agriculture than the general public. 85% expressed support for a complete ban on new industrial animal agriculture facilities – almost twice the support for this concept compared to the general public.

**These results represent an extraordinary level of both awareness and consensus.** At a time when the country is divided on a number of issues, most of these opinions and beliefs held true across political party, race, gender, and regardless of whether the respondent lived in a rural or urban setting. The ASPCA has been advocating for reforms that would protect animals and people involved in animal agriculture, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. This new data reinforces the urgent need and unique opportunity for consumer engagement, government action and private sector commitments to address farm animal welfare, worker safety and public health risks on-farm and in slaughterhouses.

## Poll Methodology

Lake Research Partners designed and administered this survey with 1,000 American adults. The nationwide survey was conducted over the Internet on August 18-24, 2020, from a national sample of Internet users. The data were weighted slightly by gender, age, region, race, political party identification and education to mirror known demographics of the adult population of the United States. The margin of error for the total sample is +/- 3.1% and larger for the sub-groups. In interpreting survey results, all sample surveys are subject to possible sampling error; that is, the results of a survey may differ from those which would be obtained if the entire population were interviewed. The size of the sampling error depends upon both the total number of respondents in the survey and the percentage distribution of responses to a particular question.



## Survey Findings

### *Measuring Recent Exposure to Issues in Industrial Animal Agriculture*

Respondents were asked whether they had heard about one or more of the topics related to animal agriculture that have been covered fairly extensively in the media since the start of the pandemic.

Specifically:

- Worker health or safety issues on industrial farms or slaughterhouses;
- Animal welfare concerns on industrial farms or slaughterhouses;
- Depopulation or mass euthanasia of animals on industrial farms;
- The link between industrial animal agriculture and public health risks;
- The link between industrial animal agriculture and pandemics.

65% of respondents had heard about at least one of these issues. Worker health and safety were familiar to the most people at 37%. Those who recently heard about at least one of these issues were evenly split between major political parties (Republican and Democrat), spanned race, geography and age, and were spread across both urban and rural areas.





## Belief That Industrial Animal Agriculture Contributes to Societal Problems

Participants were asked whether they believed that industrial animal agriculture contributes to animal suffering, worker safety and health risks, various public health risks, problems for communities near farms or environmental damage.

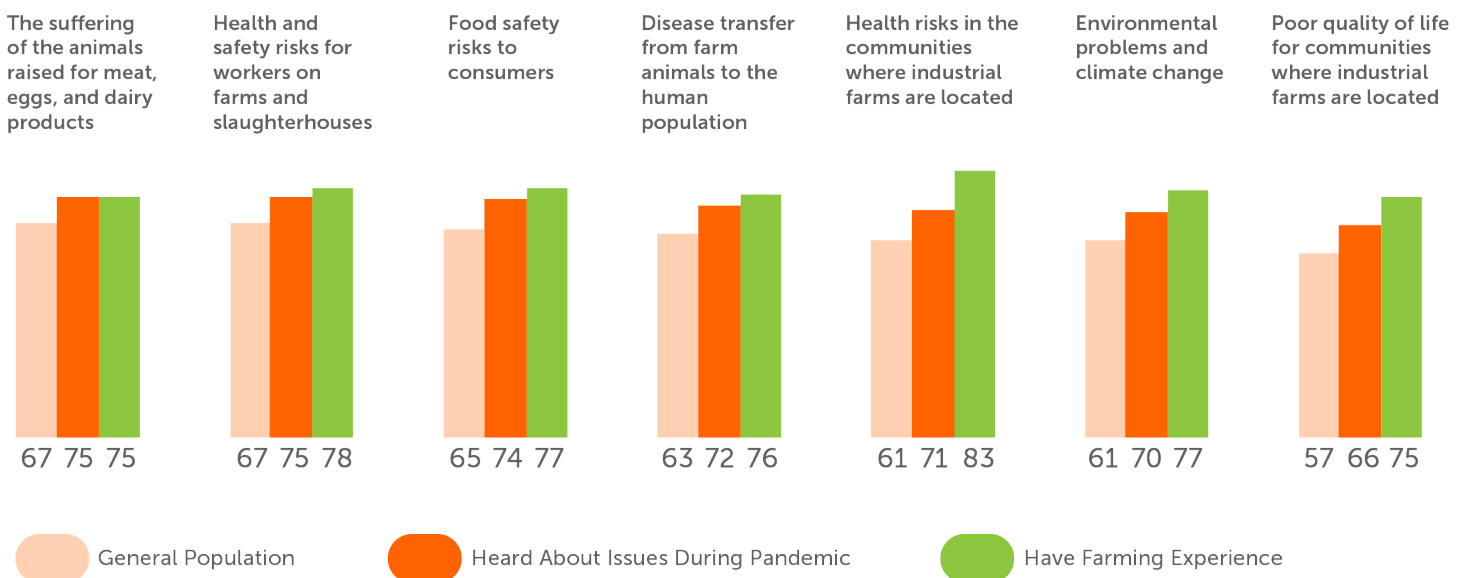
Respondents whose households derive 25% or more of their income from agriculture expressed the strongest belief that industrial animal agriculture contributes to various societal problems – between 7 and 23 points higher than the general public. In particular, 83% of those working in or closely associated with agriculture believe that industrial farms cause health risks in the communities where they are located, and 75% believe that industrial farms reduce the quality of life for nearby communities – revealing an approximately 20-point gap between the general public and those with farming experience on the connection between industrial farms and community problems.

There was also a higher level of association (between 7 and 10 points) between industrial animal agriculture and harms to humans and animals among those who had heard about industrial animal agriculture during the pandemic, compared to the general public.

### Animal Welfare & Industrial Animal Agriculture

*Industrial animal agriculture facilities, also called Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), raise animals in large, enclosed sheds where they are often confined in cages or crowded together, unable to perform basic natural behaviors such as stretching their wings, running, rooting or dustbathing.<sup>[1]</sup> Animals are sometimes subjected to painful alterations like tail-docking and beak-trimming, often carried out without anesthetic.*

## To what extent do you believe that industrial animal agriculture contributes to each of the following?



## Public Concern About Industrial Animal Agriculture

Participants were asked if they were concerned about various issues related to industrial animal agriculture, including animal welfare, worker safety and/or public health risks.

89% of respondents reported being somewhat or very concerned about at least one issue, with high numbers across political party, race, geography and age. Among the issues stated, diseases spread by animals on concentrated farms and food safety risks ranked highest, with 75% concerned about each of these topics, followed very closely by the suffering of animals at 74%.

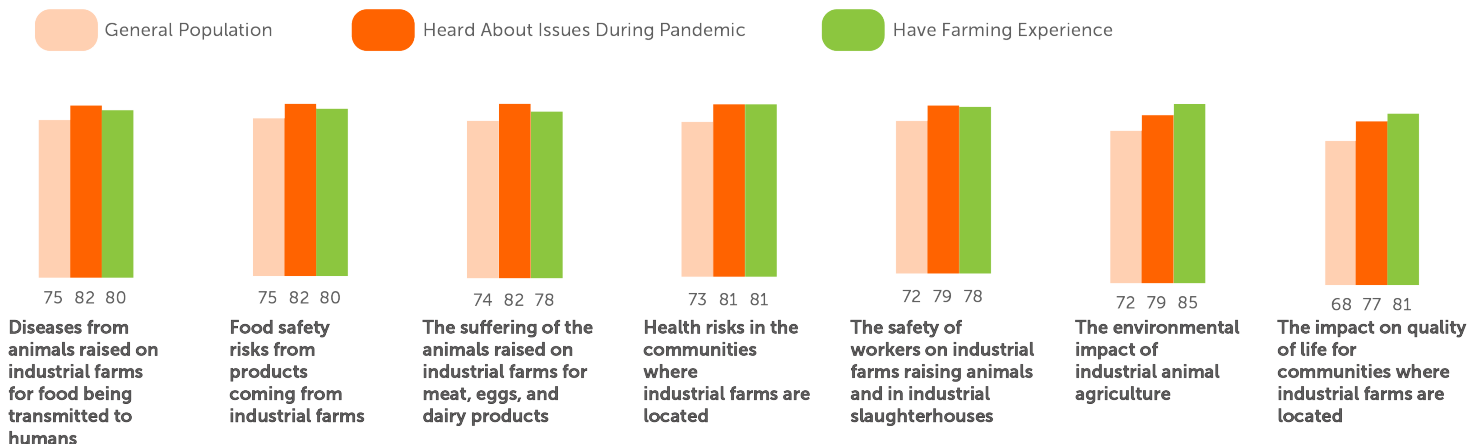
Again, those with farming experience and their families reported higher levels of concern than the general public about each topic related to industrial animal agriculture, with about 80% or more expressing concern on each of the topics. Their concern was exceptionally high around the industry's environmental damage (85%) and impact on local communities (81%).

When respondents had heard about these issues during the pandemic, their levels of concern jumped across the board, with 80% reporting concern about each of the issues, versus 60% among those who had not heard about issues during the pandemic.

### Public Health & Industrial Animal Agriculture

*The high density of animals in CAFOs combined with the mismanagement of their waste creates a breeding ground for Salmonella, E. coli and other pathogens that can be passed to consumers through animal products.<sup>[2]</sup> These conditions also increase the risk of future pandemics.<sup>[3]</sup> A number of recent instances of highly pathogenic and deadly flu strains, including H5N1<sup>[4]</sup> and H1N1<sup>[5]</sup>, originated from industrial chicken and pig farms. In April, in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak, an infectious and fatal strain of bird flu was confirmed on a conventional turkey farm in South Carolina that was raising more than 30,000 birds in a barn.*

## % Concerned about Industrial Animal Agriculture Impacts





## **Belief That Animal and Human Welfare Are Tied**

Participants were asked whether they believe that inhumane treatment of animals on farms impacts public health risks, including viral outbreaks, and whether they believe that poor working conditions impact the treatment of animals on farms.

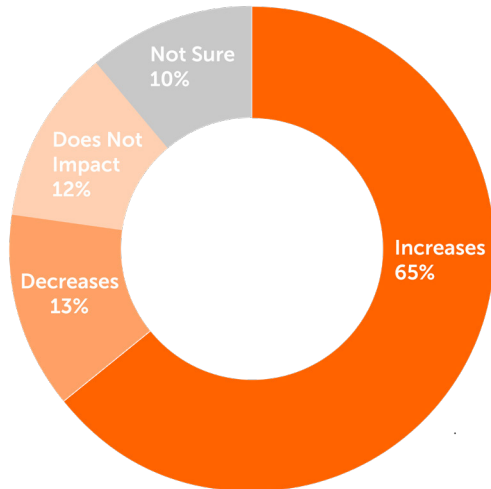
65% of respondents reported that they believe that poor worker protections and harsh working conditions increase the inhumane treatment of farm animals. The number remained steady across political party, age and whether respondents lived in urban or rural areas. More of those who heard about these issues during the pandemic made this connection (71%). 59% of farmers and their family members believe that these issues are interconnected.

57% of respondents believe that the inhumane treatment of animals increases public health risks. That number rises to 66% among both farmers and their families and those who heard about issues of worker and animal welfare during the pandemic.

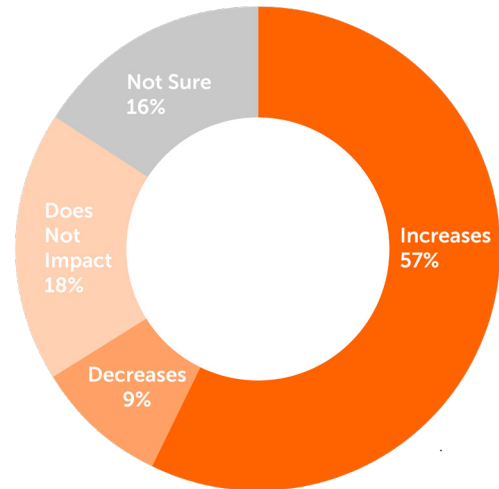
## **Worker Safety & Industrial Animal Agriculture**

*Workers in CAFOs are consistently exposed to a variety of harmful gases and particulate matter<sup>[6]</sup> causing respiratory disorders, cardiovascular complications, chronic aches and pains and premature death.<sup>[7]</sup>*

**Do you think poor protections and harsh working conditions for workers increases, decreases, or does not impact inhumane treatment of animals?**



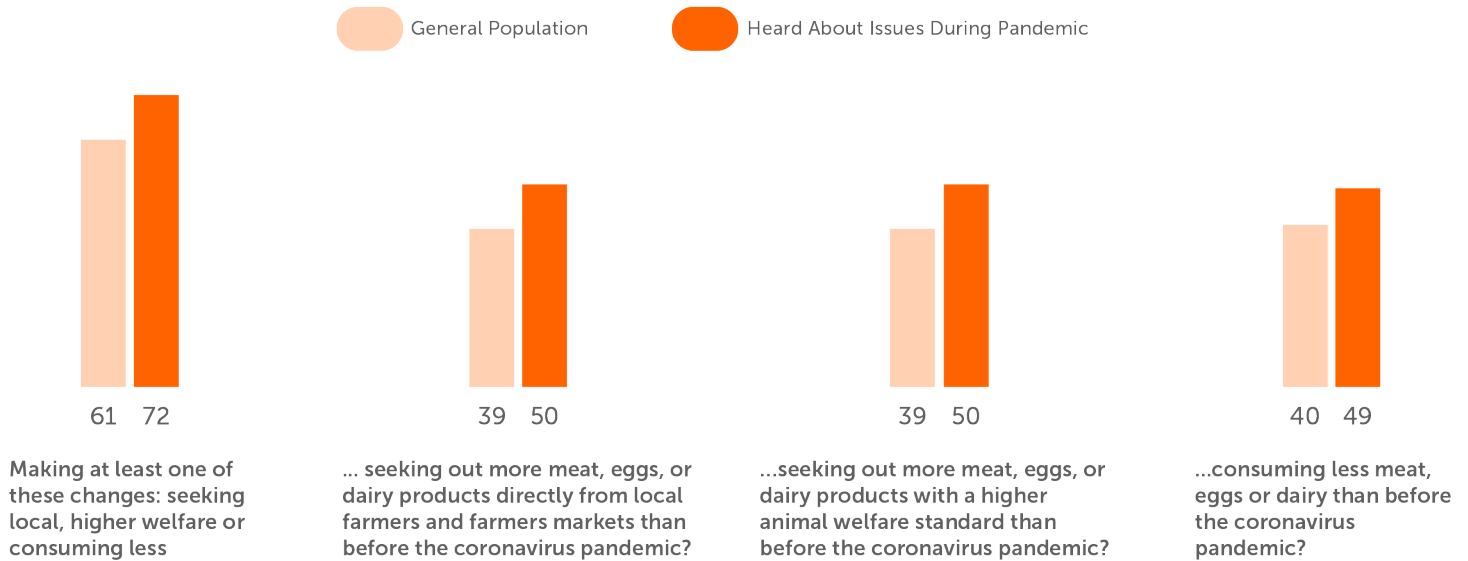
**Do you think inhumane treatment of farm animals increases, decreases or does not impact public health risks, including viral outbreaks?**



## Consumer Behavior Change

Participants were asked a variety of questions about their purchases of animal products since the start of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic.

### Since the coronavirus pandemic, have you been ...?

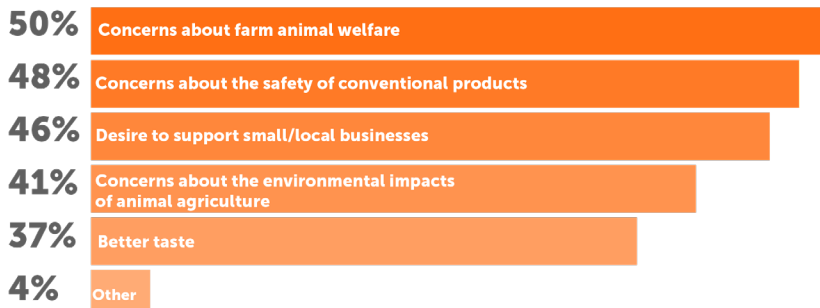


Overall, 61% of respondents reported adjusting their meat, egg and dairy purchases to either buy more from local farmers, a greater quantity of higher-welfare products\*, or fewer animal products overall since the pandemic began. That number rose to 72% among those who heard about recent issues of animal welfare, worker safety or public health related to factory farming amid the COVID-19 crisis. These behavior changes were driven in equal parts by cost-consciousness and concern about the various impacts of factory farming.

#### Buying more local meat, eggs and dairy

Those with farming experience and their families were twice as likely as the general population to have shifted to buying more locally raised animal products (83%). Local purchasing was also higher among respondents aged 18-39 (51%); those who had heard about issues of animal welfare, worker safety or public health since the pandemic (50%); and Republicans (47%) and Latinx respondents (46%). Overall, 39% of respondents reported seeking out more meat, eggs or dairy products directly from local farmers and farmers markets than they did before the coronavirus pandemic.

#### Reasons for Seeking More Humanely Raised Animal Products Since Pandemic



#### Buying more humane meat, eggs and dairy

82% of those with farming experience and their families also reported buying more animal products with higher welfare standards since the start of the pandemic. Overall, 39% of respondents shifted to higher-welfare sources during the pandemic and reported doing so out of a concern for animal welfare, concerns over the safety of conventional products, and a desire to support small and local businesses.

\*The term "higher-welfare" was not defined for participants.



## Reducing consumption of meat, eggs and dairy

40% of respondents reported consuming less meat, eggs or dairy than before the coronavirus pandemic, in equal parts because of the higher costs of these products and concerns about the safety of these products. Concerns about farm animal welfare and the environment also drove purchasing choices, with unavailability and affordability ranking lower. Farmers, in particular, were motivated by environmental and animal welfare concerns.

### Reasons for consuming fewer animal products since pandemic



Once again, those involved in agriculture and their families more than doubled the general population on this behavior change, with 81% reporting reduced animal product consumption since the start of the pandemic. Reduction of animal product consumption was also high among those who had heard about issues of animal welfare, worker safety or public health during the pandemic (each 50%) and respondents aged 18-39 (45%). Many respondents changed animal product

consumption in more than one way. More than half (58%) of those reducing consumption also reported looking for higher-welfare animal products.



### Animal Welfare & Industrial Animal Agriculture

*At slaughterhouses, extremely fast line speeds increase the risk of inhumane handling and ineffective stunning, resulting in excruciating deaths, including animals entering boiling "scalding tanks" while conscious.<sup>[10]</sup>*

## Support for Public Policy Reforms and Government Funding

Participants were asked whether they believe that the government should slow slaughter speeds in order to protect animal welfare, worker safety or food safety, with the order of the topics randomized. Overall, 82% of respondents affirmed that slaughter speeds should be reduced. Protecting animals from suffering (69%), protecting workers' safety (72%) and protecting food safety (74%) all received similar levels of support. Farmers and those with families tied to agriculture were especially supportive of slowing slaughter speeds with 97% favorable either to protect workers, food safety or animals.

**Believe that farms raising animals in ways that are more humane, healthy and fair to workers should be prioritized for government funding (%)**

**61%** General Population

**71%** Heard About Issues During Pandemic

**77%** Have Farming Experience

**Believe institutions should receive government funds to purchase GFPP foods (%)**

**67%** General Population

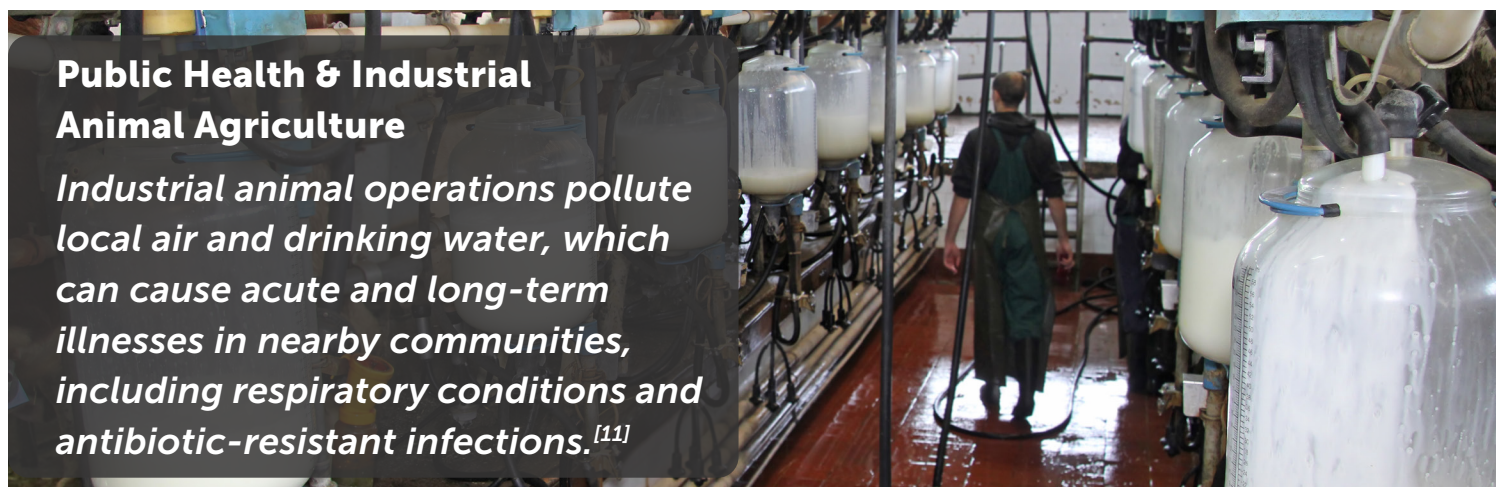
**76%** Heard About Issues During Pandemic

**86%** Have Farming Experience

Participants were also asked whether farms raising animals with practices that are more humane, healthy and fair to workers should be prioritized for government funding, and 61% of respondents supported this. An additional 25% believe this kind of farming and industrial farming should at least be given equal priority for government funding.

Support for prioritizing funding to more humane and healthy farms was significantly higher among those with first-hand experience in agriculture (77%), those who had heard about issues in animal agriculture during the pandemic (71%) and people aged 18-39 (70%). Support was equally high among Republicans (60%) and Democrats (64%).

Participants were asked whether public institutions should receive dedicated funding to purchase food in line with the standards of the Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP), which sources food meeting specific criteria tied to five values: animal welfare, nutrition, sustainability, fair labor and local sourcing. Two-thirds of the respondents (67%) believe that this funding should be made available. Support for this issue was similarly high overall, regardless of political party, race, age, or whether respondents lived in urban or rural settings. There was especially high support for this kind of food in public institutions among those with first-hand or family experience in farming (86%) and those who had heard about issues in industrial animal agriculture during the pandemic (76%).

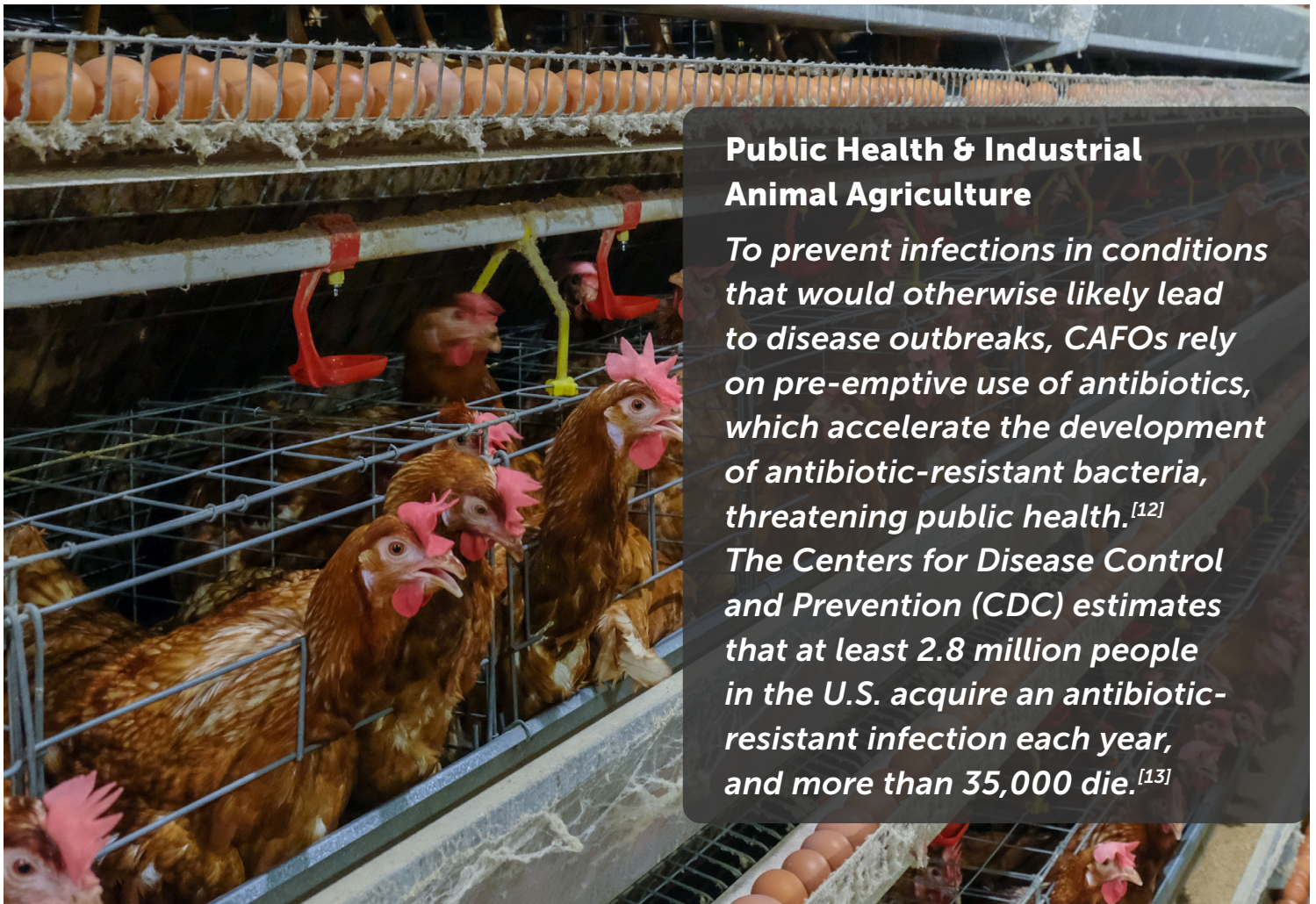
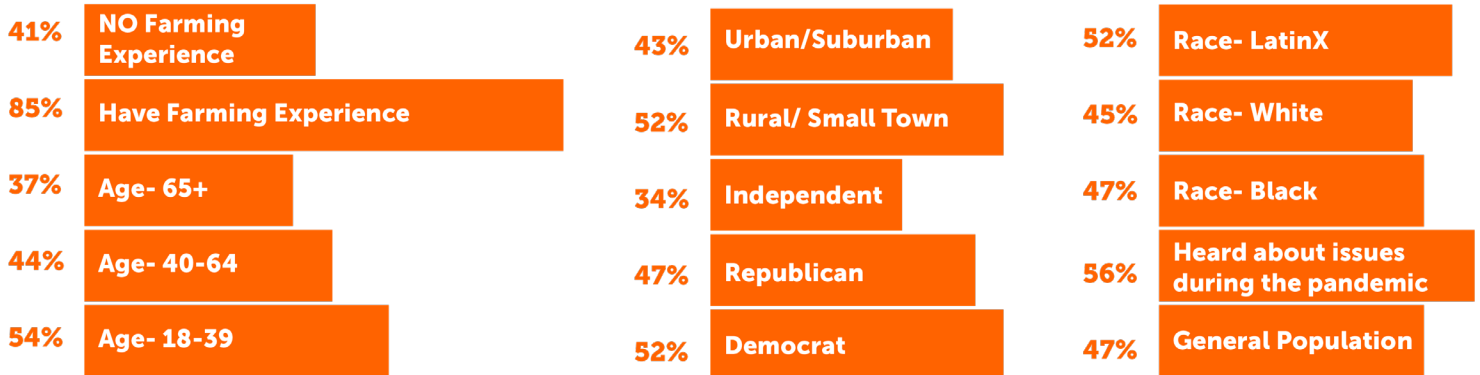




## Support for Banning New Industrial Animal Agriculture Facilities

Respondents were asked whether they support a ban on all new industrial animal agriculture facilities, or CAFOs. Of those with an opinion, there is strong support for banning new industrial farms, with 47% in favor, 26% opposed, and the balance of 28% responding that they are unsure. Most noteworthy, support almost doubled among those with farming experience and their families, with 85% supporting a ban on new CAFOs and 49% expressing strong support. Support also jumped above 50% among those in rural areas and was higher among those who had heard about problems in industrial animal agriculture during the pandemic (56%), respondents between 18-39 (54%), Democrats (52%) and Latinx respondents (52%).

## Support a ban on all new industrial farms (%)



### Public Health & Industrial Animal Agriculture

*To prevent infections in conditions that would otherwise likely lead to disease outbreaks, CAFOs rely on pre-emptive use of antibiotics, which accelerate the development of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, threatening public health.<sup>[12]</sup>*

*The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that at least 2.8 million people in the U.S. acquire an antibiotic-resistant infection each year, and more than 35,000 die.<sup>[13]</sup>*



## Conclusion

The survey reveals that there is broad public concern about the impact of intensive animal farming on both animal and human wellbeing and that the pandemic has generated increased awareness, behavior change, and motivation to reform the animal agriculture industry. Furthermore, the survey showed that farmers and their families – those with the closest personal ties to and knowledge about the agricultural industry – are the demographic that is the most concerned about industrial animal agriculture. This proves that these concerns are not based on ignorance of how the industry works or biased information sources. On the contrary, those who are most informed about and experienced in agriculture expressed the highest levels of concern and are particularly motivated to address animal welfare, worker safety and human health risks related to large-scale animal farming.

This survey also shows that the public relates inhumane treatment of animals to poor outcomes for humans. This broad understanding of the interconnectedness of human and animal welfare and the consistent ranking of animal welfare as a top concern supports the case for including consideration of animal handling practices and animal welfare in all initiatives and policies designed to improve the food system.

### *Recommendations*

- By committing to more humane and healthy practices, including the adoption of meaningful welfare certifications, food brands and farmers can reassure consumers about worker and food safety.
- By supporting policy reforms that would improve farm animals' welfare, like the Farm System Reform Act and the Safe Line Speeds During COVID-19 Act, legislators can also reduce the public's concern about worker safety, community health problems and diseases stemming from industrial practices.
- By incorporating farm animals in their messaging, advocates for workers, food safety, local communities and public health protections will be advancing their cause and broadening their base.

While the pandemic and its aftershocks continue to strain our fragile food system at every level, an opportunity is emerging to channel the growing public unease with this system, as captured in this poll, to advance the critical cause of reforming industrial animal agriculture.





- [1] <https://www.asPCA.org/animal-cruelty/farm-animal-welfare>
- [2] [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/e-coli-salmonella-and-oth\\_b\\_415240](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/e-coli-salmonella-and-oth_b_415240); <https://www.foodandwaterEurope.org/factsheet/food-safety-consequences-of-factory-farms/>
- [3] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3666729/>
- [4] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2570817/>
- [5] <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/sci/325/5937/1197.full.pdf>
- [6] [https://foodispower.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/CAFOs-Chemicals\\_Associated\\_with\\_Air\\_Emissions\\_5-10-06\\_158862\\_7.pdf](https://foodispower.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/CAFOs-Chemicals_Associated_with_Air_Emissions_5-10-06_158862_7.pdf)
- [7] [https://foodispower.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/CAFOs-Chemicals\\_Associated\\_with\\_Air\\_Emissions\\_5-10-06\\_158862\\_7.pdf](https://foodispower.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/CAFOs-Chemicals_Associated_with_Air_Emissions_5-10-06_158862_7.pdf)
- [8] <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/09/04/when-were-dead-and-buried-our-bones-will-keep-hurting/workers-rights-under-threat>
- [9] <https://www.gao.gov/assets/680/676796.pdf>
- [10] <https://www.asPCA.org/animal-protection/public-policy/stopping-extreme-speed-slaughter>
- [11] <https://www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2020/01/13/precautionary-moratorium-on-new-and-expanding-concentrated-animal-feeding-operations>
- [12] <https://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/sites/default/files/Antibiotic%20Resistance%20101%20Report%20March%202015.pdf>
- [13] <https://www.cdc.gov/drugresistance/>

