


American Households in 2026: Grocery Spending, Behavior Change, and Food Waste Reduction

Marigold Walkins and Ana Gomez Lemmen Meyer

Executive Summary

Nearly one-third of all food in the United States, valued at over $380 billion annually, is lost or wasted as it makes its way from farms to our plates (ReFED, 2026). The residential sector generates roughly one-third of this surplus, meaning Americans spend around $762 per person per year on food that ultimately goes uneaten. Because much of this consumer waste is driven by everyday decisions about what to buy, how to store it, and when to prepare and consume food, even small shifts in food shopping, preparation, and management behaviors have been found to reduce household food waste at scale (Schanes et al., 2018).

In April, ReFED released *Progress on the Plate*, our latest landscape assessment of food waste in the United States. We estimate that total surplus food across all sectors declined by 2.2% between 2023 and 2024, marking the first annual reduction since the COVID pandemic. Much of the progress occurred in homes, with Americans generating 950,000 fewer tons of surplus food in 2024—an almost 4% decrease from the year before. This took place during a period of ongoing economic uncertainty. While year-over-year grocery inflation has eased, grocery prices remain roughly 30% higher than they were in early 2020 (BLS, 2026). This raises important questions about how pressures such as food prices and grocery spending shape food shopping, preparation, and management behaviors, and which of those behaviors are most closely linked to household food waste reduction.

To explore these dynamics further and to understand Americans' recent experiences, we partnered with YouGov, with support from the Ida & Robert Gordon Family Foundation, to carry out a nationally representative survey of 1,000 U.S. households. Conducted in January 2026, the survey asked respondents about their financial situation, grocery spending, food shopping, preparation, and management behaviors, as well as self-reported food waste, with a focus on how these have changed in the past twelve months.

Table of Contents

What Our Survey Found

Over half of respondents (56%) self-reported wasting less food than a year ago. When households noticed a change in their grocery spending, they adjusted how they shop for food, and prepare and manage it at home, and reported wasting less food.

Survey Results

1 Over two-thirds of American households said their grocery spending changed in the past year, with 58% reporting it went up, and 93% of those attributing the increase to food prices.

Grocery prices were a significant source of budget strain for respondents in 2026, felt across income levels and self-reported financial situations. The median weekly grocery spend across all survey respondents was around $150, or $7,800 a year. For those reporting increased grocery spending, the median weekly increase was around $50, equivalent to $2,600 in additional grocery spending over the course of a year or roughly a third of a typical household's annual grocery budget.[1]

2 Both households spending more and less on food adapted how they managed it, and reported wasting less.

Households spending more and households spending less represent two distinct responses to rising food prices. Households spending more (58% of households, with a median income of around $90,000) were largely able to absorb higher grocery prices. The increase was noticeable, however, and for many, it made food costs feel more important. As a result, most reported adapting how they shop for food, and prepare and manage it at home. Households spending less (11% of households, with a median income around $55,000) could not absorb the scale of this increase and instead reported actively cutting back on what they bought and changing how they managed food at home.

Households spending more on groceries were 29% more likely to report reduced waste than households with no change in grocery spending, and households spending less were 40% more likely. Among households that changed their grocery spending, those who attributed the change to food prices were 17% more likely to reduce food waste than those citing other reasons. Both groups reported wasting less, but through different behaviors, and those differences matter for how solutions should be designed and targeted.

3 Waste reduction is tied to stacking multiple small behavioral changes, not any single one.

Households that reported wasting less made multiple small changes. The behaviors households most consistently reported doing more often as a result of grocery prices were meal planning, using up leftovers, freezing food, checking what was already in the fridge, and choosing smaller package sizes. Each additional behavioral change increased the probability of reporting less waste by about 8% for households whose spending rose and by about 11% for those whose spending fell. A household making three behavioral changes was therefore at least 24% more likely to report wasting less than a household not making any, with the cumulative effect even stronger (33%) for the spending-less group. Meal planning and leftover use showed the highest probability of reduced waste and, therefore, should anchor practical guidance. Our survey results, along with the wider peer-reviewed literature, suggest that helping households adopt several practices together increases the probability of reducing food waste. While multiple behaviors may ultimately contribute to better outcomes, habit-formation research indicates that introducing changes gradually can improve the likelihood that new behaviors will persist over time.

4 Lower-income households face the greatest burden and stand to benefit most from targeted practical support.

The reported median increase in grocery spending was broadly similar across income levels (around $50 a week or $2,600 a year), but it affected households very differently depending on their income. For the roughly one in four American households earning less than $40,000 a year (approximately 32 million homes), their change in spending represents around 10% of annual income or the equivalent of more than a month of pre-tax earnings. For those earning $150,000 or more, the increase represents just 1.5%. The same dollar increase, therefore, hits the households least able to absorb it nearly seven times harder.

Households under greater financial pressure reported fewer behavioral changes overall, but each change corresponded to a greater probability of reporting less waste, suggesting that helping this group adopt even one or two additional behaviors could have an outsized impact. These households are already managing tight budgets, limited storage, and competing demands on their time, and these constraints can make it harder to adopt and sustain multiple food management behaviors. Without support that addresses these barriers directly, food waste interventions targeted at lower-income households will hit a ceiling regardless of how well they are designed.

[1] Spending figures in this survey are self-reported and should be understood as reflecting respondents' perceptions rather than precise expenditure estimates. Recall over a twelve-month period may lead to less precise estimates, and respondents may have interpreted "grocery" spending differently, with some including non-food household purchases. For context, the reported change in weekly expenditures is higher than food expenditure growth recorded in the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Consumer Expenditure Survey (which uses expenditure diaries to estimate spending) during comparable periods of grocery price pressure in previous years, suggesting the figure captures the felt experience of rising costs rather than a precise measure of spending change. Therefore, our estimates are indicative rather than precise.

Implications & Recommendations

The findings point to opportunities for practitioners, policymakers, and food businesses to act. Households should not have to be under financial strain to see the value of food, adopt better food management habits, and waste less. Research has found that most American households significantly underestimate the cost of the food they waste (MITRE, 2023), and our survey suggests that sustained grocery price pressure may have made food costs more noticeable, creating a window of opportunity to frame food waste reduction as part of an affordability agenda. The recommendations below set out practical ways to act on that.

For Food Waste Practitioners:

- **Recommendation 1: Frame food waste reduction as a money-saving opportunity and pair that message with practical tools.** With grocery prices remaining a significant source of household budget strain, an affordability frame is a compelling and timely entry point for consumer behavior change and has been found to be more effective than environmental messaging alone. However, messaging campaigns to consumers should be paired with specific practical tools such as meal planners, storage and freezing guidance, and leftover recipes that give households both the motivation and the means to act (WRAP, 2015; Stancu et al., 2016; Aitken et al., 2025).

- **Recommendation 2: Help households shift multiple behaviors at once, and tailor the mix to their circumstances.** Households that reported wasting less made multiple small behavioral changes, and each additional change increased the probability of reporting less waste, suggesting that helping households adopt several practices together is more effective than promoting any single one in isolation. Because campaigns that require too many behavior changes at once can be harder for households to act on, meal planning and leftover use should anchor any campaign as the two behaviors most consistently linked to waste reduction, with additional behaviors, particularly freezing food, checking what's already in the fridge, and choosing smaller pack sizes, layered in as households build confidence and capacity.

- **Recommendation 3: For lower-income households, prioritize practical capacity over messaging.** Lower-income households face greater constraints on their practical ability to reduce food waste, including time, knowledge, and budget flexibility, as well as fewer opportunities to act on that knowledge (Heidig et al., 2025; Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2015). Additional support that targets structural barriers would therefore be more effective than only offering food waste reduction guidance. In practice, this could mean, for example, integrating food management resources into food assistance programs, expanding access to community storage and batch-cooking facilities, and providing guidance tailored to the constraints of a stretched household budget, though more research is needed to understand which approaches are most effective.

For Policymakers:

- **Recommendation 1: Fund consumer education on food management framed around savings and affordability.** There is a strong case for public investment in education campaigns that help households see food waste reduction as a direct money-saving opportunity. Federal funding can also extend the reach of food management tools and guidance, particularly by integrating them into existing food assistance programs.

- **Recommendation 2: Pass the Food Date Labeling Act.** Our survey found that households are paying closer attention to food costs and actively seeking more value from the food they buy, but inconsistent and confusing date labels continue to undermine those efforts as households discard food that is still safe to eat. The Food Date Labeling Act offers a legislative opportunity to address the confusion by standardizing labels to two clear options ("BEST If Used By" for quality and "USE By" for safety). This could help reduce confusion and support households to use more of the food they buy and stretch their grocery budgets further. Estimates suggest that consumers could save around $1.3 billion annually while also reducing food waste resulting from date label concerns.

For Food Businesses (Retailers, Manufacturers):

- **Recommendation 1: Use consumer and waste data to inform packaging and product decisions.** For manufacturers, residential food waste should be a consideration in product development and packaging decisions, particularly where data shows that products commonly spoil before the package is finished. For retailers, waste considerations can inform assortment planning, promotions, and replenishment decisions. In both cases, where evidence points to a mismatch between pack size and how households actually use a product, that evidence should inform packaging, price, and promotion decisions (Wilson et al., 2017).

- **Recommendation 2: Support behaviors most strongly linked to reducing food waste in homes.** There is an opportunity for food businesses, including retailers, to reinforce leftover use and meal planning by offering tools, recipes, resealable and freezer-ready packaging, and on-pack storage guidance, positioned as practical ways to get more value from every grocery trip.

- **Recommendation 3: Sell recoverable surplus at affordable prices, then donate what remains.** There is an opportunity for retailers and manufacturers to capture more demand for surplus food before it exits the retail channel by selling suitable products to consumers at lower prices through in-store markdowns, discounted near-expiration sections, or partnerships with food recovery platforms. This approach addresses both food waste and affordability simultaneously, and is particularly relevant for lower-income households who face the greatest burden from rising grocery prices but have the most to gain from practical support that stretches their grocery budget further (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2015).

Introduction

Every year, nearly one-third of food in the United States, valued at over $380 billion annually, is lost or wasted as it makes its way from farms to our plates (ReFED, 2026). The scale of surplus food generation has far-reaching impacts. In 2024, almost 14% of U.S. households (18.3 million) were food insecure, with nearly 48 million people living in those households (Rabbitt et al., 2025). At the same time, 14 billion meals were surplus, enough to feed nearly a third of the country for a year.

The residential sector generates roughly one-third of total surplus food produced in the U.S. (ReFED, 2026). That means at the household level, Americans are spending approximately $762 per person on food that goes uneaten. Household surplus is ultimately shaped by everyday decisions people make about what to buy, how to store food, what to cook, and how to manage leftovers. Therefore, even small shifts in food shopping, preparation, and management behaviors can reduce household food waste at scale (Schanes et al., 2018).

In April, ReFED released *Progress on the Plate*, our latest landscape assessment of food waste in the United States. We estimate that total surplus food across all sectors declined by 2.2% between 2023 and 2024, marking the first annual reduction since the COVID pandemic. Much of the progress occurred in the residential sector, with households reducing their surplus food by 950,000 tons in 2024, a decrease of almost 4% from the year before. These changes were happening alongside ongoing economic uncertainty. While year-over-year grocery inflation has eased, grocery prices remain roughly 30% higher than they were in early 2020 (BLS, 2026). This raises important questions about how pressures such as food prices and grocery spending shape food shopping, preparation, and management behaviors, as well as which of those behaviors are most closely linked to reduced household food waste.

To explore these dynamics further and to ask Americans about their recent experiences, we partnered with YouGov, with support from the Ida & Robert Gordon Family Foundation, to conduct a nationally representative survey of 1,000 U.S. households in January 2026. The survey asked respondents about their financial situation, grocery spending, and food shopping, preparation, and management behaviors, as well as self-reported food waste, with a focus on how these had changed in the past twelve months. While the survey did not measure absolute food waste volumes or include household waste audits, it offers an important picture of what Americans are doing in their homes today and which behaviors are most closely associated with reported waste reductions.

A substantial body of research has already established the behavioral foundations of household food waste reduction. This survey offers current U.S.-specific evidence of how households are navigating these behaviors during a sustained period of grocery price pressure and how that pressure is shaping behavior differently across income levels. The report draws on wider household food-waste literature to frame the findings and recommendations.

Methodology & Limitations

Survey design and questions:

Our report reflects the results of a nationally representative survey of 1,000 U.S. households conducted in partnership with YouGov in January 2026. Respondents were asked to self-report their financial situation, grocery spending, and food shopping, preparation, and management behaviors, and food waste, with a focus on how these had changed in the past twelve months. Behavior-change questions were asked only of the 632 respondents who reported a change in their grocery spending and attributed that change to food prices.

Analysis:

We used weighted descriptive statistics and regression analysis to examine the relationship between grocery spending changes, reported food shopping, preparation, and management behaviors, and reported food waste reduction. Regression models were used to estimate the statistical association between individual behaviors and the probability of reporting reduced food waste using weighted multivariate analysis. We also used regression analysis to examine whether households reporting a greater number of food management practices were more likely to report reduced food waste, allowing us to assess whether waste reduction was associated with broader patterns of behavioral adjustment. All analyses use survey weights to reflect the national population represented by the sample.

Evidence limitations and disclaimers:

Our survey relies on self-reported data, and we did not conduct any waste audits to verify the claims. Research consistently finds that Americans tend to underestimate how much food they waste when asked to self-report (Neff et al., 2015), so findings should be understood as indicative of behavioral patterns and associations rather than precise measures of waste reduction.

The food waste measure is categorical with respondents answering whether they wasted "much less," "a little less," "about the same," "a little more" or "much more" and does not capture the volume of waste reduced. Findings describe the direction of reported change rather than its scale.

Spending figures in this survey are self-reported and should be understood as reflecting respondents' perceptions rather than precise expenditure estimates. Recall over a twelve-month period may lead to less precise estimates, and respondents may have interpreted "grocery" spending differently, with some including non-food household purchases. For context, the reported change in weekly expenditures in our survey is greater than food expenditure growth recorded in the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Consumer Expenditure Survey (which uses expenditure diaries to estimate spending) during comparable periods of grocery price pressure. This suggests that our survey results on weekly grocery spending and the increase in the past twelve months capture the felt experience of rising costs rather than a precise measure of spending change.

The regression analysis identifies which behavioral changes, or more specifically, which behaviors done more often than before, are statistically associated with a higher likelihood of reporting less waste, after accounting for overlap among behaviors. It does not establish causation, and behaviors that do not reach statistical significance may still be part of broader patterns of food management adjustment. The absence of a significant result should not be read as evidence that a behavior does not matter.

The survey is also a snapshot in time, and we cannot determine whether changes in grocery spending drove behavioral change and reduced waste, or whether reduced waste itself contributed to lower grocery spending. Both pathways are plausible and may be happening simultaneously.

The group of households that reported spending less at the grocery store in the past twelve months is small (72 households), and the findings should therefore be treated as indicative.

Survey Results

1 Grocery prices are a near-universal pressure in 2026, regardless of overall financial situation.

Most Americans described their financial situation in January 2026 as broadly stable and not significantly different from a year earlier. The majority (63%) of American households we surveyed described their financial situation as positive, with 17% saying it is "excellent" and 46% saying it is "good." Another 30% rated their situation as "fair," and 7% as "poor" (Figure 1).

When asked about how their financial situation had changed in the past year, 41% of households said it had stayed about the same, while 30% said it had improved (22% "somewhat better," 8% "much better") and 28% said it had worsened (22% "somewhat worse," 6% "much worse") (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Respondents' self-reported financial situation in January 2026 (%)

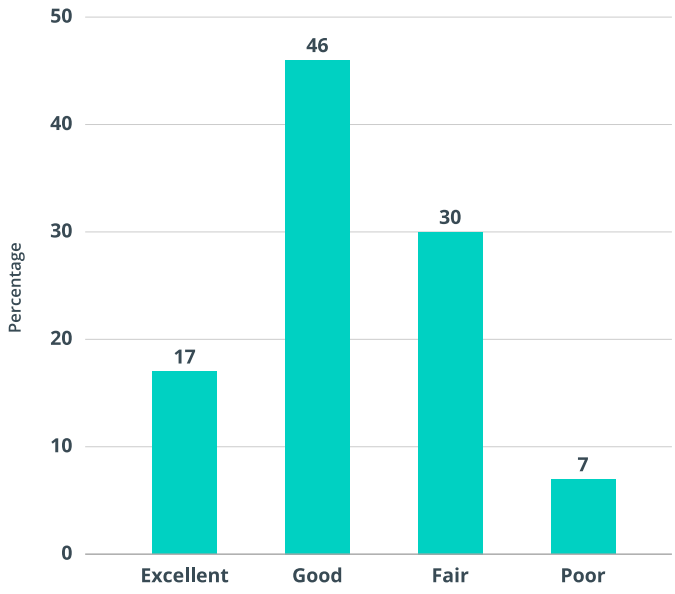
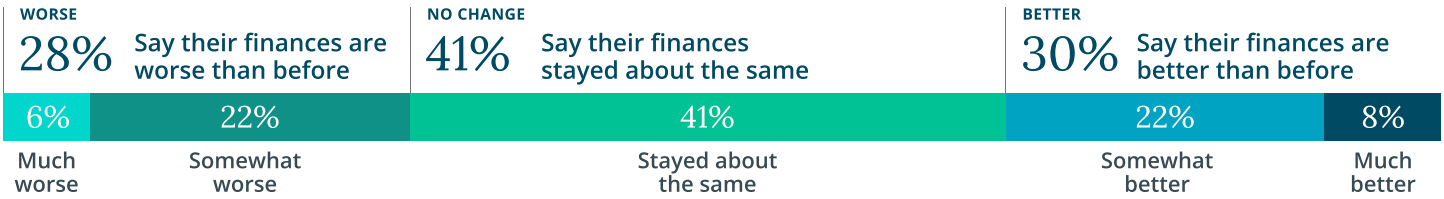
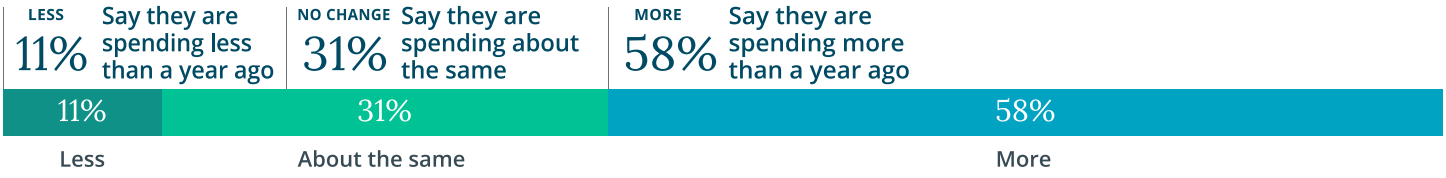


Figure 2: Reported change in financial situation in the past twelve months (%)



Grocery prices and weekly spending emerged as a notable and recurring source of budget strain in survey responses. Over half (58%) of Americans reported spending more on groceries in January 2026 compared to a year ago, while a smaller share (11%) reported spending less, and 31% reported spending about the same (Figure 3).[2] Among those spending more, 93% attributed the increase to food prices.

Figure 3: Reported changes in grocery spending in the past twelve months (%)



Households spending more and households spending less represent two distinct responses to rising food prices. The larger group (58% of households, with a median income around $90,000) was largely able to absorb paying more at the grocery store. But the increase was noticeable, and for many it made the cost of food feel more important. As a result, most reported shifting how they shop for, prepare, and manage food at home. The smaller group (11% of households, with a median income around $55,000) could not absorb the increase and reduced their grocery spending as a result.

[2] As the behavior-change questions discussed later were only asked of households who reported a change in their grocery spending, this group falls outside the main analysis. Possible explanations for why their spending remained stable include households actively managing purchases to offset price increases (for example, buying less or switching brands, shopping at discount retailers, or being less aware of incremental changes in their weekly bill).

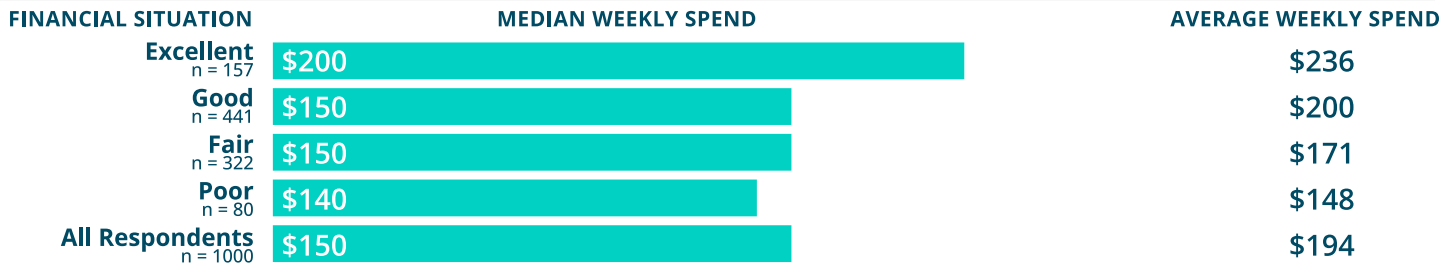
2 Households report similar grocery spending regardless of financial situation, but the approximately $50 weekly reported increase places a disproportionate burden on those least able to afford it.

Weekly grocery spending was relatively similar across households' financial situations (Figure 4). The median weekly spend was $150, or $7,800 per year, across all respondents, including those who described their finances as "good" or "fair." Households reporting an "excellent" financial situation spent more (around $200 per week), while those in a "poor" situation reported less ($140 per week).

For households that reported spending more on groceries in the past year, the median increase was approximately $50 per week (Figure 5), equivalent to $2,600 in additional grocery spending per year, roughly a third of a typical household's grocery budget.[3]

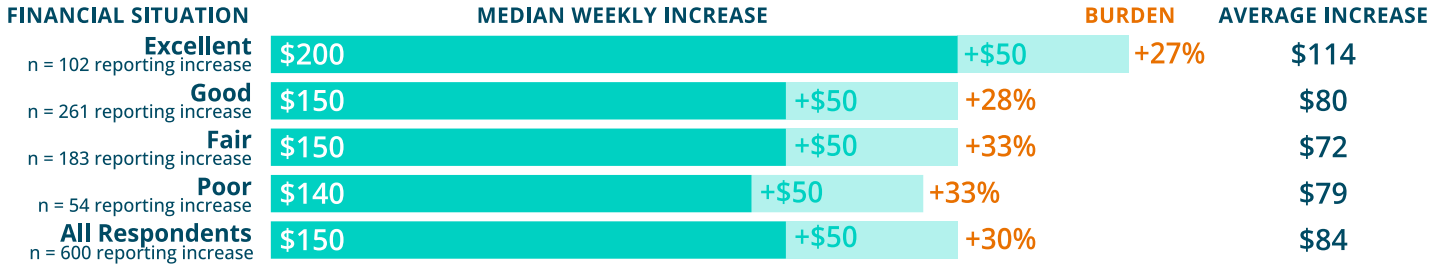
The approximately $50 weekly increase in grocery spending is similar across financial groups, but it represents a larger share of the budget for households in weaker financial positions (33% compared to 27%). In annual income terms, that change in spending represents approximately 10.4% of annual income for households earning under $40,000, compared with 1.5% for those earning $150,000 or more (Figure 6). To put that in context, roughly one in four American households (around 32 million homes) earn less than $40,000 a year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025). The same dollar increase, therefore, hits the households least able to absorb it nearly seven times harder.

*Figure 4: Self-reported weekly grocery spend by financial group in January 2026**



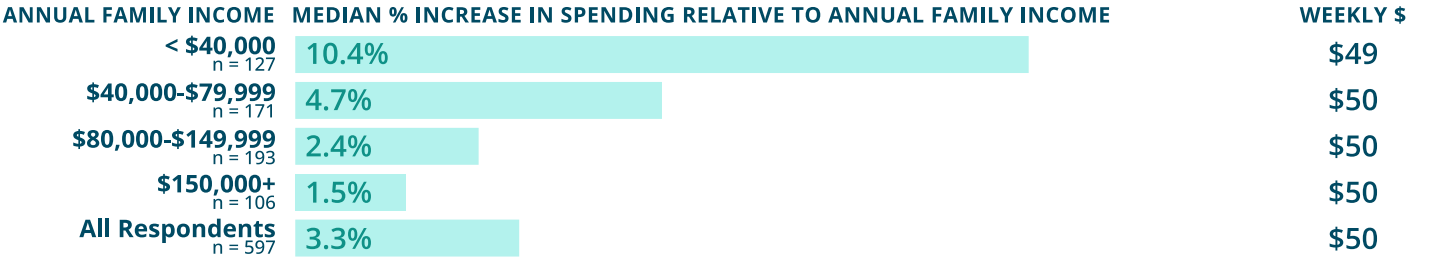
** Values of weekly grocery spending in the top 1% were adjusted (winsorized) to reduce the influence of extreme responses.*

Figure 5: Self-reported weekly grocery spend change by financial group for those reporting that grocery prices increased in the past twelve months[4]*



** Values of weekly grocery spending in the top 1% were adjusted (winsorized) to reduce the influence of extreme responses.*

Figure 6: Self-reported weekly grocery spend change by annual family income for those reporting that grocery prices increased in the past twelve months[5]*



** Values of weekly grocery spending in the top 1% were adjusted (winsorized) to reduce the influence of extreme responses.*
*** Three respondents preferred not to report their family income.*

[3] Spending figures in this survey are self-reported and should be understood as reflecting respondents' perceptions rather than precise expenditure estimates. Recall over a twelve-month period may lead to less precise estimates, and respondents may have interpreted "grocery" spending differently, with some including non-food household purchases. For context, the reported change in weekly expenditures is higher than food expenditure growth recorded in the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Consumer Expenditure Survey (which uses expenditure diaries to estimate spending) during comparable periods of grocery price pressure in previous years, suggesting the figure captures the felt experience of rising costs rather than a precise measure of spending change. Therefore, our estimates are indicative rather than precise.

[4] Proportional burden is calculated as the weighted median of each respondent's individual percentage increase (their reported dollar increase divided by their own current weekly grocery spend).

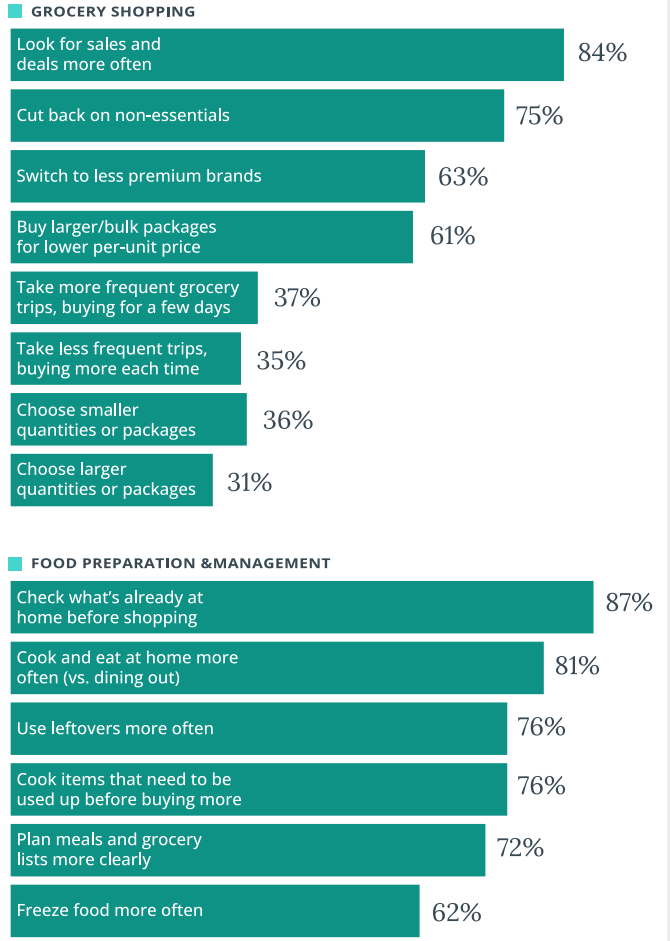
[5] Proportional burden is calculated as the weighted median of each respondent's individual percentage increase (their reported dollar increase divided by their own current weekly grocery spend).

3 Households reported shifting a range of food shopping, preparation, and management behaviors in response to food prices.

Rising food prices placed households under budget pressure, and respondents reported shifting food shopping, preparation, and management behaviors as a result. Among the 632 respondents who reported a change in their grocery spending and who attributed that change to food prices, respondents consistently reported a variety of changes in grocery shopping practices or behaviors, primarily aimed at maximizing cost savings (Figure 7). Eighty-four percent reported looking for sales and deals more often, 75% reported cutting back on non-essentials, reducing the amount of food brought into the home, 63% said they were switching to less premium brands, and 61% reported buying larger or bulk packages to reduce the per-unit price. However, households were divided on two specific behaviors. Roughly 37% reported going to the grocery store more often, while 35% reported going less often, and 36% reported choosing to buy smaller quantities or packages, while 31% reported buying larger ones.

At the same time, respondents reported several changes in their food management practices or behaviors (see Figure 7). Not all of these food shopping, preparation, and management behaviors are likely to reduce food waste, and some have been linked to increased food waste in broader research. For example, bulk buying and shopping organized around price promotions have been linked to overpurchasing and spoilage at home, though evidence on the impact of price promotions on household food waste is mixed (Tsalis et al., 2021). Brand switching is primarily a cost-saving strategy that does not directly change how food is used in the home. Cutting back on non-essentials, by contrast, can reduce waste directly by limiting the amount of food brought into the home that might otherwise go unused. Research has consistently highlighted that using leftovers, freezing food, choosing smaller quantities, and buying only what is needed are most closely linked to food waste reductions (Schanes et al., 2018). Meal planning shows strong links to waste reduction in our survey, particularly when done alongside other behaviors, though prior research has found more mixed results for meal planning in isolation, suggesting its effectiveness may depend on whether it is accompanied by complementary practices such as leftover use and careful storage.

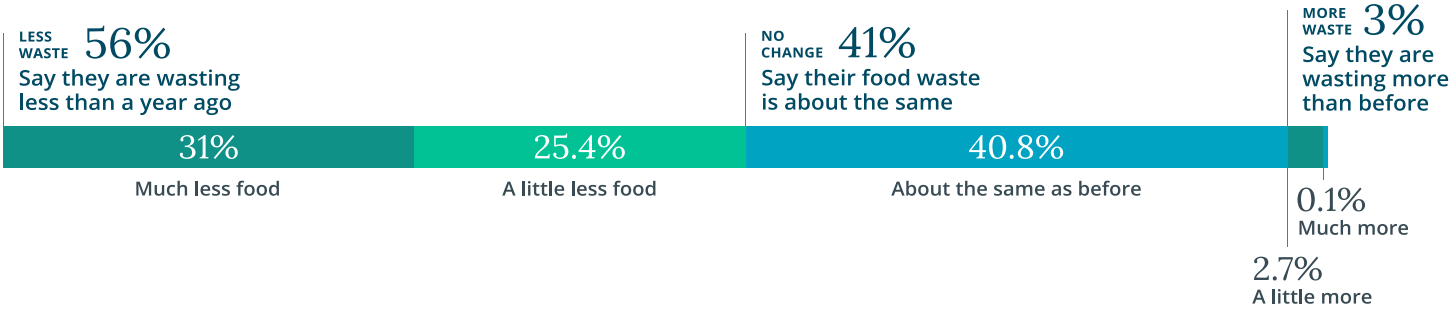
Figure 7: Reported changes in food shopping, preparation, and management behaviors in response to current food prices (%, n = 632)



4 Over half (56%) of households self-reported wasting less food in the past twelve months.

Changes in grocery prices over the past 12 months prompted 56% of households to self-report wasting less food. Nearly one-third (31%) reported wasting "much less" food, and another 25% reported wasting "a little less." Forty-one percent said that changes in grocery prices had not affected how much food they throw away, and just 3% reported wasting more food (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Change in self-reported food waste due to grocery price shifts in the past twelve months (%)



Survey Analysis

Households reported reducing food waste alongside widespread changes in food shopping, preparation, and management behaviors. However, the survey responses alone cannot determine how pressures such as food prices and grocery spending shape these behaviors, or which behaviors are most closely associated with reducing food waste.

To address this, we used regression analysis to test which reported changes in food shopping, preparation, and management behaviors are associated with a higher likelihood of reporting reduced food waste. Because respondents were asked, "Which best describes how your household is generally shopping for or preparing food differently due to current food prices?," our analysis estimates how reporting a given behavior more often than before relates to reporting reduced waste. The regression model evaluates which behaviors remain associated with reported food waste reduction after accounting for overlap among behaviors, allowing us to assess whether waste reduction is linked to a broader pattern of food management practices or concentrated in just one or two.

1 When households noticed a change in their grocery spending, they adapted their food shopping, preparation, and management behaviors and reported wasting less.

Households spending more and households spending less represent two distinct responses to rising food prices. The larger group (58% of households, with a median income of around $90,000) was largely able to absorb paying more at the grocery store. But the price increase was noticeable, and for many it made food costs feel more important. As a result, most reported shifting how they shop for, prepare, and manage food at home. The smaller group (11% of households, with a median income around $55,000) could not absorb the price increase and reported actively cutting back on what they bought while also changing how they managed food at home.

Households spending more on groceries were 29% more likely to report reduced waste than households with no change in grocery spending, while households spending less were 40% more likely. Among households that changed their grocery spending, those who attributed this change to food prices were 17% more likely to reduce food waste than those citing other reasons. Both groups reported wasting less, but through different behaviors, and those differences matter for how solutions should be designed and targeted.

Our survey cannot tell us directly why noticing a change in grocery spending led households to change their behavior. But the analysis suggests that when the cost of groceries becomes more noticeable, households appear to pay closer attention to the value of the food they buy, and that attention drives behavior shifts.

For households that reported spending less on groceries, the survey cannot determine whether financial pressure led them to change their behavior and waste less food, or whether efforts to reduce food waste helped lower their grocery spending. Both explanations are plausible, and both may be occurring at the same time. However, because the survey was a snapshot over a week in January 2026 and did not track households over time, we cannot determine which came first. This is also a small group in our survey (72 households), which means the findings carry more uncertainty than those for the larger group of households that reported spending more on groceries.

2 Among households spending more on groceries, reported waste reduction was linked to a broad set of food shopping, preparation, and management behaviors.

Of the 560 households that reported increased grocery spending and attributed the change to food prices, six of the twelve behavior shifts are statistically associated with a higher probability of reporting reduced food waste, even after accounting for the other behavioral changes households were making at the same time:

- Using leftovers more often **(+19.6%)**
- Looking for sales/deals more often **(+14.9%)**
- Choosing smaller quantities/packages **(+11.3%)**
- Freezing food more often **(+9.9%)**
- Planning meals more closely **(+9.9%)**
- Cooking more instead of eating out **(+11.2%)**

Of the six behaviors associated with reduced waste, using leftovers more often (+19.6%, p=.004), looking for sales/deals more often (+14.9%, p=.051), and choosing smaller quantities/packages (+11.3%, p=.011) show the largest associations with reporting reduced food waste after adjusting for the other reported behavioral changes households were making at the same time. Planning meals more closely, freezing food, and cooking more at home are also associated with reduced waste in our survey results, although the estimated relationships are smaller and supported by weaker statistical evidence.

The association between looking for sales and deals and reporting less waste is somewhat counterintuitive, as price-promotion behavior is more commonly linked to overpurchasing and spoilage in broader research (Tsalis et al., 2021). It is possible that households that report looking for sales more often are also planning their shopping more carefully, and that it is the planning, rather than the deal-hunting itself, that is driving the waste reduction. Wider research suggests that the relationship between sale-seeking and waste tends to depend on whether it reflects deliberate planning or impulse buying (Tsalis et al., 2021).

For households reporting increased grocery spending, the behaviors most closely associated with reduced food waste point to more intentional food management. Households appear to be making better use of what they already have (by using leftovers, freezing, and choosing smaller quantities and using them up), planning purchases more carefully, and shifting meals from restaurants and takeout to home-cooked meals.

3 Among households whose grocery spending fell, reported waste reduction was concentrated in two behaviors: meal planning and leftovers.

Of the 72 households whose grocery spending declined and who attributed the change to food prices, two of the twelve behavior shifts are associated with a higher probability of reporting reduced food waste, even after accounting for the other behavioral changes households were making at the same time:

- Planning meals more closely **(+53.0%)**
- Using leftovers more often **(+36.7%)**

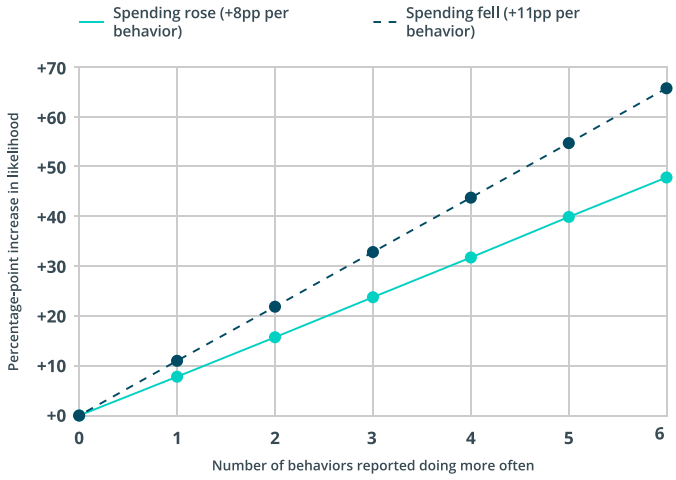
Households that reported more meal planning were 53.0% more likely to report reducing food waste. Those using leftovers more often were 36.7% more likely to self-report food waste reduction.

This group has a median income of around $55,000 and was unable to absorb the rise in food prices. Households under greater financial pressure reported fewer behavioral changes overall, but each change corresponded to a greater probability of reporting less waste.

4 Each additional behavior a household reported doing more often was associated with a higher probability of reporting reduced food waste.

Each additional behavior from the full list that a household reported doing more often corresponded to an approximately 8% higher probability of reporting reduced waste among households whose spending rose, and approximately 11% among those whose spending fell (Figure 9). Reported waste reduction in this survey, therefore, is associated with the cumulative adoption of multiple reinforcing behaviors rather than any single change.

Figure 9: Stacking behavioral shifts and the increased probability of reporting reduced food waste by group



Conclusions & Recommendations

Our survey set out to understand how American households are responding to sustained grocery price pressure and what that means for behavior change and food waste in January 2026. While the results are self-reported and we did not conduct waste audits to verify the reported reductions, the findings point to consistent conclusions and practical opportunities for practitioners, policymakers, and food businesses to act.

1 Grocery prices are a near-universal pressure on American households in 2026.

Over two-thirds of households (69%) reported a change in their grocery spending, and among those who spent more, 93% attributed the increase to food prices. The same median increase of $50 a week or $2,600 a year hits lower-income households nearly seven times as hard as the highest earners. For the roughly 1 in 4 American households earning less than $40,000 a year, their change in spending represents about 10.4% of annual income, compared with 1.5% for the comparable share at the top of the distribution (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025), making grocery price pressure both a universal and unequal burden.

2 Both households spending more and less on food adapted how they managed it, and reported wasting less.

Households spending more and households spending less represent two distinct responses to rising food prices. Households spending more (58% of households, with a median income of around $90,000) were largely able to absorb higher grocery prices. The increase was noticeable, however, and for many, it made food costs feel more important. As a result, most reported adapting how they shop for, prepare, and manage food at home. Households spending less (11% of households, with a median income around $55,000) could not absorb the scale of this increase and instead reported actively cutting back on what they bought and changing how they managed food at home.

Households spending more were 29% more likely to report reduced waste, while households spending less were 40% more likely. Among households that changed their grocery spending, those who attributed this change to food prices were 17% more likely to reduce food waste than those citing other reasons. The spending-less finding is based on a smaller group of 72 households and should be treated as directionally informative rather than definitive. Our results suggest that when grocery spending becomes noticeable, particularly as a result of rising food prices, households pay attention to the value of food, and this drives behavior change and waste reduction.

Rising food prices appear to have made food costs more noticeable to American households. Ninety-three percent of households attributed their spending increase directly to food prices. Earlier research found that many American households significantly underestimate the cost of the food they waste, and that closing this gap could be a powerful driver of behavior change (MITRE, 2023). With grocery prices making food costs more noticeable, households may now be more receptive to campaigns that frame food waste reduction in terms of value and savings. Our survey cannot confirm whether that gap has narrowed, but the conditions suggest renewed opportunity to frame food waste reduction as part of an affordability agenda.

3 Households that reported wasting less made multiple small changes.

The behaviors households most consistently reported doing more often as a result of grocery prices were meal planning, using up leftovers, freezing food, checking what was already in the fridge, and choosing smaller package sizes. Each additional behavioral adaptation a household reported doing more often increased the probability of reporting less waste (around 8% for households spending more and 11% for those spending less). A household making three behavioral changes was therefore at least 24% more likely to report wasting less than a household not making any, with the cumulative effect even stronger (33%) for the spending-less group. Meal planning and leftover use showed the highest probability of reduced waste and therefore should anchor practical guidance. Our survey results, along with the wider peer-reviewed literature, suggest that helping households adopt several practices together increases the probability of reducing food waste.

4 Lower-income households face the greatest burden and stand to benefit most from targeted practical support.

The reported median increase in grocery spending was broadly similar across income levels (approximately $50 a week), but this impacted households very differently depending on their income level. For the roughly 1 in 4 American households earning less than $40,000 a year (roughly 32 million homes), that additional spending each week represents around 10% of annual income, or the equivalent of more than a month of pre-tax earnings. For those earning $150,000 or more, the increase represents just 1.5%. The same dollar increase, therefore, hits the households least able to absorb it nearly seven times harder.

Households under greater financial pressure also reported fewer behavioral changes overall, but each behavioral change they reported doing more often had a higher probability of waste reduction. These households are already managing tight budgets, limited storage, and less time, and those constraints can make it harder to adopt and sustain multiple food management behaviors. Without support that addresses these barriers, food waste interventions targeted at lower-income households will hit a ceiling regardless of how well they are designed.

For Food Waste Practitioners:

- **Recommendation 1: Frame food waste reduction as a money-saving opportunity and pair that message with practical tools.** With grocery prices remaining a significant source of household budget strain, an affordability frame is a compelling and timely entry point for consumer behavior change and has been found to be more effective than environmental messaging alone. However, messaging campaigns to consumers should be paired with specific practical tools such as meal planners, storage and freezing guidance, and leftover recipes that give households both the motivation and the means to act (WRAP, 2015; Stancu et al., 2016; Aitken et al., 2025).

- **Recommendation 2: Help households shift multiple behaviors at once, and tailor the mix to their circumstances.** Households that reported wasting less made multiple small behavioral changes, and each additional change increased the probability of reporting less waste, suggesting that helping households adopt several practices together is more effective than promoting any single one in isolation. Because campaigns that require too many behavior changes at once can be harder for households to act on, meal planning and leftover use should anchor any campaign as the two behaviors most consistently linked to waste reduction, with additional behaviors, particularly freezing food, checking what's already in the fridge, and choosing smaller package sizes, layered in as households build confidence and capacity.

- **Recommendation 3: For lower-income households, prioritize practical capacity over messaging.** Lower-income households face greater constraints on their practical ability to reduce food waste, including time, knowledge, and budget flexibility, as well as fewer opportunities to act on that knowledge (Heidig et al., 2025; Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2015). Additional support that targets structural barriers would therefore be more effective than only offering food waste reduction guidance. In practice, this could mean, for example, integrating food management resources into food assistance programs, expanding access to community storage and batch-cooking facilities, and providing guidance tailored to the constraints of a stretched household budget, though more research is needed to understand which approaches are most effective.

For Policymakers:

- **Recommendation 1: Fund consumer education on food management framed around savings and affordability.** There is a strong case for public investment in education campaigns that help households see food waste reduction as a direct money-saving opportunity. Federal funding can also extend the reach of food management tools and guidance, particularly by integrating them into existing food assistance programs.

- **Recommendation 2: Pass the Food Date Labeling Act.** Our survey found that households are paying closer attention to food costs and actively seeking more value from the food they buy, but inconsistent and confusing date labels continue to undermine those efforts as households discard food that is still safe to eat. The Food Date Labeling Act offers a legislative opportunity to address the confusion by standardizing labels to two clear options ("BEST If Used By" for quality and "USE By" for safety). This could help reduce confusion and support households to use more of the food they buy, and stretch their grocery budgets further. Estimates suggest that consumers could save around $1.3 billion annually while also reducing food waste resulting from date label concerns.

For Food Businesses (Retailers, Manufacturers):

- **Recommendation 1: Use consumer and waste data to inform packaging and product decisions.** For manufacturers, residential food waste should be a consideration in product development and packaging decisions, particularly where data shows that products commonly spoil before the package is finished. For retailers, waste considerations can inform assortment planning, promotions, and replenishment decisions. In both cases, where evidence points to a mismatch between package size and how households actually use a product, that evidence should inform packaging, price, and promotion decisions (Wilson et al., 2017).

- **Recommendation 2: Support behaviors most strongly linked to reducing food waste in homes.** There is an opportunity for food businesses, including retailers, to reinforce leftover use and meal planning by offering tools, recipes, resealable and freezer-ready packaging, and on-package storage guidance, positioned as practical ways to get more value from every grocery trip.

- **Recommendation 3: Sell recoverable surplus at affordable prices, then donate what remains.** There is an opportunity for retailers and manufacturers to capture more demand for surplus food before it exits the retail channel by selling suitable products to consumers at lower prices through in-store markdowns, discounted near-expiration sections, or partnerships with food recovery platforms. This approach addresses both food waste and affordability simultaneously, and is particularly relevant for lower-income households who face the greatest burden from rising grocery prices but have the most to gain from practical support that stretches their grocery budget further (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2015).

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ReFED is a U.S.-based nonprofit that partners with food businesses, funders, solution providers, policymakers, and more to solve food waste. Its vision is a sustainable, resilient, and inclusive food system that makes the best use of the food we grow. The organization serves as the definitive source for food waste data, providing the most comprehensive analysis of the food waste problem and solutions to address it. Through its tools and resources, in-person and virtual convenings, and services tailored to help businesses, funders, and solution providers scale their impact, ReFED works to increase adoption of food waste solutions across the supply chain. To learn more about ReFED and solutions to reduce food waste, please visit www.refed.org.

Authors

Marigold Walkins
Director of Research, ReFED

Ana Gomez Lemmen Meyer
Data Scientist, ReFED