



# Small businesses – Big risks: Current status and future direction of HACCP in Cyprus

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## Abstract

Food safety practices and procedures, in the new Member States, are being scrutinized closely both by the public and the European Commission. HACCP is increasingly relied on to ensure food safety in both food producing and catering businesses. Public concern in Cyprus about safety and quality of food has been growing and food businesses have to review their safety procedures more rigorously. Our survey shows that the size of business is the best indicator of application of HACCP and that small businesses are lagging behind in ensuring safety of their products due to financial constraints. According to our survey implementation level of the HACCP system in food businesses in Cyprus is approximately 17%. Awareness of potential hazards in food production and food handling is very limited. The recognition of the full potential of the HACCP system for ensuring food safety requires assistance from the Cyprus Government and the EU Commission.

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## 1. Introduction

In contrast to most of the new EU Member States, Cyprus relies on the tourist industry for a substantial part of its revenue and has a sizable community of foreign residents, mainly from the UK. From ancient times Cyprus produced wine and other foodstuffs for export. Its neighbours, Greece, Israel, Egypt and Turkey are also major exporters of fresh food produce. Eating habits of Cypriots are changing and there is a tendency for an increase in consumption of:

- organic foods,
- bottled water,
- processed ‘luxury foods’,

- nutrient and ‘bioactive’ supplements,
- exotic foods from outside the EU,
- prescribed or self-prescribed foods, for example, containing probiotics,
- eating out and takeaways and
- alcohol and other mood modifying substances.

Investigative journalism has given rise to a proliferation of food scares in Cyprus. People realize increasingly the importance of safe food production and demand their consumer rights yet, there is also a reduction in basic knowledge of food safety among younger generation and decrease in time spent in preparing and consuming meals.

A harmonised approach to food safety across the EU, including the Accession States, is essential to meet growing public concerns (Bridges & Bridges, 2004). For the Cyprus economy dependant on tourism, high confidence in the safety of its food is vital. A decade ago the contribution of the hotel industry and restaurants to GDP was 8.5%

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(SSRC, 2000) and it is still growing with 10% of population is employed in this sector.

## 2. Methodology

There has been no previous research on HACCP application in Cyprus. The principal method in this research was the application of specifically designed questionnaires combined with personal interviews. A pilot study to test the design of the questionnaire was conducted and adjustments made. Businesses in the pilot study were excluded from the main survey.

Almost 7% of all food businesses (300 enterprises) in Cyprus were surveyed. Very unusually for studies of this nature the participation rate approached 100%.

The questionnaire was intended for the owners/managers of the businesses and just over 80% of questionnaires were filled by the individuals in this position. However, in reality it was not always possible to liaise with owners and other members of staff completed the remainder of questionnaires. Standard statistical package (SPSS) was used in this study.

## 3. Results

Forty-nine (16.3%) of the surveyed businesses were hotels, 135 (45%) were catering establishments and the remaining 116 (38.7%) were food manufacturing enterprises.

Almost half of the respondents (48.7%) had secondary education only. The younger respondents were more qualified as 31 (72.1%) of the 20–29 age group and 59 (58.4%) of the 30–39 year olds have acquired a college Diploma or a University Degree. Respondents older than 40 years old were less qualified. Of those between 50 and 60 years old only 34.7% had higher education qualifications. Diploma was the most frequent qualification acquired among the respondents from hotels whereas the secondary education certificate from catering businesses and industries.

Respondents from hotels had higher level of education than respondents from the food industry and catering businesses. Hotels, large enterprises of food industry and catering businesses have more structured management systems. They can afford a qualified person in each position. It is therefore assumed that this is the reason that hotels employ better educated people, followed by different types of food industry and catering businesses.

The mean numbers of years of operation of each category of food business were 16.5, 11.1 and 15.2 years for hotels, catering and industries, respectively.

In Cyprus 97.3% of food businesses have less than 50 food handlers. For statistical purposes the businesses in this survey were classified as small-size businesses (up to 10 handlers), medium-size businesses (up to 50 food handlers) and large businesses (over 50 food handlers). According to this classification, 73.3% of the surveyed businesses were small and another 24% were medium-size businesses.

The rationale for using the number of food handlers as a key parameter in terms of HACCP implementation is that many businesses in this survey have employees, who are not directly involved in dealing with food. It was therefore considered more relevant to use the number of food handlers for classification of these businesses. Although it has become customary to link small and medium-size businesses together (SME), for Cyprus it is appropriate to analyse them separately.

This is similar to other new member states, such as Hungary where out of 9000 food companies 7600 employ less than 11 workers (Feher, 2002).

Other characteristics of small businesses in Cyprus are as follows:

- They serve local customers.
- They have a very limited share of the market.
- They are owned by one person or a small group of people, managed by their owners who deal with all management issues (family run businesses).
- They are independent businesses.

Out of the total 220 small businesses, 118 were catering businesses, 80 comprised different types of food industry and 22 were hotels (Table 1).

Seventy-six (25.3%) businesses employed temporary food handlers. Seventy-two (94.7%) of businesses with temporary food handlers were classified as small businesses. Catering businesses employed more temporary food handlers than hotels and all types of food industry. Only 75% of temporary full-time food handlers had valid Health Certificate during the survey. About 30% of businesses were inspected four times per year. The second most frequent interval between inspections for hotels was every 6 months and, for catering and food industry, every month. The mean number of inspections is important in relation to the risk categories of food businesses.

Table 1  
Category of food business according to number of food handlers

Category	Number of businesses				
	Hotels	Catering	Industry	Total	(%)
<i>A. Small businesses</i>					
1–2 food handlers	3	43	18	64	(21.3)
3–4 food handlers	1	46	24	71	(23.7)
5–10 food handlers	18	29	38	85	(28.3)
Subtotal	22 (44.9%)	118 (87.4%)	80 (69%)	220	(73.3)
<i>B. Medium businesses</i>					
11–50 food handlers	25 (51%)	15 (11.1%)	32 (27.6%)	72	(24)
<i>C. Large businesses</i>					
More than 51 food handlers	2 (4.1%)	2 (1.5%)	4 (3.4%)	8	(2.6)



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