

Executive Summary

The choices households make affect the climate and the environment in numerous ways, ranging from daily habits, such as what to eat and how to get to work, to less frequent choices, such as how to heat their homes. The potential to reduce the environmental impacts of household consumption is well documented but has proven difficult to realise. Understanding and overcoming the barriers to behaviour change must be a policy priority given the urgent need to accelerate action to limit climate change and improve environmental quality.

This report presents insights from the third round of the OECD Survey on Environmental Policies and Individual Behaviour Change (EPIC), which explores what drives household behaviour and how policies may affect household decisions. Following two previous rounds of the survey in 2008 and 2011, a third round was implemented in 2022. With a sample of more than 17 000 households, the third round comprises nine countries: Belgium, Canada, Israel, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States. It explores four key areas: energy, transport, waste and food systems.

Since the second EPIC Survey in 2011, environmental issues have risen up policy agendas, with milestones including the adoption of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (2015) and the Global Biodiversity Framework (2022), and a resolution to reach agreement on an internationally legally binding instrument to end plastic pollution. Technological innovations have also altered the landscape of consumption options. Over the last decade the cost of renewably sourced electricity has declined rapidly, making it less expensive than fossil fuel-generated electricity in many countries. Drastic changes have also occurred in transport systems, such as the increased availability and affordability of electric vehicles. Digitalisation has facilitated new business models, many of which are associated with environmental benefits, such as reducing food waste and enabling peer-to-peer sharing of goods.

Societies and economies have also been significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, geo-political tensions, and the associated energy and commodity crises. These diverse pressures and developments warrant a careful examination of the drivers of consumption choices and support for policy measures at a time of interlocking global crises. The 2022 EPIC Survey yields numerous insights.

Key findings

- **Energy use:** Households are more likely to practise easily adopted energy-saving actions, such as turning off the lights when leaving a room (92% of respondents), than actions that are harder to adopt or could reduce comfort, such as minimising the use of heating or cooling (68%). Uptake of renewable energy and low-emissions energy technologies is not widespread, even when these options are available. Among households for whom installation is possible, less than one-third have installed solar panels (29%), heat pumps (30%) and battery storage (27%). Uptake is particularly low for technologies that are costly or not well-understood.
- **Transport:** Although 50% of commuters in urban areas walk, cycle or take public transport to work, households still rely heavily on private motorised vehicles, which accounts for the remaining 50% of commuter travel in urban areas. Overall, 75% of households report that at least one household

member uses a car on a regular basis. However, more than half of regular car users (54%) indicate that improved public transport, such as cheaper, more frequent and more widespread services, would encourage them to drive less. The overall high reliance on private cars in all countries highlights the potential for electric cars in decarbonising the transport sector. A barrier to their uptake appears to be a lack of charging infrastructure: 33% of respondents report that there are no charging stations within three kilometres of their residence.

- **Waste practices:** Many households act to reduce waste by using reusable shopping bags (83%), but fewer buy second-hand items (37%) or rent items (20%). Households with drop-off services or services that collect recyclable waste at their residence produce on average 26% and 42% less mixed (i.e. non-recyclable) waste than households without these services. Households charged for mixed waste report composting 55% of their food waste, while those that are not charged report composting 35% of their food waste. Up to 16% of households report disposing of electric and electronic waste along with mixed waste.
- **Food consumption:** Affordability (64%), taste (61%), freshness (60%) and nutritional value (54%) are respondents' top priorities when making food purchases. The environmental impacts of food products are less important, even for the environmentally concerned. Across countries, 24% of households consume red meat several times a week. Less than half of respondents indicate that they would be willing to substitute conventional meat with a lab-grown alternative, and express reservations about its health impacts.

Policy implications

Overall, availability, affordability and convenience are key incentives in household decision making. Policies to promote environmentally sustainable choices should therefore seek to remove barriers to making sustainable choices. Survey results point to a number of policy priorities:

- **Make sustainable choices available and feasible.** Key bottlenecks to sustainable behaviour include a lack of availability and awareness, such as of renewably generated electricity options or charging stations for electric vehicles, as well as feasibility, such as solar panels for tenants or solar energy options (e.g. community solar) for those living in apartment buildings.
- **Provide incentives that promote sustainable choices.** Affordability and convenience are important factors for encouraging sustainable choices, especially around transport and food. Income and environmental concern are important factors in many household decisions, but environmental concern alone does not appear to be enough to change certain behaviours, such as in the case of eating red meat or using a car, when alternative modes are feasible.
- **Leverage existing public support to advance environmental policies.** Respondents systematically express less support for taxes and fees than for measures that make sustainable alternatives more affordable, such as subsidies. Policy complementarity is an important consideration, as households' acceptance of and ability to respond to tax-based measures depends on the alternatives available to changing their behaviour. In addition to providing sustainable alternatives, complementary policies to taxes and fees include a recycling of the revenues generated (e.g. to fund improvements in public transport).
- **Bundle incentives to maximise impact.** Certain environmental behaviours go hand in hand. Complementary incentives can reward environmental action in one domain by providing incentives for action in another domain. For example, those who shop with reusable containers could receive discounts on sustainable food items.

The high levels of support expressed for measures such as improving public transport services and stricter regulations on farming, should empower policymakers to take action to induce shifts to more sustainable consumption.



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