

# Opinion: Where is the food safety?

By Mark Bittman, New York Times

I'm eager to cover some curious and less depressing topics here – did you know Asian multi-millionaires are cornering the market on first-growth Bordeaux? – and equally eager to stop throwing mind-numbing numbers around. But as long as those pesky Republicans keep attacking the food supply for low-income people and food safety for all of us, and as long as most Democrats put up toothless defenses instead of actually trying to make things better, I gotta pay attention. If we needed further evidence that the party of “family values” only values wealthy families, we have it now; when these guys say “women and children first,” they mean “first to throw overboard.”

The House's reactionary majority wants to dismantle two aspects of the Federal system that serve the majority of us not perfectly but decently: the Women, Infants and Children Program (WIC), one of the most effective of all social welfare programs, and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), among whose jobs is the increasingly difficult one of protecting us from the kind of outbreak of E. coli that just killed at least 39 people in Germany, gravely – perhaps mortally – sickened another 800 and gave another couple thousand a few of those days none of us ever wants.

As I wrote two weeks ago, we've had our share of foodborne illnesses in the past, but have not kept up with the increasing threat of E. coli. One in six Americans gets sick from the food we eat every year – that's about 48 million people, or enough to fill your average baseball stadium a thousand times with people having extremely unpleasant symptoms – and there are 3,000 food-related deaths annually.

This is a food system that Georgia Congressman Jack Kingston calls “99.99 percent safe.” I guess he wasn’t one of the 16 percent last year who fell ill, but maybe he should talk to a million or two of them; they should be easy enough to find.

As we near the 10th anniversary of 9/11, we’re going to be reminded more and more of how much 3,000 deaths from hostile attackers can hurt. Yet put aside the questionable decisions we made in anger and sorrow that have cost us \$1.2 trillion – and another 6,000 or so American lives – in wars whose benefits are far from clear. Think, instead, that the annual costs of food-borne illness are estimated to be around \$152 billion a year, and consider that the entire proposed FDA budget is around \$4 billion (three percent of that \$150 billion), and that a measly \$280 million or so of that (about one-fifth of one percent of that \$150 billion) was destined for the Food Safety Modernization Act, which would expand activity geared toward protecting us from E. coli and other foodborne threats.

**Read the whole story**