

How Many Vegetarians Are There?

An HRC Research Primer (Covering the U.S.)



Report in Brief

This primer summarizes the latest quantitative research relating to the size of the vegetarian and vegan (veg*n) populations in the United States.

The Bottom Line

A small proportion of U.S. adults (1-3% of the population, or 2-6 million adults) are “actual” veg*ns, though about twice that number (4-6%) consider themselves vegetarian when asked by researchers. The number of veg*n youths seems comparable to adults (2-3%, or 1-1.5 million children), but research on vegetarian children age 18 and under is currently very limited.

How to Use this Information

Animal and veg*n advocates are well-served by knowing the true number of veg*ns in the population and measuring that proportion over time. Understanding that actual veg*ns are currently a small segment of the population is an important reminder that most people perceive veg*ism to be a challenging personal decision.

HRC recommends that veg*n advocates start small by identifying narrow segments of the population that are relatively predisposed toward meat reduction and veg*ism compared with meat consumers in general. Through focused and strategic campaigns (rather than shotgun approaches targeting the “general public”), vegetarian advocates can eventually reach a “tipping point” at which large numbers of people will begin to adopt vegetarian diets.

HRC Information

HRC is a nonprofit organization dedicated to maximizing the effectiveness of animal advocates by applying professional, cost-efficient, and informative consumer and market research methods.

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Introduction and Overview

Advocating for veg*n diets is one of the most important methods of working for animal protection. In the United States, a growing number of organizations are advocating such plant-based diets. In many ways, however, veg*n advocacy in the U.S. remains in its infancy, with only a small number of “true” vegetarians, and even fewer vegans. Anyone interested in veg*n advocacy should know how many people are currently vegetarian or vegan. Indeed, most discussions about veg*ism ultimately come around to the question, “How many vegetarians and vegans are there?”

Of course, the answer depends on how you ask the question. To understand the *actual* veg*n population, one must isolate specific types of animal-based foods and ask carefully worded questions to ensure that respondents fully understand the definition of vegetarianism. However, the more common approach to measuring veg*ism is to simply asks respondents to “self-report” if they are vegetarian or not. Both responses are useful to know, but the number of actual veg*ns is naturally the better measure; each is described in more detail in later sections.

In a nutshell, based on the surveys summarized in the following sections, an estimated 1-3% of adults and 2-3% of youths are actual veg*ns (the vast majority are vegetarian, not vegan). There are about 225 million adults (age 18 and over) and 45 million youths (age 6-17) in the U.S., according to Census Bureau estimates for 2006. The number of self-reported vegetarians is roughly double the number of actual veg*ns (no self-reported data are available for youths). The following table shows our estimates for the current size of both populations.

	U.S. Adults (age 18+)		U.S. Youths (age 8-17)	
	(%)	(#)	(%)	(#)
Actual Vegans & Vegetarians	1 – 3%	2 – 6 million	2 – 3%	1 – 1.5 million
Self-Reported Vegetarians	4 – 6%	8 – 13 million	N/A	N/A

Actual Vegetarians and Vegans

In recent years, the Vegetarian Resource Group (VRG) and HRC have completed studies using comprehensive definitions of “meat” in an attempt to accurately measure veg*ism in the U.S. VRG conducts surveys of adults every three years (most recently in 2006), as well as surveys of youths age 8-17 conducted every five years. These surveys are a primary source for estimates of the vegetarian population; summary data for all surveys is available at <http://www.vrg.org/>. VRG asks respondents, “Which of the following foods do you NEVER eat?” The HRC study in 2005 took a different approach, asking respondents to report how often they eat “any type of meat, including chicken, turkey, fish/shellfish, beef, pork, veal, or lamb.”

We should note that measuring the number of *actual* veg*ns for the entire U.S. is difficult because they are a very small segment of the population. This typically results in much less precise survey results and therefore small changes in the percent of actual veg*ns over time do not necessarily represent meaningful trends. Despite these concerns, however, it is informative to look at how many people report eating a truly veg*n diet, using an inclusive and appropriate definition of the term “meat.” See the following table for a summary of the VRG and HRC studies, as well as two studies from other sources that used a relatively comprehensive approach to defining vegetarianism.

RESEARCH ON ACTUAL VEGETARIANS AND VEGANS *

Year	Source	% of Adults	# of Adults	% of Youths	# of Youths
2010	Vegetarian Resource Group	N/A	N/A	3%	1.4 million
2009	Vegetarian Resource Group	3%	6-8 million	N/A	N/A
2008	Vegetarian Times Magazine	3.2%	7.3 million	N/A	N/A
2006	Vegetarian Resource Group	2%	5.2 million	N/A	N/A
2005	Humane Research Council	1%	2.2 million	N/A	N/A
2005	Vegetarian Resource Group	N/A	N/A	3%	1.3 million
2003	Vegetarian Resource Group	3%	6.5 million	N/A	N/A
2000	Vegetarian Resource Group	3%	6.3 million	N/A	N/A
2000	Vegetarian Resource Group	N/A	N/A	2%	900 thousand
1997	Vegetarian Resource Group	1%	2.0 million	N/A	N/A
1995	HealthFocus, Inc.	3%	5.8 million	N/A	N/A
1995	Vegetarian Resource Group	N/A	N/A	< 2%	800 thousand

* Source: Details for all research studies cited in this primer are available on HRC’s HumaneSpot.org.

Based on the available data shown in the previous table, we can safely estimate that actual veg*ns represent between 1% and 3% of the adult population in the U.S., or between 2 and 6.5 million persons. The most recent studies from VRG and HRC provide estimates ranging from 1.3% to 2.8% of adults. Regarding youths, data are limited, but VRG has completed studies every five years, most recently indicating that 2-3% of youths age 8-17 are actual veg*ns. This translates to between roughly 900 thousand and 1.3 million veg*n youths. The data show consistently modest numbers of actual veg*ns, but there is no discernible trend over time.

Self-Described Vegetarians

The mainstream media and other sources often refer to populations of 10 million or more adult vegetarians in the U.S. While not inaccurate, per se, these estimates are misleading because they are based on “self-described” vegetarians who may or may not be using a correct and inclusive definition of the term “vegetarian.” By simply asking the question, “Do you consider yourself a vegetarian,” the results invariably include people who identify veg*ism with simply avoiding red meat, eating only chicken and/or fish products, etc. While actual veg*ns appear to represent between 1% and 3% of the population, self-described veg*ns (a segment that includes actual veg*ns) represent a significantly larger 4-6%. This translates to roughly 9-13 million self-described veg*ns; see the following table for a summary.

RESEARCH ON SELF-DESCRIBED VEGETARIANS AND VEGANS*

Year	Source	% of Adults	# of Adults
2005	CBS Corp.	2%	4.5 million
2002	Time / CNN	6%	12.9 million
1999	Gallup	6%	12.1 million

Note: There are no known studies of self-described vegetarianism among youths. However, see the “more information” section for data points regarding youths.

RESEARCH ON SELF-DESCRIBED VEGETARIANS AND VEGANS*, CONTINUED

Year	Source	% of Adults	# of Adults
1995	Time / CNN	5%	9.7 million
1992	Time/ CNN	7%	13.2 million
1978	Roper	1%	1.6 million
1943	Gallup	3%	2.9 million

The largest and most recent study was conducted by Time/CNN in 2002 and found that 6% of U.S. adults (12.9 million people) consider themselves vegetarian. Given the sample size of more than 10,000 people, this study represents the most accurate assessment of self-reported vegetarianism ever conducted in the United States. Interestingly, these latest Time/CNN results fall at the upper end of the range of self-reported veg*ism as described by previous studies spanning several decades. This might suggest that self-described veg*ns have increased in number over time. However, it is impossible to make any concrete conclusions about trends based on current data.

It is clear that any study using self-reported vegetarianism as its primary measure will overstate the number of true veg*ns in the population due to a misunderstanding of the term (e.g., someone who rarely eats chicken and/or fish may identify as vegetarian). However, those who describe themselves as vegetarian but continue to eat some types of animal flesh (roughly 5-7 million adults) are an audience that might be of special interest to veg*n advocates. Although these “untrue” vegetarians only represent a small segment of the population, they may be predisposed toward wanting to associate themselves with vegetarianism. Exploring this desired association and its apparent disconnection with such a person continuing to eat some types of meat is an ongoing topic of study for HRC.

More Information

ADDITIONAL DATA POINTS - ADULTS

Year	Source	% of Adults
2009	Vegetarian Resource Group (How Many Vegetarians Are There?)	5% of females 18-34 are vegetarian, and an additional 12% of females 18-34 never eat meat.
2006	Vegetarian Resource Group	9% of women are vegetarian, nearly twice as many as among men (5%). 9% of adults age 45-54 are vegetarian, vs. 5% of 18-24 year olds. 8% of college graduates are vegetarian, vs. 4% of those who have not completed high school.
2005	Humane Research Council (Vegetarianism in the US: A Summary of Quantitative Research)	13% of U.S. adults are “semi-vegetarians” who eat meat with less than half of meals. 3 times as many people have reduced their meat consumption over the past year than increased it. Vegetarians and semi-vegetarians are predominantly female (these groups are 63% and 70% women, respectively).

ADDITIONAL DATA POINTS - YOUTHS

Year	Source	% of Youths
2010	Vegetarian Resource Group (How Many Youth are Vegetarian?)	7% of U.S. youth never eat meat, and 12% of males age 10-12 stated they don't eat meat.
2005	Vegetarian Resource Group (How Many Youth Are Vegetarian? 2005 Vegetarian Resource Group Poll)	11% of girls age 13-15 said that they never eat meat.
2004	Aramark Survey	24 percent of students indicated that the availability of vegan dishes on campus is important to them.
2003	Teenage Research Unlimited (Meat Industry, Pro-Vegetarian Groups Compete for Young People's Loyalties)	20% of all 12-19 year olds consider vegetarianism to be "in." Specifically, 48% of 16-17 year old girls, 50% of 18-19 year old girls, and 22% of 18-19 year old boys said that they think vegetarianism is "in."
2003	Mintel Research (Vegetarian Foods - U.S.)	Adults age 18-24 are three times more likely than the general population to follow a vegetarian diet.
1995	Time, Cable News Network (Roper Poll on Self-Consideration as Vegetarian [not actual title])	Almost half of female college students say vegetarianism is in, versus one half of male students, according to RoperCollegeTrack.
1994	National Restaurant Association (Meet the New Vegetarian)	15% of the nation's 15 million college students eat vegetarian during a typical day.