



The Price of British Chicken: How Supermarkets Are Failing on Animal Welfare

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Aims of this report

This report set out to investigate the number of broiler chickens (chickens raised for meat) that died on-farm in Britain in 2021 as a measure of animal welfare.

Summary of our findings

- 64 million broiler chickens reared on UK farms in 2021 never made it to slaughter.
- Around 61 million of the birds died on the farm they were reared on, meaning they died from welfare related issues. This is roughly 167,000 a day and just under 1.2 million every week.
- More broiler chickens *died from welfare issues* than the total numbers of pigs (11.1 million), sheeps (11.7 million) and cows (2.6 million) that were *slaughtered* in the same year *combined*.
- Nearly 5 million may have died from cardiac arrest.
- 15 million may have experienced lameness so severe that they had their necks broken (culling.)
- Over 24 million may have died from an infection.

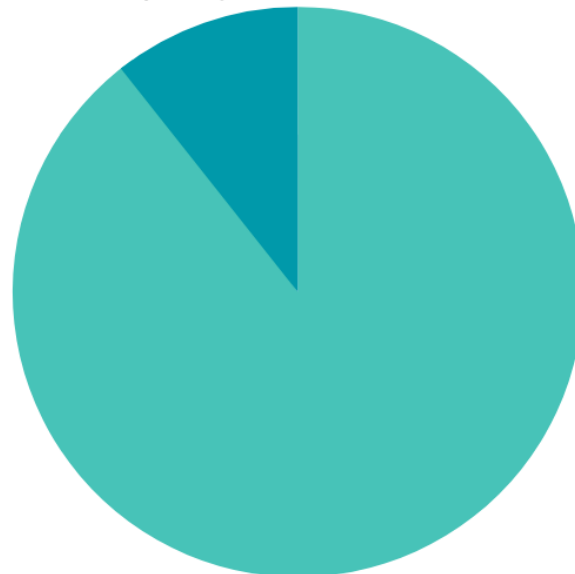


Photo: Open Cages

Background

According to DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) as of May 2022, 1.123 billion chickens were killed for meat in Britain in 2021. They are by far the most numerous animals farmed in the UK, accounting for approximately one-third of total meat production¹.

PIGS, COWS, SHEEPS, TURKEYS, DUCKS, FARMED FISH
134 million



BROILER CHICKENS
1,123 million

SLAUGHTER FIGURES FOR THE UK, 2021



Why do we farm and kill so many chickens in Britain each year? In addition to chicken being our most popular meat, broiler chickens are farmed in such large numbers because of their size: 1 cow is roughly equal to 134 chickens in terms of the amount of food they can produce.

Thus, when we talk about British factory farming, we are mostly talking about broiler chickens. Their welfare, or lack of, is by far the most significant issue for British farming in terms of numbers of animals affected. And as we will see, in terms of quality of life, too.

Knowing the death toll of British chickens on-farm will provide further, and specifically industry-wide evidence to strengthen the case for adopting better welfare standards.

Britain has poor chicken welfare standards

Around 90-95% of the UK's broiler chickens are farmed intensively. Broadly speaking, intensive chicken farming involves using practices that maximise efficiency – usually at the

expense of animal welfare. Such practices include breeding animals for unnaturally rapid growth; populating sheds with tens of thousands of birds; keeping them locked inside warehouses with their excrement covering the floor with no access to fresh air; and lack of stimulation or opportunity to express natural behaviours such as dust bathing.

Broiler chickens can, unfortunately, be farmed this intensively partly because of their smaller size: it is estimated that there are over 800 poultry farms in the UK which have the capacity to house more than one million animals. Here it is also worth noting that broiler farming is highly automated with very little worker interaction, and therefore the most important welfare issues are related to the systemic practices: which will be discussed below.

A prime example of intensive farming's focus on efficiency over welfare is the "Ross 308" – known to the public as the "Frankenchicken." This is the most common breed of broiler (meat) chicken used on British chicken farms, followed by the Cobb 500². The genetics of these birds are designed to ensure the animals grow extremely quickly. Fast growing breeds make up around 95% of the UK's broiler flock, and experts agree that growth rate is by far the most important welfare factor facing chickens raised for meat.

For context, compare this to Dutch and French production, whereby at least 40% and 24% of production uses slower growing breeds³. As a result of recent commitments from all major French retailers, the proportion of fast growing chickens in France is set to decrease drastically further by 2026. Note that France is not a small chicken producer, but one of the largest in Europe. 50-60% of domestic Danish chicken production is expected to be using slower growing breeds by the end of 2022.

Broiler chickens have been selectively bred to grow 400% faster than in the 1950s, resulting in the modern, rapidly growing Ross 308⁴. This bird is typically slaughtered at around 35-42 days old.

Fast growing broiler chickens can experience welfare problems so severe and in such great numbers that the RSPCA, Compassion in World Farming, and many other leading animal welfare charities are calling for their total removal from British shelves.

This selection for performance has been reported to be responsible for contributing to not only the most, but also the most severe, welfare problems seen in broilers today, such as chronic leg disorders and lameness, heart and circulatory problems and chemical burns from chronically lying in their own waste².

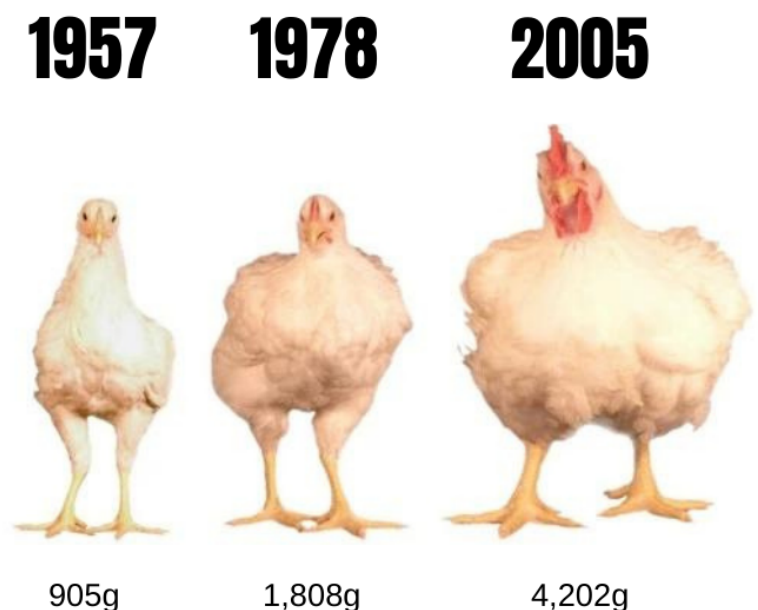




Photo: Open Cages

Fast growth can cause leg developmental disorders where the cartilage in the leg and hip develops abnormally and affects the bird's ability to walk. Fast growth can also cause the leg bones to become deformed as the body gains weight too quickly for skeletal development to keep pace. The pressure this fast growth puts on the immature skeleton of the bird can also cause microfractures in the cartilage and bone².

Studies show that 26-38% of a flock of fast growing broiler chickens can experience lameness so severe that they require culling² and up to 98% can have an observable leg defect. 28% can have a "gait" score of 3 or higher, which essentially means they are in pain as a result of leg abnormality².

The RSPCA reports that *"the genetics of the most extensively used conventional broiler breeds fail to ensure many of these chickens have a life worth living."*

British chickens also typically inhabit sheds populated by tens of thousands of birds. In their last weeks they typically have less space on average than an A4 sheet of paper. These crowded environments can exacerbate welfare problems such as stress, locomotion, burns from the ammonia soaked litter and respiratory diseases⁴. We must also remember that these birds are locked indoors for their entire lives: all the waste wafting through the air, the noise of 30,000 animals, the near unending interactions, the almost total lack of opportunity to express natural behaviours like dust bathing: these factors combine to create a highly stressful and unhygienic environment for clean, social animals like chickens.



Photo: Open Cages

Ross 308: the chicken in the room

The vast majority of chicken available in most UK supermarkets comes from this one breed raised in these crowded, intensive conditions. The practices described are the norm, not the exception.

Of the 1.187 billion chickens placed on British farms in 2021, over 1 billion of them were the fastest growing breeds. **Overwhelmingly, Britain continues to rely on the most cruel practices available for chicken production.** Until this is addressed, claims of high welfare standards do not match reality.



Death is expected, but kept quiet

Scientific² and video evidence^{5,6,7} has shown that Ross 308 chickens tend to die prematurely in great numbers. This has not only serious implications for the welfare of the animals, it also

suggests a significant amount of waste, wasted resources for the industry and a major oversight contributing to animal agriculture's existing criticism as an unsustainable industry.



Photo: Open Cages

However, neither the chicken industry, nor the supermarkets who are the nation's leading retailers of chicken, publicise much or any credible evidence on the wellbeing of these animals let alone how many are dying prematurely. When they do, it's celebrated as an unusually transparent event⁸.

When industry bodies like Red Tractor⁹ or the National Farmers Union¹⁰ do give mortality figures, it is usually in percent without providing the number of animals that percent refers to. This could be because a percent appears sterile and less shocking than the actual number of animals: it may be seen as not in their interest to be transparent if the welfare is generally poor. As an example, thousands of birds dying in a single flock of 30,000 is often considered "normal."⁵ Most notably, neither the industry nor the retailers tend to give any information to the nature of *how* these animals are dying, either. Was it quick and painless? Or was it from heart failure?

Due to the many serious welfare issues faced by fast growing chickens, and the opaque nature of the industry, mortality figures and context should be made available to the public.

Causes of premature death

Premature death will likely always be a reality for animals in industrialised animal farming. However, an important question is how much of it is related to poor practices. The scale of the chicken industry as a whole is so large that even moderate improvements in animal welfare can improve the lives of many millions of animals and significantly reduce the amount of unintended death and unnecessary suffering.

Some may claim that large numbers of deaths come with the turf of farming large numbers of animals. Here it's worth reiterating how young broiler chickens are when they die: no older than 6 weeks for fast growing breeds. Chickens can have life spans of 5-10 years. So broiler mortality would be more akin to human child mortality, which is seen as a problem, rather than general human deaths which are seen as natural for a population. More importantly, the sheer number of the animals involved should motivate stakeholders to be more concerned about improving animal welfare, not less, as poor practices have great consequences for many animals. Mortality is directly correlated with welfare.

Ultimately, welfare issues and mortality rates are significantly higher in broiler chickens with faster growth rates.² The main causes of death can include heart attack, ascites and lameness. As a result of genetic selection for fast growth, energy is diverted primarily into muscle growth. This process can deprive other parts of the body of energy and oxygen, and put pressure on the bird's organs, especially the heart and lungs. As such, fast growth can increase the risk of two types of heart conditions: ascites (enlargement of the heart, resulting in fluid leak from the liver gathering in the abdomen) and sudden death syndrome (acute heart failure².)



Photo: Open Cages

The animals do not just die prematurely, they are also killed. It is an industry standard practice for workers to “cull” – break the neck – of a chicken who is deemed not fit for slaughter, for example due to lameness, with their bare hands.



Photo: Animal Equality UK

Cases have documented that workers don't always kill the animal when breaking the neck⁷: this is likely because they are not veterinarians. Even in “successful” cases, this method is generally used as it's a low cost intervention that can be applied to hundreds of animals in a single day on a farm without the need to hire a vet. As a Moy Park chicken farm worker told an undercover investigator: *“It's cheaper to get rid of it and kill it. Because at the end of the day it's about making money”*.⁷

It's hard to imagine these deaths due to heart attack, disease and lameness being anything other than traumatic for the animals. Even in the “best case” scenario of a farm worker putting the animal out of their misery by breaking their neck, the bird will have suffered for some time to have got to the point of being visibly lame or sick. This is especially true in a commercial broiler shed populated by tens of thousands of animals where the unwell can be easily missed⁵. Therefore for an animal to be identified for culling, he will need to be sufficiently sick to be noticed.

It's alarming to consider how many broiler chickens are experiencing pain and suffering but not visibly enough to be “removed” – as the industry often refers to it¹¹. It is impractical to imagine that a majority of the hundreds of thousands of birds on a single farm would receive sufficient attention to ensure the culling is carried out without any harm. As previously mentioned, breaking the neck is a practice prioritised for efficiency.

When considering the numbers of animals dying in the British chicken industry, the nature of the deaths will be just as important to consider.

2021 mortality: the findings

In 2021, 64 million broiler chickens were placed* on British farms that did not make it to slaughter.**

*Placed refers to chickens that were born and placed onto farms. Over 200 million eggs apparently did not make it to this point.

**Figures published by Defra¹².

Why did 64 million broiler chickens die before slaughter?

It has been reported that 1 million chickens could be “dead on arrival” when arriving at the slaughterhouse in 2021, due to transport issues such as lack of water and heat stress¹². The UK also experienced its worst ever bird flu outbreak in 2021, apparently leading to the killing of over 2.3 million birds¹⁴. It is beyond the scope of this report to conclude how many of these were broiler chickens, so we have assumed that the vast majority of them were, as the vast majority of farmed birds in Britain are broiler chickens. We have taken 3 million as a reasonable estimate for the number of broiler chickens that died from bird flu culls and transport.

This report seeks to measure on-farm mortality, and not overall premature deaths, as on-farm is where the welfare issues of the breeds are most relevant and we see the greatest opportunity for welfare improvement. So we have deducted this number from the final figures.

64 million broiler chickens died prematurely in Britain in 2021.

Approximately **61 million** broiler chickens died on-farm in Britain in 2021.

Conclusions

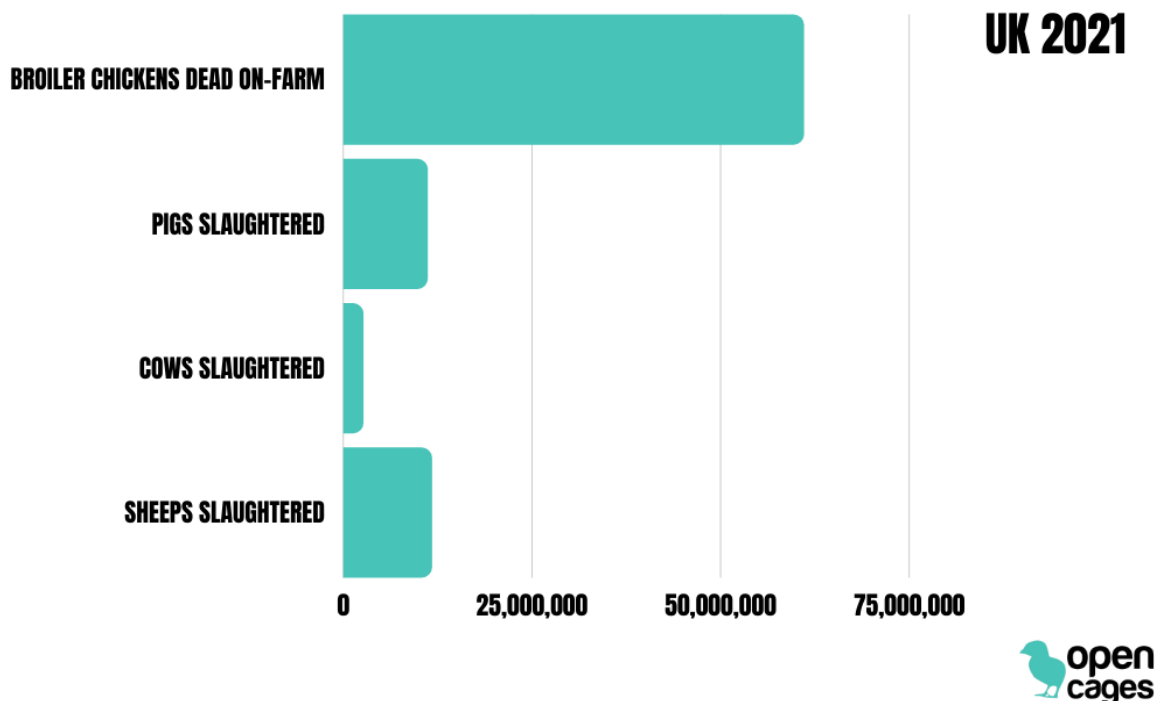
It is our opinion that these figures show a failure to safeguard the welfare of Britain’s most numerous farmed land animals. The data is inconsistent with claims of high standards.

Crucially, these numbers are not inevitable as a result of the scale of the industry. The vast majority of the animals are fast growing breeds: the very worst breeds available in terms of welfare outcomes and mortality rates. Tens of millions of these deaths are needless and avoidable.

Consider these comparisons:

- More broiler chickens *died from welfare issues* than the total numbers of pigs (11.1 million), sheeps (11.7 million) and cows (2.6 million) that were *slaughtered* in the same year *combined*.*
- More broiler chickens *died from welfare issues* in this year than the total number of egg laying hens *placed* on British farms (38.2 million.)*
- Countries like Norway and Ireland kill around 60-70 million broiler chickens in total each year.
- The number of broiler chickens that *died before slaughter in 2021* is equivalent to 95% of the current UK human population.

*Figures from Defra.



How did they die?

An RSPCA study found that 8% of broiler deaths recorded were caused by a heart attack. Applied to the 61 million figure, this could suggest nearly **5 million broiler chickens died from cardiac arrest in Britain in 2021**. This figure is nearly double the number of cows that were slaughtered for food that year.

The same study found that 24% of deaths were related to lameness and 40% related to an infection. This could mean nearly **15 million broiler chickens experienced lameness so severe that they had their necks broken and over 24 million may have died from an infection**.

Vast numbers of animals are dying and suffering on British farms not only from severe health related issues, but from issues that stakeholders refuse to address despite solutions being known to them for many years. It should be the duty of Defra, the chicken farming industry and the food businesses that sell them to take responsible and meaningful actions to address this.

Avian influenza: 64 million opportunities for infection

It's worth noting that this is not only alarming for animal welfare. 64 million broiler chicken carcasses had to be disposed of in 2021. Reducing the vast amounts of biological waste produced by broiler chicken deaths is also a public health duty. Each one of these bodies is an opportunity for any virus present to infect a human being. And given that bird flu outbreaks are becoming more frequent, not less, biosecurity measures are clearly not doing enough to contain the viruses.

The Better Chicken Commitment (BCC)

The Better Chicken Commitment is a science-based chicken welfare policy that addresses issues related to breeding for fast-growth and high-yield, housing, stocking density, and slaughter.

Companies looking to adopt these standards must stop using the fastest growing breeds such as Ross 308, throughout their entire supply chain by 2026, instead choosing slower growing breeds that experience significantly improved welfare, sourced from significantly less crowded environments.



Over 300 companies across the UK and Europe have signed up, including Marks and Spencer, Waitrose, KFC, Subway, Burger King, Nestlé, Unilever and more. In Europe, every major French supermarket has made the pledge, as have other supermarkets in Germany, Spain, Poland, Norway and more. Some large retailers in Denmark have already stopped using Ross 308 chickens as of 2022, as will M&S by the end of the year.

If adopted industry wide, we could see tens of millions of fewer premature deaths in the UK chicken industry.

Reducing consumption

The scale of the British chicken industry is directly related to the demand for chicken meat. Chicken is the nation's most popular meat, and reducing consumption would be one way to reduce suffering and mortality in the industry.

Here it is worth noting that consumers should also be discouraged from switching to eating chickens instead of larger animals like pigs or cows. As we have seen, the number of chickens it takes to produce the same amount of meat results in a staggering increase of animal suffering. Non-animal proteins would provide the greatest opportunity for consumers looking to reduce their impact on animal suffering and climate change.

However, it is never as simple as 'supply and demand.' UK supermarkets are increasingly coming under criticism for 'deceptive' animal welfare labelling and aggressive marketing. By manipulating minimal product labelling laws and dishing out feel-good TV advertisements, cheap animal products like chicken are often presented by supermarkets as 'local,' 'welfare assured' and 'sustainable' in attempts to calm rising concerns of how ethically food is sourced¹⁵. Much of the time, information about the origin of cheap chicken is simply non-existent or very hard for a consumer to find.

Additionally, a recent report from Eating Better found that the big four UK supermarkets were 'bombarding' consumers with cheap meat deals in spite of pledges to promote meat free and more sustainable eating¹⁶. Therefore we must ask whether we can even call these informed choices when consumers are not being told the truth, and when millions of pounds are being spent to direct us to the cheap chicken aisle.

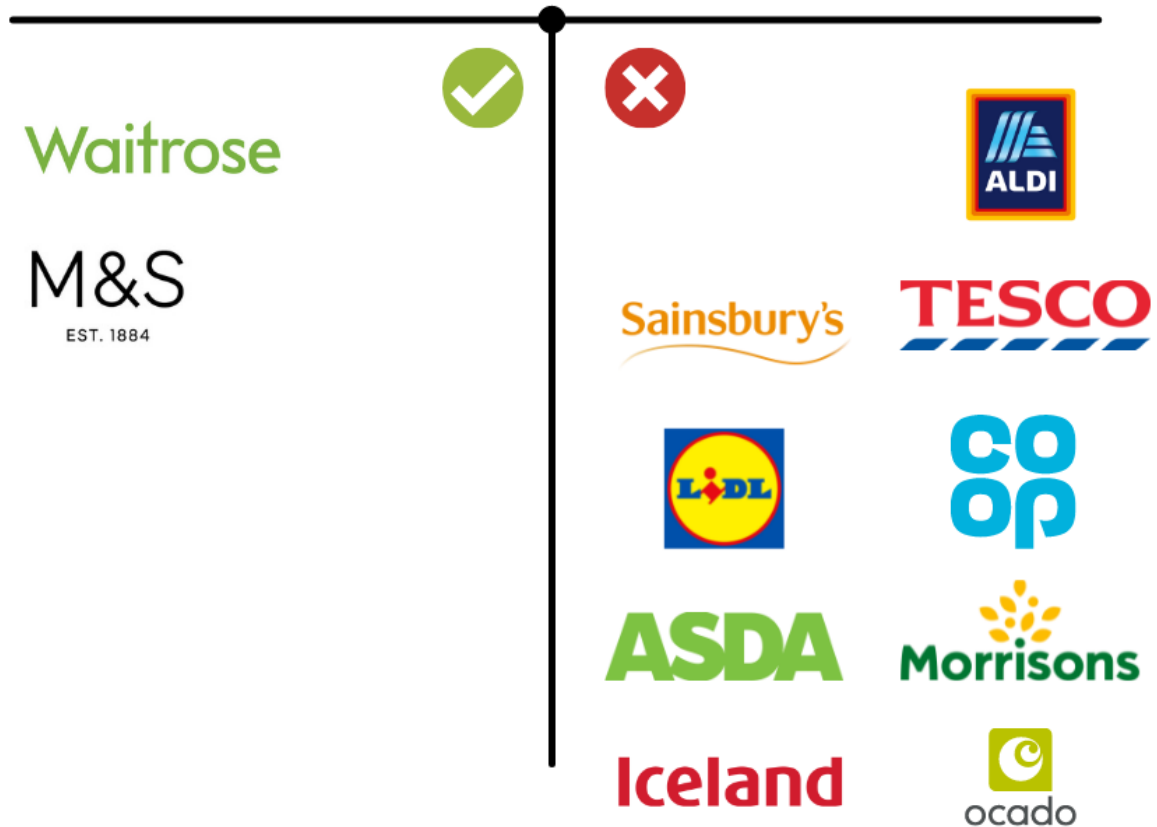
Ultimately, it is the retailers who hold the most power to make significant change. By adopting BCC standards they would directly improve the wellbeing of the hundreds of millions of chickens reared and killed in Britain every year.

Which UK companies haven't signed the BCC?

Significant progress has been made by the various food sectors in Britain with 27% of the UK's supply chain signed up to the BCC. Unfortunately, as of May 2022 the UK supermarket sector – which sells the vast majority of British chicken – has largely refused to tackle this major animal welfare crisis.

Tesco, Sainsbury's, Morrisons, Asda, Lidl, Aldi, Iceland, Co-op and Ocado have chosen to continue selling the fastest growing breeds, and continue to claim that their chicken welfare standards are high^{6,17,18}.

MAJOR UK SUPERMARKETS WITH BCC COMMITMENTS



As has been explored in this report, fast growing chickens suffer inherently as a result of their genetics, regardless of such claims. As a result, huge retailers all over Europe are making the switch, which further begs the question of why the UK's supermarkets are so far behind.

Perhaps most clearly demonstrating the the practicality of the BCC, in February 2022 Defra endorsed the Better Chicken Commitment calling its implementation a “priority” and pledging to use subsidies to help make the transition happen¹⁹. Not only does this show an agreement that the Better Chicken Commitment is an appropriate solution to tackle these welfare issues, it shows that the UK Government acknowledges that the current welfare standards must change.

However, as a result of refusing to address this problem, British supermarkets are permitting practices that will soon be some of the worst for chicken welfare in Europe.

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