

# Study of Current and Former Vegetarians and Vegans

Qualitative Findings



faunalytics

July 2015

A close-up photograph of a light blue ceramic bowl filled with several lemons and limes. The fruits are vibrant yellow and green, with some showing their characteristic bumpy texture. The bowl is set against a dark, rustic wooden background. A semi-transparent white rectangular box is centered over the bowl, containing the title 'Introduction' in a black serif font.

# Introduction

The number of people adopting and experimenting with vegetarian and vegan diets in the U.S. is noteworthy. But as with any dietary modification, not everyone who tries a new diet maintains it over time. It is important for vegan and animal advocates to identify what can lead to these difficulties and lapses and use this information to help people stick with, or return to, animal-friendly diets. This document is a step in that direction and builds upon the previously released Faunalytics report covering our Study of Current and Former Vegetarians and Vegans.

This report focuses on data collected from a representative sample of former vegetarians/vegans\* in the U.S. (For more on the study's sample and methodology, see Asher et al., 2014a and 2014b.) We used open-format questions in an online survey to gather information on what prompted vegetarians and vegans to move away from their diet, as well as what they say they would need in order to adopt it once more.

The survey findings show that the process of moving away from a vegetarian or vegan diet is multifaceted and complex, with patterns emerging in the areas of food/taste, health, social, convenience, cost, and motivations. The same appears to be true for anticipating a return to a vegetarian or vegan diet.

Here we share these important first-hand messages from former vegetarians/vegans with animal advocates and researchers who are working to better understand barriers to successful vegetarian and vegan maintenance. With this information, we will be in a better position as a movement to help limit obstacles that people face when trying to maintain or re-adopt a diet that is more ethical.

\* The study focused exclusively on dietary vegetarianism and veganism, however, the terms “vegetarian” and “vegan” have been used as shorthand in this report to indicate diet rather than lifestyle.

**Team:** Kathryn Asher, Che Green, Cobie deLespinasse, Hans Gutbrod, Brock Bastian, Mirna Jewell, and Galina Hale

**Sponsors:** Animal Welfare Trust, VegFund, FARM, and Stephen Kaufman, MD

**Thanks:** to Jack Norris for reviewing an early draft

## i. reasons for lapsing

---

In the survey, former vegetarians/vegans were asked to give the primary reason that they stopped eating the diet.

Of the 1,166 former vegetarians/vegans in the study, 1,115 (96%) answered this question—representing 992 lapsed vegetarians and 123 lapsed vegans—many of whom offered multiple reasons for abandoning the diet. A total of 207 participants provided responses that were not able to be coded because they gave no reason or said they could not remember (33) or because they provided a response that did not answer the question or had an unclear meaning (174).

We coded the usable responses into categories and subcategories. The following pages highlight the patterns uncovered in six main categories: 1) unsatisfied with food, 2) health, 3) social issues, 4) inconvenience, 5) cost, and 6) lack of motivation. We also grouped a number of responses under an “other” category.

In reviewing the findings, keep in mind that the figures presented account for the number of *mentions* given that some people provided more than one answer to our question.

## Unsatisfied With Food



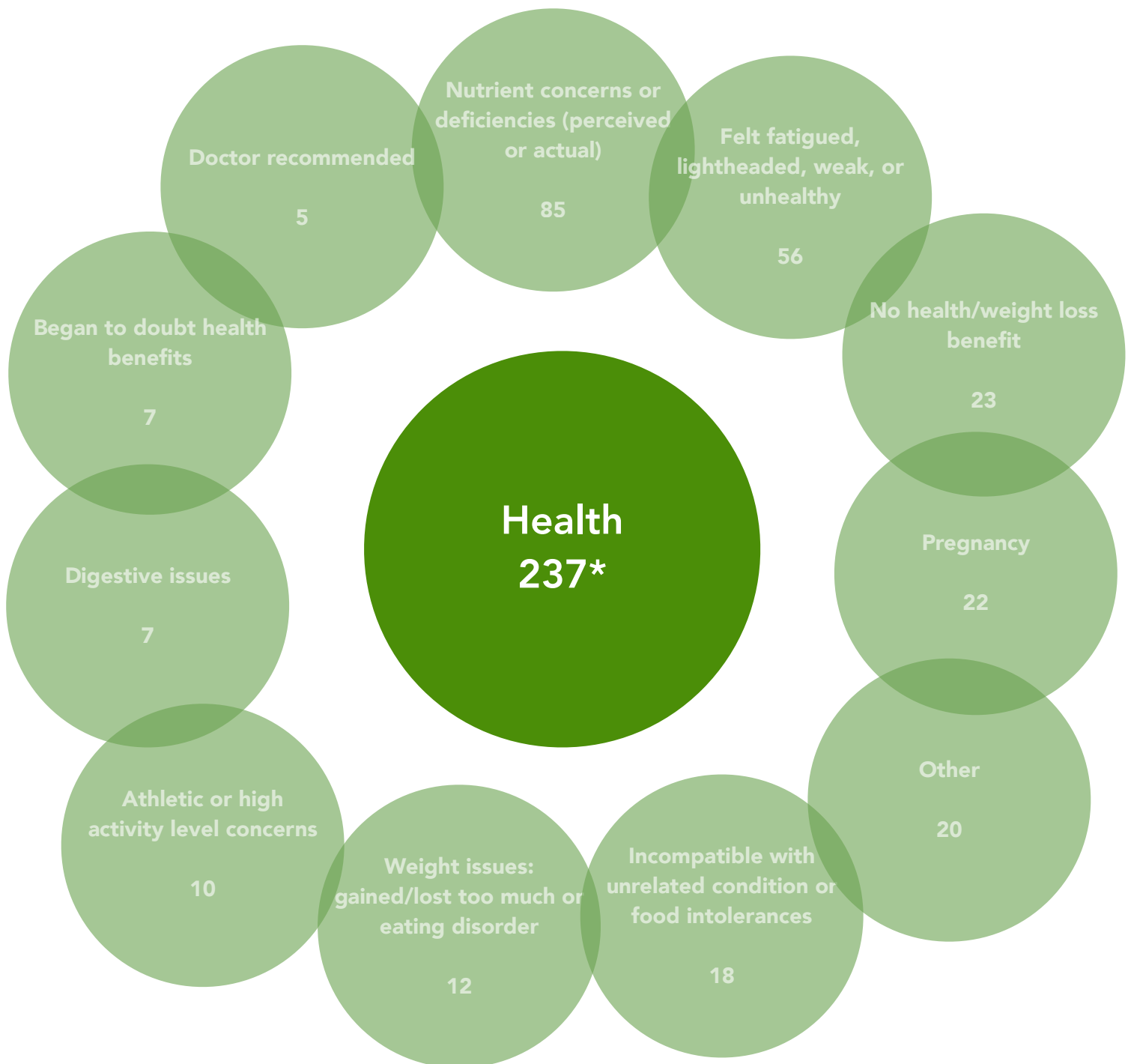
Responses that touched on a dissatisfaction with food were separated into three subcategories, the most popular of which related to disliking meat-free food or wanting meat. A desire for meat was expressed generally, as well as individually for beef, pork, chicken, turkey, seafood, and fish.

\* There are 297 mentions for this category when each subcategory is added up, compared to 293 mentions when responses from participants that appear in more than one subcategory are counted only once.

\*\* The term "meat" as opposed to "animal products" is used here because there were very few references to non-meat animal products (eggs, dairy, etc.). This is not surprising as the overwhelming majority of former vegetarians and vegans in the study were lapsed vegetarians.

\*\*\* There is some reason to believe that cravings are a separate phenomenon from simply wanting or being tempted by meat and that cravings may have a health connection. This may mean there is some overlap between this category and the health category. Any mentions of cravings were put in their own subcategory, though it is possible that there are responses in the "disliked/bored with food, wanted variety, wanted meat" subcategory that belong in the cravings category and vice versa.

# Health

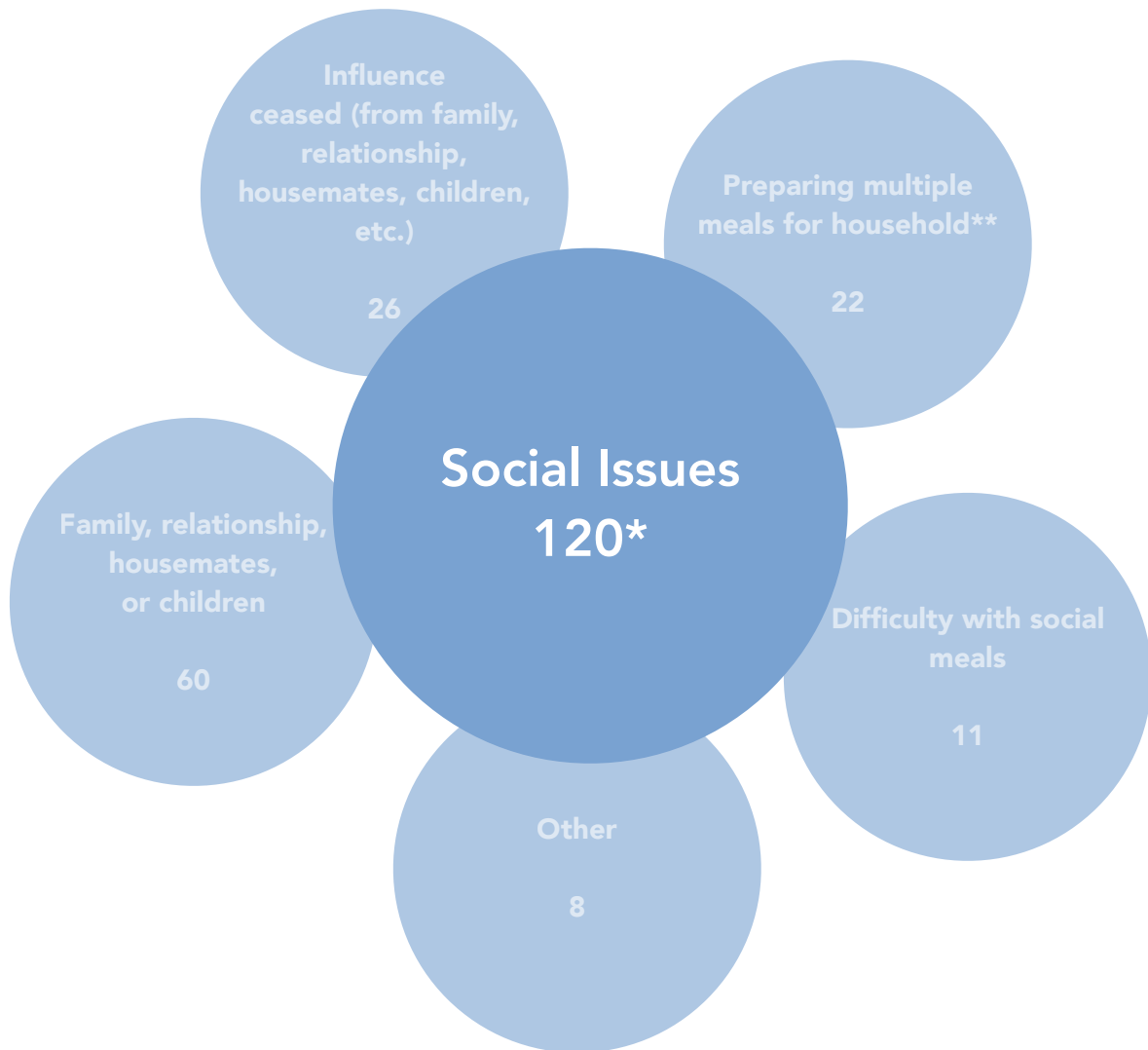


We identified a total of 11 subcategories relating to health. The most common was “nutrient concerns or deficiencies (perceived or actual).” Of the 85 responses in this subcategory, 37 referred to protein and 21 to iron, which represented the most popular concerns by far. Also of note on the health front is the subcategory that takes in individuals who said they felt fatigued, lightheaded, weak, or unhealthy.

\* There are 265 mentions for this category when each subcategory is added up, compared to 237 mentions when responses from participants that appear in more than one subcategory are counted only once.



## Social Issues

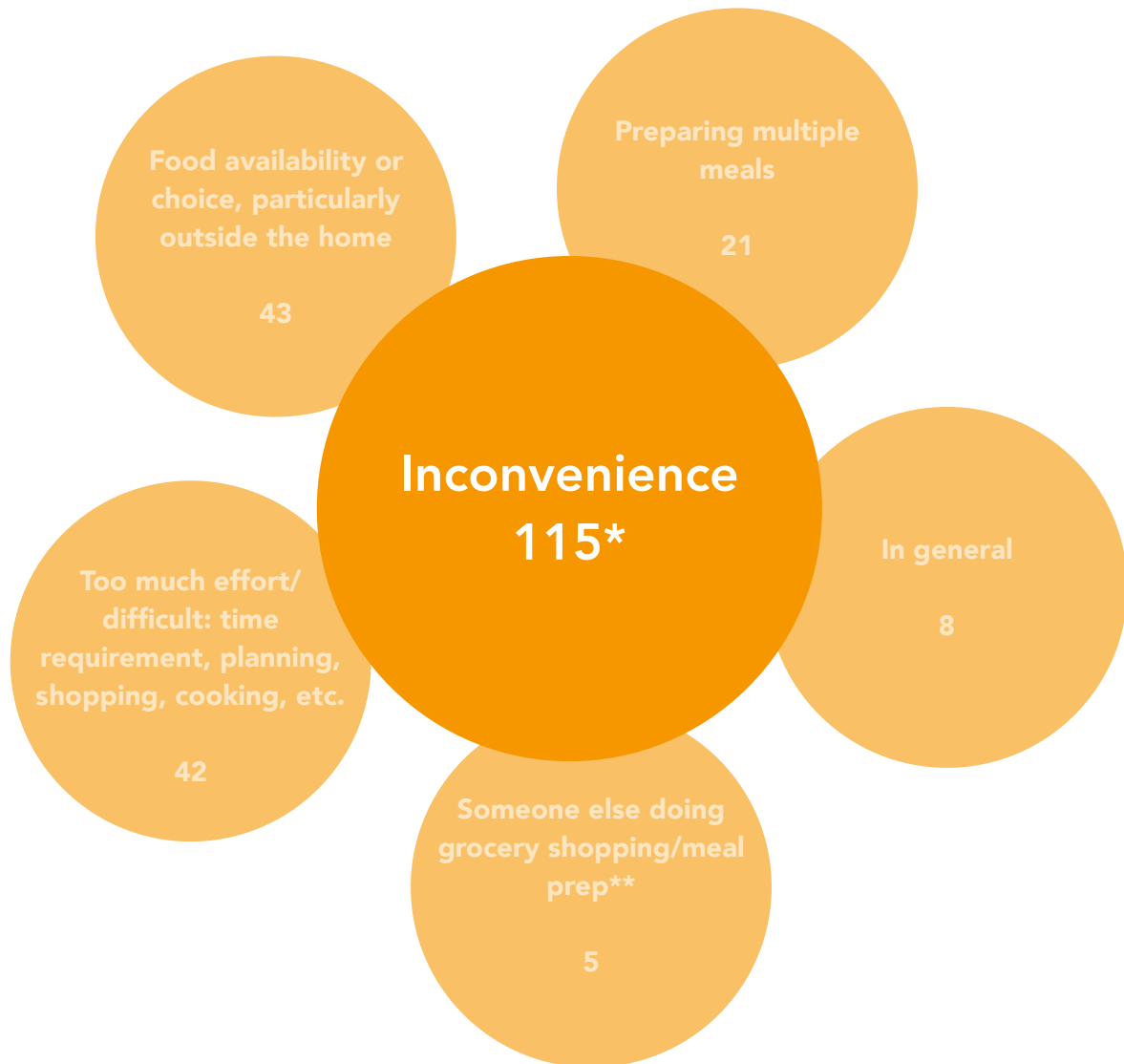


Social issues were separated into five subcategories, the most popular of which was “family, relationship, housemates, or children.” This was a general catchall—though other subcategories in the social category may, and do, relate to this as well—that included many types of responses including lack of support from these individuals, difficulty maintaining the diet around family, the need to cook meat-based meals for one’s family, and having to eat what other family/household members were eating. Also of note is the “influence ceased” subcategory that indicated that individuals lapsed because their influence for eating a meat-free diet stopped, whether it was a vegetarian or vegan family member (often a child) who moved out or ending a relationship with a partner who had urged them in that direction.

\* There are 127 mentions for this category when each subcategory is added up, compared to 120 mentions when responses from participants that appear in more than one subcategory are counted only once.

\*\* Many of the items relating to having to prepare multiple meals are found in more than one category (inconvenience, cost, and/or social issues).

# Inconvenience



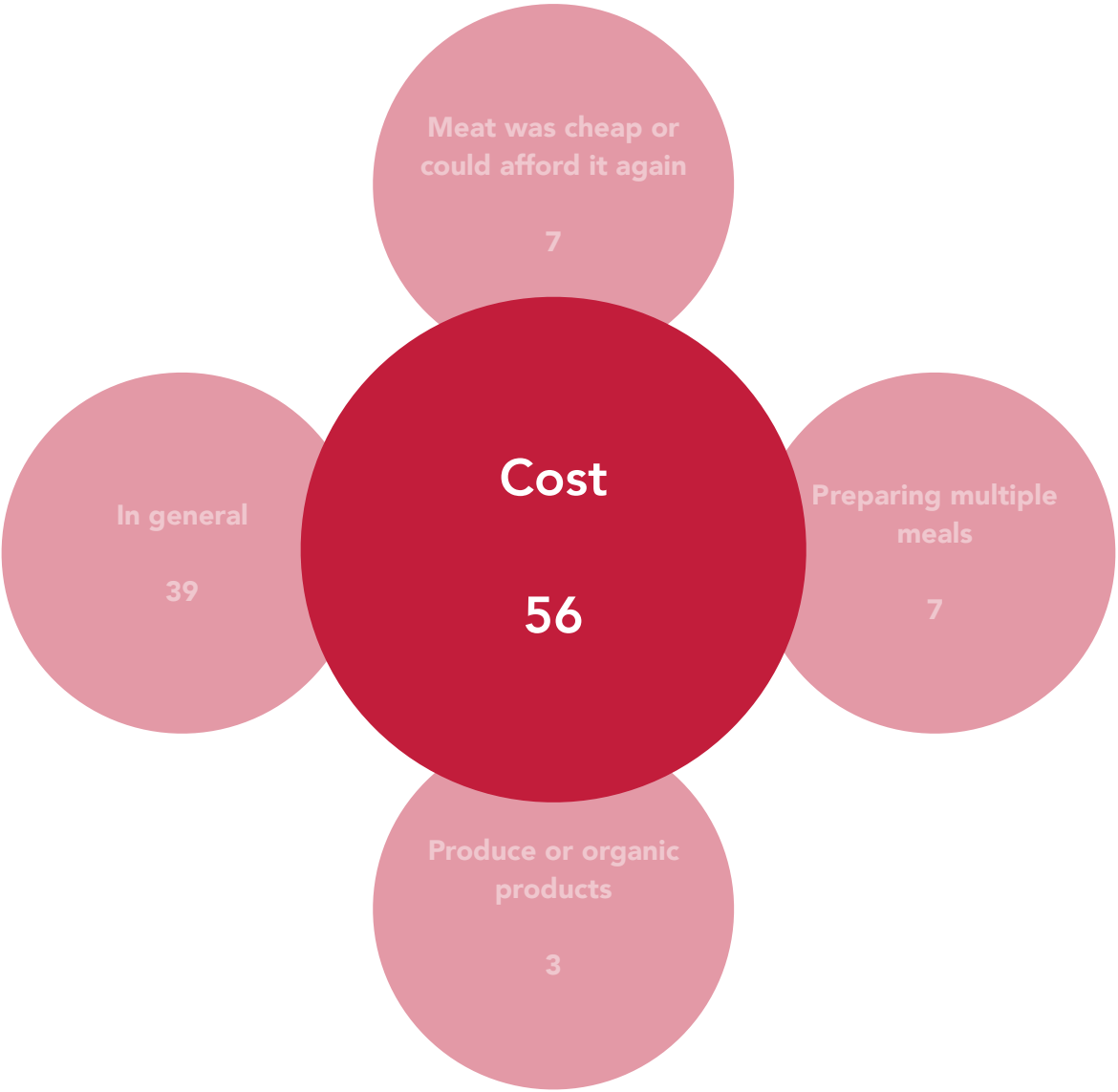
Responses related to inconvenience were put into five subcategories, the two most popular of which were “food availability or choice, particularly outside the home” and “too much effort/difficult: time requirement, planning, shopping, cooking, etc.” These speak to the effort that former vegetarians/vegans feel is needed both at home and in their larger environment to have suitable food to eat.

\* There are 119 mentions for this category when each subcategory is added up, compared to 115 mentions when responses from participants that appear in more than one subcategory are counted only once.

\*\* All of these items also appear under “social issues (family, relationship, housemates, or children).”



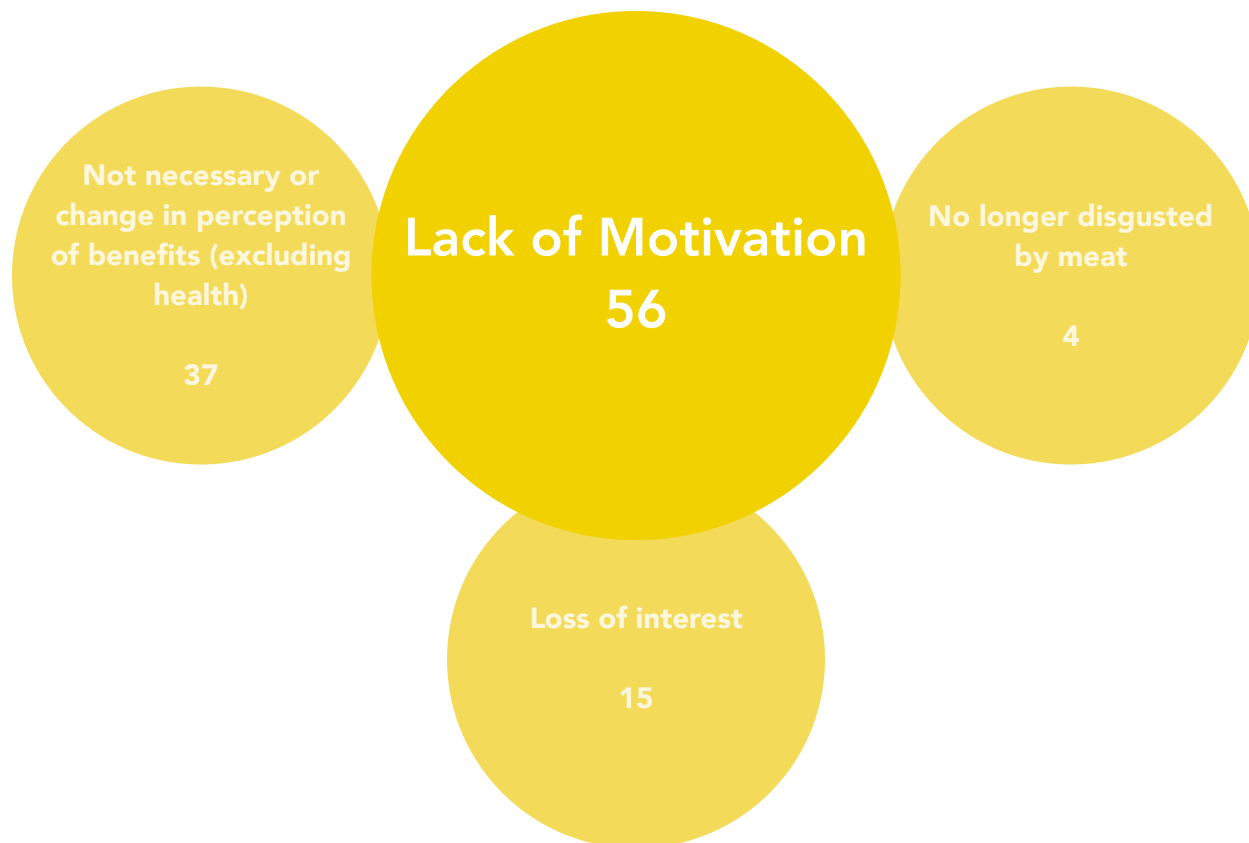
# Cost



Most reasons for lapsing because of cost generally referred to the expense of being on a meat-free diet, without specifying further. People that did elaborate mentioned the cost of preparing multiple meals (i.e., for themselves and others in the household), and that meat was cheap or that due to a change in their financial situation they were able to afford meat again. There were also a few mentions of the cost of produce and organic products, though of note neither fresh produce nor organic items are a necessity for a meat-free diet.



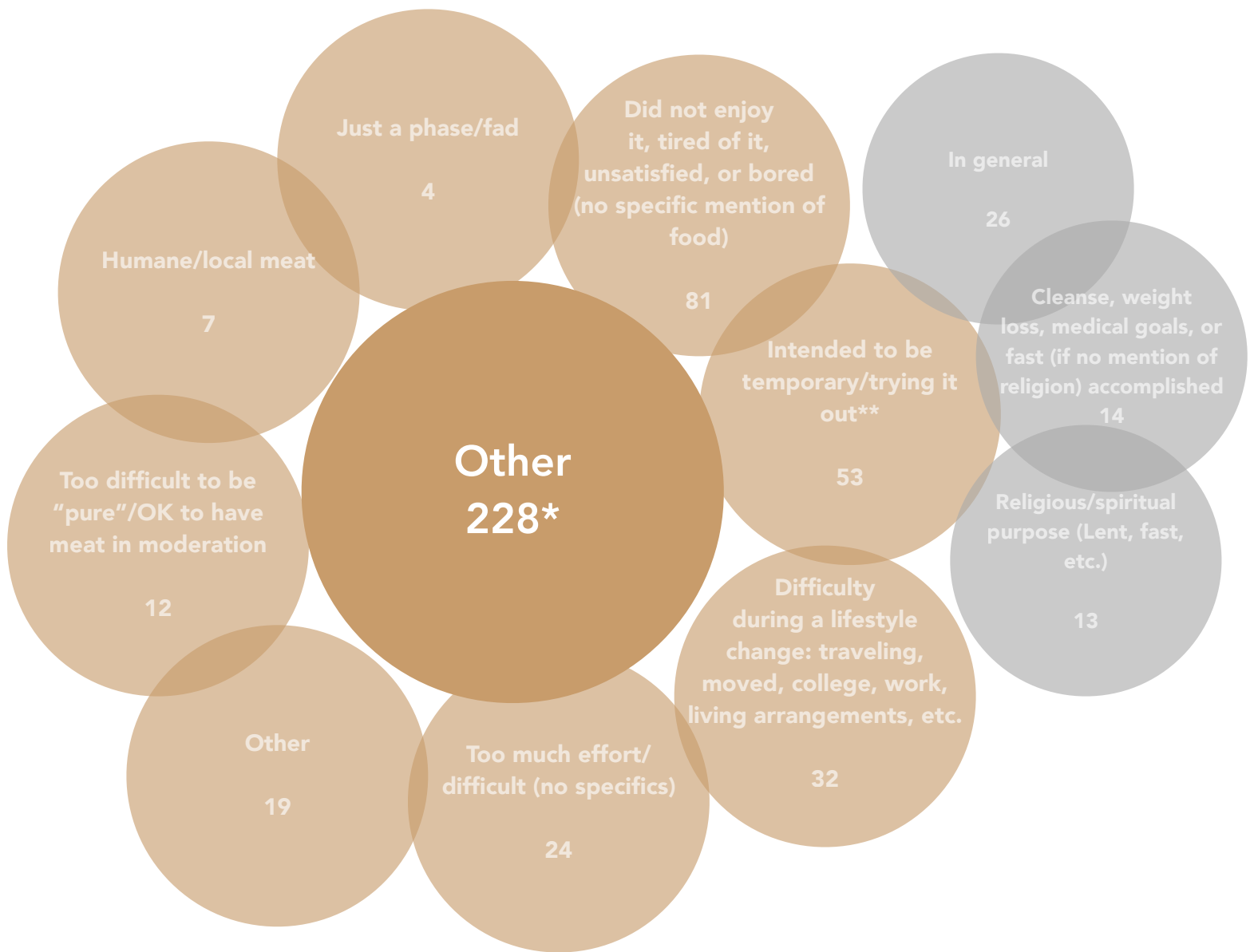
## Lack of Motivation



Most of the responses that noted a lack of motivation had to do with believing the diet was not necessary or having a change in perception about its benefits. Most people did not elaborate on how their views of the diet's benefit(s) had changed however.

This category overlaps with a number of others including the "no health/weight loss benefit" subcategory under the health category, though those health items were not counted here. It is possible that some responses under "not necessary or change in perception of benefits (excluding health)" may have been referring to a health benefit, in which case the health category could be undercounting relevant responses.

# Other



There were a number of subcategories that did not readily fit in one of the existing categories and so were grouped together under the "other" umbrella. The most common of these was "did not enjoy it, tired of it, unsatisfied, or bored (no specific mention of food)." Although responses in this subcategory did not mention taste, it is possible that this was what some participants were referring to, which may have led to undercounting the "unsatisfied with food" category. Also of note is the indication that the diet was not intended to be permanent,\*\* which is not often something that advocates consider. Of those who elaborated on the reasons why they embarked on the diet for a set amount of time, the most common reasons were connected to religion or health.

\* There are 232 mentions for this category when each subcategory is added up, compared to 228 mentions when responses from participants that appear in more than one subcategory are counted only once.

\*\* This finding suggests that future studies on lapsed vegetarians/vegans may want to exclude these types of individuals. This finding also serves as a limitation on this study's data, though fortunately the numbers are quite small.

## ii. requirements for re-adoption

In the survey, we asked former vegetarians/vegans if they were interested in resuming the diet. We then asked those who said they were interested to tell us what they would need in order to do so.

Of the 1,166 former vegetarians/vegans in the study, 411 provided a response for this question—359 lapsed vegetarians and 52 lapsed vegans—many of whom listed multiple requirements. Of these 411 participants, 136 provided answers that were not able to be coded because they said they had no requirements (64), they said they did not know what their requirements were (18), or because they provided a response that did not answer the question or had an unclear meaning (54).

The usable responses were coded into categories and from there into subcategories. The following page highlights the patterns discovered in five main categories: 1) food (convenience, taste, etc.), 2) motivation/incentive/dedication, 3) social, 4) cost, and 5) health. There were also a few responses grouped under an “other” category. As before, the numbers presented are the number of *mentions* for the concept, with the understanding that some people provided more than one answer to our question.

Note that items connected to convenience or taste were grouped together for this question because there was a lot of blurring between the two when trying to interpret meaning. For example, calls for recipes could indicate an individual wanted better tasting food, more meal ideas, food that was more convenient to prepare, or something else entirely.



\* There are 143 mentions for the food category when each subcategory is added up, compared to 125 mentions when responses from participants that appear in more than one subcategory are counted only once.

\*\* There are 39 mentions for the health category when each subcategory is added up, compared to 35 mentions when responses from participants that appear in more than one subcategory are counted only once.

### iii. discussion

---

The data shows the complexity inherent in maintaining a vegetarian/vegan diet or considering a move to re-adopt it. Many individuals gave multiple reasons for why they left the diet or what they would need to resume it (or both), indicating that there is no single factor at play. While the majority of participants provided one answer to the question at hand, within this there was a tremendous amount of variety, again suggesting that there is no one approach that advocates should consider to address these concerns.

While there are limitations (see section IV) to understanding what reasons and requirements stand out, it is nonetheless useful to examine patterns in what former vegetarians/vegans said. The frequency with which the reasons for lapsing were mentioned were: unsatisfied with food (293), health (237), social issues (120), inconvenience (115), cost (56), lack of motivation (56), and other (228).

The fact that being unsatisfied with food comes out on top says a lot about the role that food and taste may play in diet maintenance. As the selection of plant-based meats has increased over time, arguably so too has manufacturers' ability to simulate the taste of meat. However, whether there's further to go on this front or simply a need to increase the availability and awareness of these alternatives remains to be examined.

The role that dishes that are based around whole foods such as lentils, beans, legumes, etc., have in meeting taste requirements is also an area worthy of investigation. Another point of note is the role that cultured meat might be able to play in all this. Given the importance of food dissatisfaction when it comes to lapses from vegetarian/vegan diets, this topic warrants extra attention from advocates and researchers alike.



The fact that health was a common reason for lapsing is also important to note. Nutrient concerns were the most popular health issue, though whether these were confirmed by medical professionals or perhaps in some cases erroneously perceived by individuals is something that we cannot know from this study. Feeling fatigued, lightheaded, weak, or unhealthy was also one of the more common health concerns. Again, it is not possible to know whether people felt this way because of their vegetarian or vegan diet or if there was something else at play. Regardless of whether some of these health concerns are *caused* by a meat-free diet, there is no doubt that individuals *believe* they are and the fact that many said this is why they lapsed is noteworthy in itself. This speaks to the important role played by registered dietitians and others in the movement who are working to provide honest information about being healthy as a vegetarian or vegan that goes beyond simply touting the benefits these diets hold when it comes to preventing and treating chronic disease.

Social issues and inconvenience were also notable reasons for lapsing, though less so than food dissatisfaction and health. Both social and convenience concerns seem to speak to the fact that at this point in history followers of these diets are positioned outside the mainstream when it comes to food, something that has both an innate communal quality and is virtually omnipresent in society given that eating registers among the most common human behaviors. Continuing to find ways to help limit these barriers both inside and outside the home seems to be a worthy endeavor for the movement.

Cost and lack of motivation were mentioned least frequently as reasons for lapsing (among the six categories described). Cost is an interesting concern in that it is possible to eat a very costly or a very inexpensive plant-based diet, depending on the food one buys. There may be a need for more information on the fact that eating vegetarian/vegan food need not be expensive.

The fact that lack of motivation was not one of the more prevalent reasons for lapsing is curious. This seems to suggest that reinforcing the “how” is more important than the “why” for those already eating a vegetarian/vegan diet. However, an alternate interpretation is that people may not realize their motivations are slipping and if they could be reinforced they may have a stronger resolve to push through some of the barriers. The movement may benefit from learning more about this interplay between motivations and barriers. A final point of note for this question is the very limited role that “humane”/local meat played in the “other” category.

When it comes to requirements for re-adoption of a vegetarian/vegan diet, there is variety in what former vegetarians/vegans say they need. In order of most common, the requirements for re-adoption were related to: food (convenience, taste, etc.) (125), motivation/incentive/dedication (58), social (52), cost (more money or less expensive food) (47), health (35), and other (8).

We see that most of the categories are close in popularity (hovering around the 50-mentions mark). If we consider that the food category takes in both convenience and taste, it is possible that these alone also are somewhat close to this mark, suggesting that there are not as many standout patterns for this question as there were for reasons for lapsing. However, when taken together, food stands out as playing a considerable role yet again.

There is a great deal of overlap between what lapsed vegetarians/vegans say caused them to move away from the diet and what those interested in re-adopting the diet say they would need to do so, which reinforces the importance of these categories. One point of note, however, is that having sufficient motivation appears to play a bigger role, comparatively speaking, in requirements for re-adoption than it does in reasons for lapsing.

The most commonly identified supports that former vegetarians/vegans say they would need in order to re-adopt the diet relate to their need for:

- an incentive or a way to maintain their resolve
- recipes, food ideas, or advice related to food
- a way to address cost issues
- better food availability or choice, particularly outside the home
- more time or ability to plan meals, shop, cook, etc.
- the important people in their life to eat less/no meat or at least be supportive of their decision not to
- advice on nutrition or ways to ensure they are healthy

Overall, the main takeaway from this report is that there are standout patterns that advocates should be aware of for why people both move away from vegetarian/vegan diets as well as what may help them move back toward these diets. Also noteworthy is the understanding that these processes are complex and multifaceted and as a result deserve continued attention. Even a small movement on this front could have a large impact. Given that more than four-fifths of vegetarians/vegans lapse and that more than a third of these individuals are interested in readopting their diet (Asher et al., 2014a), even small wins on this front will result in a surge in the number of current vegetarians/vegans in the U.S.

## iv. limitations

---

We urge readers to use the numbers presented in this report knowing that there is an unavoidable subjectivity in coding open-ended responses. Indeed, in coding this data there were a great deal of grey areas and overlap between categories/subcategories.

We understand that someone else looking at the data could come up with a very different set of patterns. Faunalytics is happy to provide both the raw and coded data to researchers and advocates who wish to examine the results further and use their own lens for interpretation.

Note: for limitations that stem from the study as a whole see Asher et al., 2014b.

# References

Asher, K., Green, C. Gutbrod, H., Jewell, M., Hale, G., & Bastian, B. (2014a). *Study of current and former vegetarians and vegans: Initial findings*. Olympia, WA: Faunalytics.

Asher, K., Green, C. Gutbrod, H., Jewell, M., Hale, G., & Bastian, B. (2014b). *Study of current and former vegetarians and vegans: Companion to the initial findings*. Olympia, WA: Faunalytics.

## Photo credits

**Fruit bowl:** Flickr user [Jennifer](#)

**Citrus bowl:** Flickr user [Jennifer Chait](#)

**Purple cabbage:** Flickr user [anjuli\\_ayer](#)

**Kiwis:** Flickr user [Chrystal Rix](#)

**Blueberries:** Flickr user [Andrea](#)

**Oranges:** Flickr user [victoria white2010](#)

**Raspberries/grapes:** Flickr user [Allen Gottfried](#)

**Lemons:** Flickr user [Photos By Clark](#)

**Coconuts:** Flickr user [Xipe Totec39](#)