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Differences in Food Waste Between Households with and Without Children

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Abstract

Household food waste is influenced by household composition and everyday food practices (e.g. Schanes et al., 2018; Secondi et al., 2015). The aim of this study was to compare the amount, composition and causes of avoidable food waste in households with and without children. The data were collected during 2021–2022 by Finnish students as part of higher education courses on sustainable food systems. Food waste was classified by food category and reason for disposal. Participating students recorded and weighed all avoidable food waste generated in their households for one week. Records with incomplete background information or weighing data were excluded. In total, data from 431 households (889 persons) were included in the analysis. Of these, 95 were households with children (353 persons) and 336 households without children (536 persons). The distribution of food waste showed differences between household types. Households with children generated approximately 1.6 kg of avoidable food waste per household per week, whereas households without children generated approximately 0.8 kg. The generation of food waste per person was approximately 20% higher in households without children. Clear differences were observed in both the composition and causes of food waste. In households with children, higher levels of waste were observed particularly in bread, rice and pasta products, as well as convenience foods. Several causes contributed to food waste, especially plate waste, spoilage, and food preferences. Food waste was often linked to preparing too much food and uneaten portions at mealtimes. In households without children, food waste was more strongly associated with spoilage and products exceeding their use-by or best-before date. High waste levels were observed, especially in fruits, vegetables, and dairy products. Plate waste was less common in these households. In households with children, food waste was associated with several different causes. These were mainly linked to meal situations and everyday family practices. In households without children, spoilage and expired products accounted for a larger share of food waste. Here, in the latter case, food waste was strongly related to food storage and slower consumption. In households with children, efforts should focus on meal planning, portion sizes and leftover management. The findings indicate that measures in food waste prevention should be tailored to different household types, i.e., to mechanisms behind food waste generation.

Keywords: avoidable food waste, households with children, household food waste, food waste prevention, food waste behaviour

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