

By [PETER A. COCLANIS](#)

It appears increasingly clear that the E. coli outbreak, which as of June 12 has killed 35 people and made another 3,250 or so extremely sick, originated with bean sprouts grown on an organic farm in the north of Germany. There has been a huge amount written about the outbreak, particularly about the government's feckless response.

And yet—curiously—I haven't heard any of the critics calling for draconian regulations on organics, much less for the dismantling of this still small, and thus readily terminable, component of the food industry.



WSJ Europe editorial writer Anne Jolis explains an E. coli outbreak and the dangers in allegedly healthy foods.

Things were far different last spring and summer during the salmonella enteritidis scare in the U.S. This episode—associated with shell eggs—created near hysteria. Over 500 million eggs were withdrawn from the market after a sizable number of people got ill—ultimately 1,939 illnesses were attributed to the outbreak. Tainted eggs were found at plants operated by two large producers in Iowa (Wright County Egg and Hillandale Farms).

At the time, raging critics of "industrial agriculture," "factory farms" and our "lax" regulatory regime demanded drastic reforms in both our food-production and food-safety monitoring regimes. Not surprisingly, after the "epidemic" ended—with a whimper, not a bang—none of the critics bothered to point out that not one death resulted from it, that on balance the regulations in place worked well, and that the "industrial" food system in the U.S. is actually very safe.

Regarding the last point: There are about 311.4 million people living in the U.S. today, and most of them eat (at least!) three meals a day. That comes to about one billion "eating events" daily, during each of which we are subject to risk from one or another nasty food or water-borne disease.



As a matter of fact, we do contract mild cases of such diseases—including from salmonella, campylobacter, E. coli, and noroviruses—all the time. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that about one out of six Americans comes down with a food/water-borne illness every year, that 128,000 people get hospitalized from such illnesses, and that about 3,000 die annually because of something they ate or drank.

While these numbers sound large, they aren't. Let's do the math.

In our much maligned "industrial" food regime, eight people a day, on average, die from ingesting "bad" food—mostly the very old, the very young, and people with severely compromised immune systems. That's about one out of every 39 million Americans.

If there are roughly a billion eating events daily in the U.S., then there is one death for every 125 million of these events. And that's not even considering daily non-meal "drinking" events—every time we put ourselves at risk of ingesting tainted liquids between meals. If we included such events as well, the U.S. food and drink regime becomes safer still, particularly for those without severely compromised immune systems between the ages of, say, two and 75.

These are the kinds of numbers that should inspire confidence in the safety of our food supply, not weaken knees.

*Mr. Coclanis, professor of history and director of the Global Research Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is a past president of the Agricultural History Society.*