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Social differences of red meat consumption during meat crisis and COVID-19 pandemic in Iran

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Abstract

Red meat plays an essential role in Iranian cuisine, both as a source of protein and as an integral component in eating behaviours based on religious and cultural factors. Economic challenges, including high inflation and low incomes, have affected red meat consumption in Iran in the last decade. In early 2019, the sharp jump in red meat prices led to fundamental changes in the Iranians’ dietary intakes. This price crisis was directly followed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected Iran’s under pressured economy and food markets. This study investigated the changes in per capita red meat consumption in Mashhad, the second-most populous city and a centre of red meat production in Iran, during these two crises. Mashhad is capital of Razavi Khorasan’s eastern province. The fieldwork was carried out with questionnaires in two stages in summer 2019 and spring 2021. In Mashhad, the city quarter of residence can reflect the social class of individuals. So, the primary data was collected within a survey of 296 participants (households), which were randomly selected in three different city quarters: quarter one (low-income), quarter two (middle-income) and quarter three (high-income). Stratified random sampling was used. We have studied the same sample in three different periods covering pre-crisis period (before early 2019), red meat price crisis (2019–2020) and COVID-19 pandemic period (2020 onward). As the assumption of independence of the observations is violated, we could not use the one way ANOVA. Therefore, repeated-measures ANOVA was applied for comparison. The data analysis shows that meat consumption decreased among the low-, middle and high-income groups after the price crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the per capita consumption of red meat decreased among low- and middle-income groups, while it increased among the upper-class groups. Moreover, low-income groups were more than the other groups affected by eliminating red meat from their diet or substituting it with non-protein sources. As a conclusion, the two crises have increased food insecurity and weakened social sustainability. To help vulnerable groups, government and civil society need to develop targeted strategies that enable lower-income consumers to cope with nutrition shortages during crisis periods.

Keywords: Consumer, COVID-19 pandemic, food security, Iran, meat price, red meat crisis, social sustainability

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