Americans' Food Expenditures From 1997-2025

Luke Kirk | Zachary Showman | Richard Chen

Initial Interest

Originally, our group was interested in how students at Duke spent their food points at each of the restaurants in WU.



Why stop there?

So we decided to take a look at Americans as a whole, and how they go about spending their money on food

(at-home and away)

Research Question

How has the distribution of U.S. food sales between food-at-home and food-away-from-home changed from 1997 to 2025, and how did these proportions shift between 2020 and 2025?

Introduction of Data

Source: USDA Economic Research Service
Time period: Monthly U.S. food sales, 1997–2025
Key variables: Year, month, total food sales, and percentage of sales attributed to each food category

- **Food categories**:
  - F**ood at home (FAH)**: Food purchased for consumption at home
  - **Food away from home (FAFH)**: Food purchased for consumption away from home

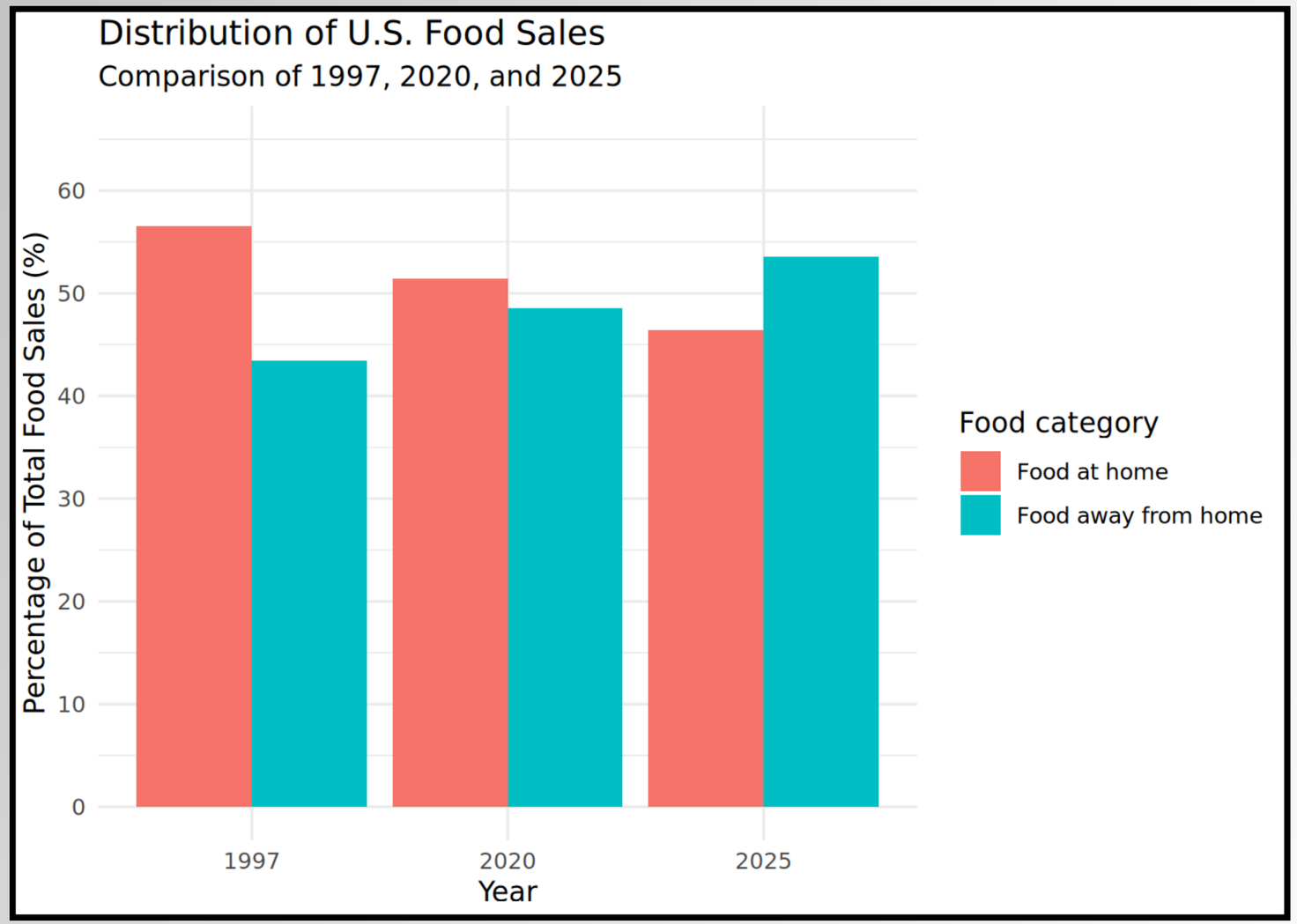
Analysis: Calculated annual food sales percentages and inflation-adjusted sales across four outlet types

We analyzed USDA data from grocery stores, warehouse clubs, limited service restaurants, and full service restaurants

How Has Food Spending Changed?

In 1997, 56.6% of food sales were attributed to food at home, compared to 43.4% away from home.

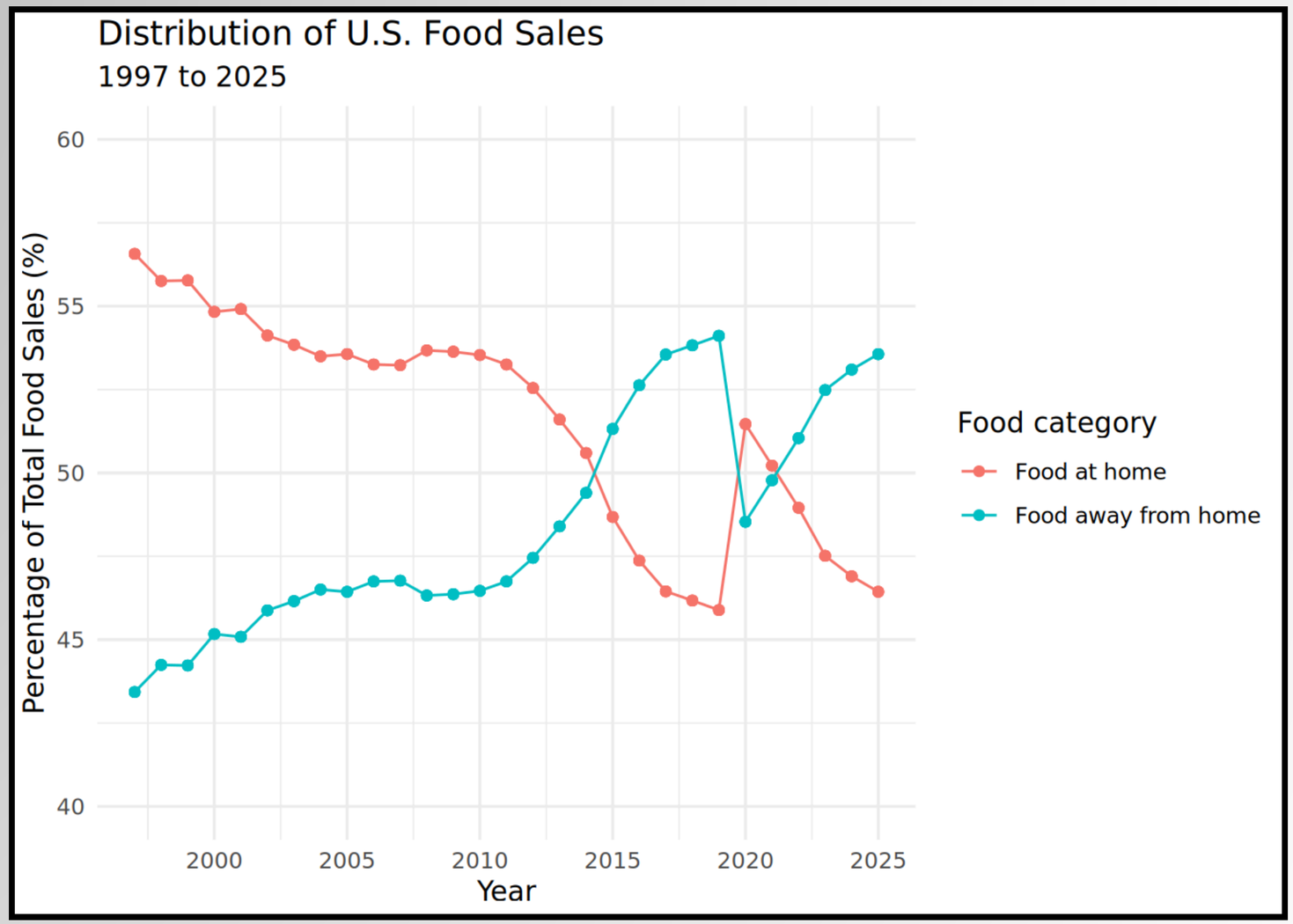
By 2025, these proportions nearly reversed, with 53.6% of sales attributed to food away from home.



A Long-Term Shift in Food Spending

Food-away-from-home sales gradually increased as a proportion of total food sales, surpassing food-at-home sales around 2014.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, food-away-from-home sales fell to 48.5% of total sales.

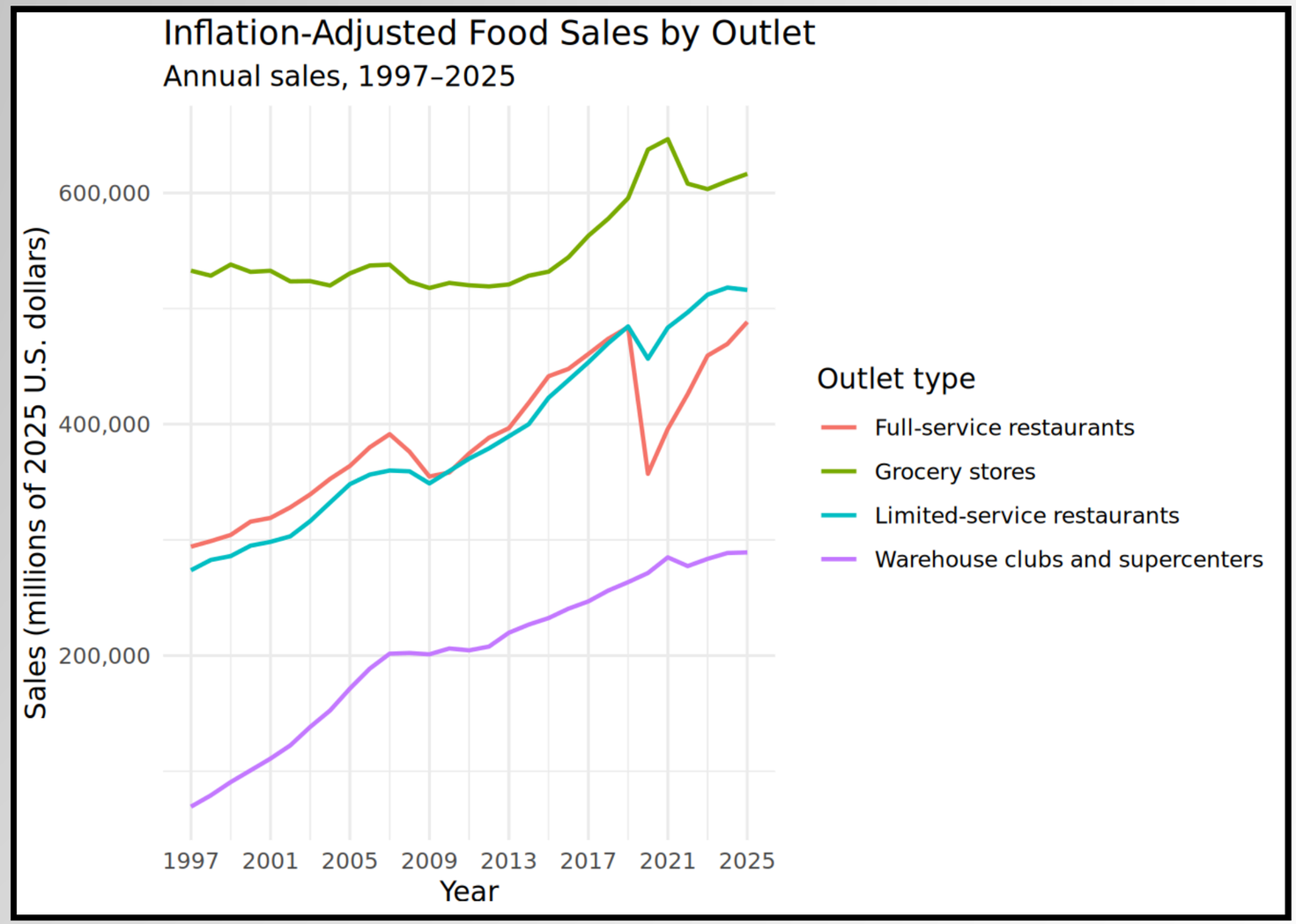


How Have Food Outlets Changed?

Full-service restaurants: Sales increased approximately 37% between 2020 and 2025, from $357 billion to $488 billion.

Grocery stores: Sales decreased approximately 3% during the same period, from $637 billion to $617 billion.

Warehouse clubs and supercenters: Sales more than quadrupled between 1997 and 2025.

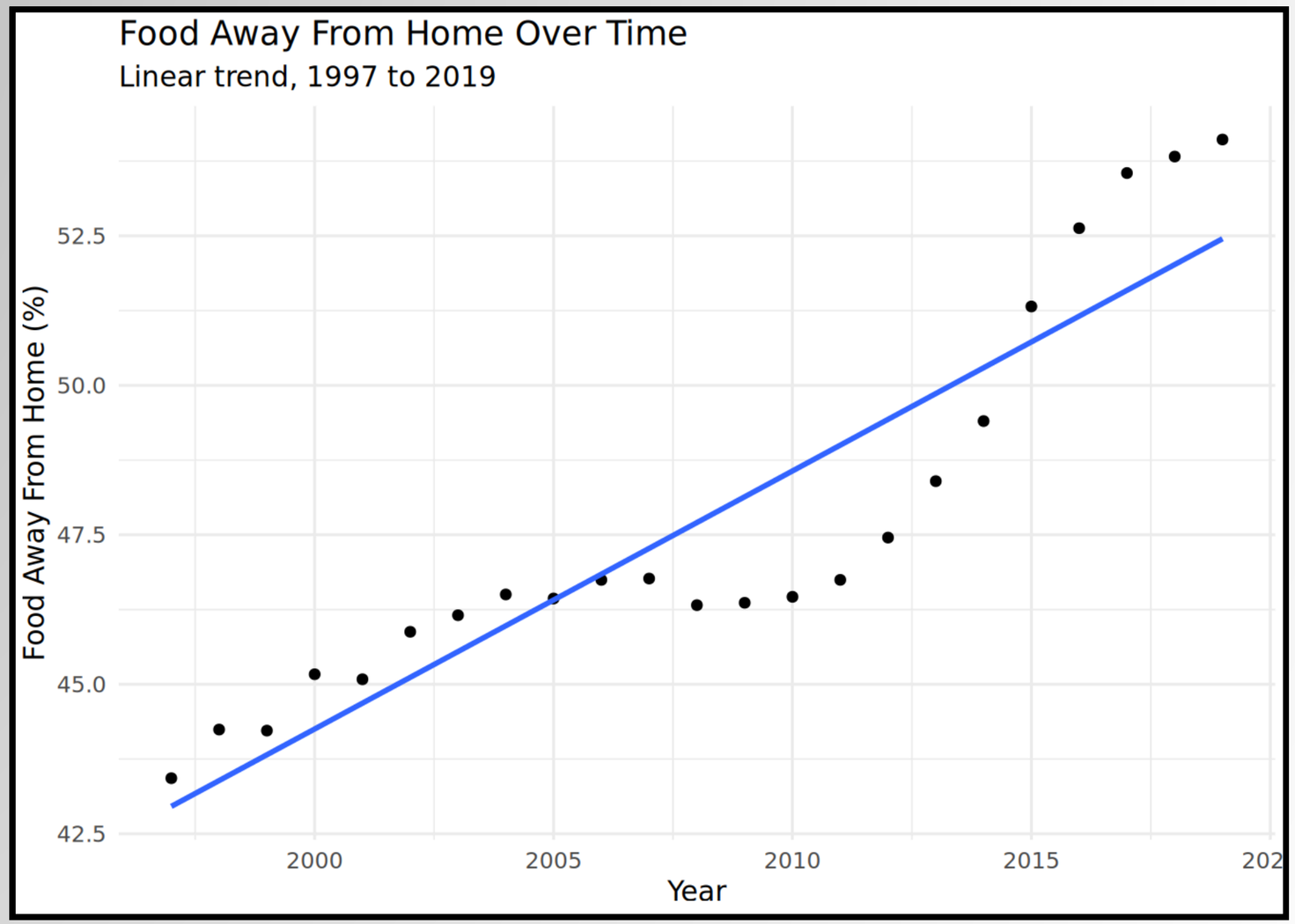


A Steady Increase in Food-Away-From-Home Sales

From 1997 to 2019, the percentage of food sales attributed to food away from home generally increased.

The model estimates an average increase of 0.432 percentage points per year. (slope)

Approximately 83.4% of the variation in food-away-from-home sales percentages is explained by the linear relationship with year. (R^2)



Conclusions

Key findings:

- U.S. food-away-from-home sales increased from 43.4% to 53.6% of total food sales between 1997 and 2025.
- The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily reversed this trend, but the away-from-home share recovered by 2025.

Limitations:

- Our analysis identifies changes in spending patterns, but cannot determine their causes.
- Sales percentages are based on nominal dollars, meaning price changes may influence the results.

Future Research:

- Examine food expenditures by household income and region.
- Incorporate food prices to distinguish changes in spending from changes in purchasing behavior.