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Beef or Chicken? A Look at U.S. Meat Trends in the Last Century

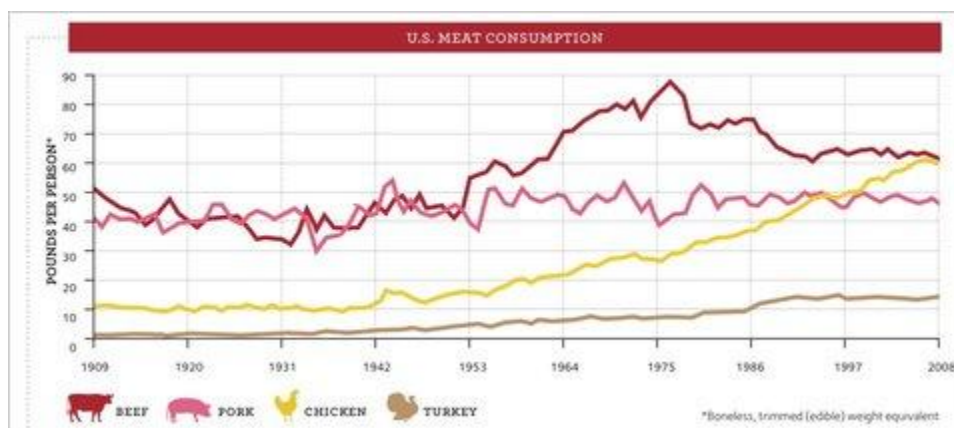
By [STEPHEN J. DUBNER](#)

A lot of meat and poultry gets eaten during the holiday season. Did you ever find yourself wondering: *Hmm, what's the trend line over the past 100 years for U.S. per-capita consumption of beef vs. chicken vs. pork vs. turkey?*

Yeah, so did we. The answers lie below the fold. Before you peek, here are a few more meaty questions to consider:

1. Which category was consumed at a clip of just 10 lbs. per person 100 years ago but has since risen to 60 lbs. per person? And what accounts for this spike?
2. Which category has reigned supreme from the early 1950's, peaking at nearly 90 lbs. per person during the late 1970's — but has recently been pretty much matched by the category in question 1?
3. Which category has been remarkably consistent for the entire century, with consumption usually between 40 and 50 lbs. per year?
4. Which category has always been the laggard — and yet has climbed from just a couple of pounds a year to well above 10?

The answers appear in the illustrated edition of *SuperFreakonomics*:



Over the past few decades, Americans have been eating less red meat and a lot more chicken. (Turkey consumption, meanwhile, has been on a slow and steady upward path, while pork has remained consistent.) The beef industry, troubled by this trend, funded research to find out why. It turns out that the public began to increasingly see beef as a health risk, thanks to recalls of tainted beef and a growing belief in the connection between red-meat consumption and heart disease. There's likely another reason: more women were entering the workforce. A [study](#) by the

agricultural economists James Mintert, Glynn Tonsor, and Ted Schroeder found that for every 1 percent increase in female employment, beef consumption sank by .6 percent while chicken consumption rose by .6 percent. Why? Probably because beef takes longer than chicken to prepare, and because poultry producers did a good job marketing cheap and ready-to-cook chicken products. Furthermore, all those working women meant more household income, which meant more families eating in restaurants — where meals are less likely to contain beef than meals at home.”