

POINT OF SERVICE FOOD INSPECTION DISCLOSURE AS A RECOMMENDED PRACTICE

Disclosure of health department inspection scores/grades at the point of service, i.e. at the food establishment, eliminates a barrier to using inspection data in the decision-making process, as it does not require the added task of using technological resources to check a website. As it relates to public disclosure, this study suggests that agencies that disclose at the point of service saw a 74% reduction in outbreaks compared to those using online only disclosure.

In 2017, there were 841 foodborne illness outbreaks reported, resulting in 14,481 illnesses, 827 hospitalizations, 20 deaths, and 14 food recalls in the United States (U.S.), including Washington, D.C. and Puerto Rico. Among the illnesses and outbreaks for which a single location was identified, 44% and 64%, respectively, were attributed to foods prepared in a restaurant setting¹.

The rise in expenditure of foods eaten away from the home and the significant proportion of foodborne illnesses attributed to restaurants has highlighted the importance of food establishment inspections. Public disclosure of food establishment inspection results enables consumers to make informed decisions about where they choose to eat².

For local inspection agencies that disclose inspection results, the most common method is through online disclosure only, which is typically hosted on or accessed through departmental websites. Drawbacks to this method include difficulty in navigating these websites and lengthy reports that are confusing to interpret by the general public. Moreover, this method may not be accessible to those who are most vulnerable to foodborne illness such as older adults³.

Current inspection practices and methods of disclosure vary widely across jurisdictions in the U.S. and presents unique challenges to evaluating program effectiveness. The objectives of this cross-sectional study were to characterize local inspection programs and evaluate the effects of programmatic characteristics, such as active public disclosure methods, on select operational and foodborne illness outcomes.

While the act of disclosure is important, the information disclosed and how they are interpreted by the public is also important. Familiarity with the symbols used to represent inspection results lends to easier interpretation by the general public. Grading practices can include letter grading and/or numerical scoring, similar to most school system grading methods in that an A grade is superior, or other ordinal methods such as stoplight colors and emoticons.

Between January 7, 2020 - April 6, 2020, an online 36-question survey was administered to 790 government-run food establishment inspection programs at state, county, city, district, and territorial levels. Use of the FDA Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards listserv allowed for direct contact and survey dissemination to managers or primary points-of-contact of food establishment inspection programs.

Of the 149 survey respondents, 127 (85%) represented a local food establishment inspection agency. Agencies that disclosed at the point of service reported fewer mean number of re-inspections by 15%, complaints by 38%, outbreaks by 55% ($p=0.03$), and Salmonella infections by 12% than did agencies that disclosed online only.

These results suggest that how local agencies conduct and score food establishment inspections and disclose results to the public likely affect the success of the programs to control and prevent foodborne illnesses and food safety hazards.

Policymakers and restaurants should consider adding point of service disclosure of inspection results to the current practices of inspection agencies. These results warrant future research to improve the effectiveness of food establishment inspection programs.

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2017). Surveillance For Foodborne Disease Outbreaks, United States, 2017: Annual Report. [online] Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, CDC, pp.1-3. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/fdoss/pdf/2017_FoodBorneOutbreaks_508.pdf> [Accessed 30 June 2020].

² Fung, A., Graham, M., and Weil, D. (2007). Full disclosure: The perils and promise of transparency. 1-282. 10.1017/CBO9780511510533.

³ Fleetwood, J. (2019). Scores on doors: restaurant hygiene ratings and public health policy. *Journal of Public Health Policy*, 40(4), pp.410-422.

