

The Myth Surrounding Access to Healthier Food in Communities Such as Native Americans, Hispanics/Latinos, and African Americans Vs. The Reality.

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In recent events, the cost of everything has been extraordinarily high, now take into account that Blacks, Hispanics/Latinos, and Native Americans will suffer the most in times like these, but even before this recent inflation in our economy, they had always struggled. Areas with close markets that have fresh foods with reasonable prices are a luxury to communities such as the ones I named. Socioeconomic and systemic racial inequalities are two simple but very complex terms that for the most part, play a huge role in why food insecurity is relevant. It may be hard to grasp for those who thought the myth of accessing healthy foods at a relative price and location is not a social issue, but like many racial injustices, it is being overlooked. In this research, I will be uncovering the underlying causes of food insecurities or “food deserts”, the causes and effects of transportation when it comes to food insecurity, and the negative health and mental effects when food is scarce. There is a myth that all communities, Native Americans, Hispanics/Latinos, and African Americans have equal access to healthier foods. However, the reality is that socioeconomic and systematic racial inequality creates disparities in access to healthier foods, turning this social justice issue that needs immediate action.

Sevilla (2021) the writer of *Food Apartheid: Racialized Access to Healthy Affordable Food* discusses the term *food deserts*. She states, “Food deserts...They are the result of systematic racism and oppression in the form of zoning codes, lending practices, and other discriminatory policies rooted in white supremacy. Using the term desert implies that the lack of healthy and affordable food is somehow naturally occurring and obscures that it is the direct result of racially discriminatory policies and systematic disinvestment in these communities.” Now that we understand the term “food desert” and its correlation to racial displacement. How many suffer from this reality? According To statistics, “One out of every five Black households is situated in a food desert, with few grocery stores, restaurants, and farmers markets” (Chui, 2021). This is

shown in my personal experience while visiting Atlanta, typically areas such as East Point and Hapeville, these neighborhoods are predominantly African American, Hispanic, and Latino. I had always noticed local markets and never well-known corporate grocery markets, like Walmart, Kroger, or Costco and in fact, upscale food stores are usually farther away and require a longer ride, matter a fact, second to local markets, fast food places are closer as well, such as Church Chicken, Waffle House, or Chick Fil A. Feller's study in *Why racism, food systems, and our health are deeply intertwined-and how we can start to untangle them*. She states, "In the 1960s, the federal government encouraged the Small Business Association to give loans to Black Americans who were then encouraged to open fast-food franchises within their communities, thus shaping the narrative that fast food is a part of Black American culture. At the same time, white flight and social unrest led many other kinds of businesses to pull out of Black, brown, and Indigenous neighborhoods—including full-service grocery stores. This left a vacuum that has been filled by dollar stores, fast-food chains, and liquor stores" (Feller, 2020). In the Feller article, it is as if the government had engraved fast food culture within these marginalized communities and now, in real-time, has to suffer the consequences of a bad diet. In a deeper sense than what Sevilla's (2021) and Feller's (2020) research contained, Atlanta has a long history when it comes to discussing the slave trade. After the Civil War and the liberation of African American slaves, they moved further into the city for opportunities of a better living, "When Blacks moved close to white areas, however, whites worked to create racial distance... For example, Moreland Avenue and Boulevard, two streets that frame Reynoldstown to the west and east have their names changed to Briarcliff Road and Monroe Drive as you head north and cross Ponce De Leon Avenue. This was because white Atlantans did not want to share the same address as Blacks" (Singh, 2022). These details from Singh (2022), Sevilla (2021), and Feller

(2020) collectively were perpetuated by historical city planning by white Atlantans that still affects people of color today, and it's not just a coincidence.

In the previous passage, the change of street names post-slavery was mentioned, but it also plays into a huge factor in food insecurity, yet more specifically I will be discussing the lack of transportation contributing to food insecurity among Native Americans, Hispanics, and Blacks. *The Impact of Transportation Service on Food Access Among Native Americans in North Dakota: A Case Study* by Jill Hough (2022), is a research paper that discusses the contrast between U.S residents and American Indian Alaska Natives (AIAN) but more specifically in this quote states the distance of grocery for both communities.” According to the USDA-ERS, 59% of all U.S. residents live within one mile (walking distance) of a supermarket. But, only 26% of AIAN live within this distance. Two-thirds of AIAN tribes live in areas considered a driving distance (between 1 to 10 miles) of a supermarket, and some households do not own vehicles...” (Jill Hough, 2022). Growing up it was never a secret that my parents were poor, being raised with Mexican immigrant parents it was inevitable to come to a country with little to no wealth and in fact, they never tried to hide it from me and my sister that we struggled financially. They had always kept us in the loop of their financial struggles to understand what they were able to give us was what they only had. The data of 59% of U.S. residents being within walking distance of a grocery store in contrast to AIAN being 1 to 10 miles from a supermarket highlighted a significant contrast. As mentioned before, I grew up poor, but that didn't stop my parents from maintaining a healthy lifestyle socially and attending school in a peaceful suburban neighborhood. We did live surprisingly close to multiple grocery stores that were within walking distance as stated in the study of Jill Hough (2022). Although we lived in a well-collected neighborhood, it reminded me of the times my parents often gave us fast food or take-out due to

the lack of money and of course, transportation. Driving to grocery stores was not always practical considering we had a sacred amount of money and we were limited to our transportation because we only had one car, which my father would typically take for work, making it harder for us to get groceries. If we did walk to the grocery store we would be limited on how much we would buy considering we can't carry tons of items and the money we can spend. With a deeper understanding of it all from my own experience and the credibility of Jill Hough (2022), how problems of transportation aren't just targeted in areas where it's predominantly people of color, or as mentioned Native Americans but it's just more of the fact that even when you are surrounded by greater factors, such as a neighborhood that seems wealthy. Perry and his colleagues worked on a research article, *What the lack of premium grocery stores says about disinvestment in black neighborhoods*, which they found, "...in seven of the 10 metro areas studied, none of the Black-majority, non-rural block groups in the top quartile for household income were located within 1 mile of a premium grocery...Black-majority block groups in each income quartile of all the metro areas studied had a lower chance of being within 1 mile of a premium grocery store than block groups in that metro area overall" (Perry et. al., 2023). This quote correlates hand in hand with my personal experience of being raised in a well-rounded suburban neighborhood. Regardless of where I live, these statistics highlight I'll still be held back and still face racial socioeconomic factors that create food insecurity because of who my parents are and who I am, Mexican.

Affording transportation is already a major obstacle for these marginalized communities, and so is trying to limit the intake of fast foods but it's difficult when healthier food often costs more. "Diet quality tends to be lower among historically marginalized groups, such as American Indian and Alaska Native and Black communities, with roots in structural racism and among rural and

economically disadvantaged communities that may have limited access to healthy food” (McCullough et al., 2022). According to the article provided by *Move for Hunger*, “Latino children are nearly twice as likely to lack access to sufficient nutritious food as non-Latino white children” (Move for Hunger, n.d.). Being unable to attain healthy foods, specifically in these sensitive communities could be because of numerous reasons, higher rates of unemployment, displacement, and education. As mentioned before, I lived in a predominantly white neighborhood but my parents were still unable to afford luxury items or even healthy food options. It was a problem because my parents were immigrants and I'd like to think we happened to be lucky compared to other Hispanics because my father grew up in the United States at the age of 12 and was able to graduate high school with honors and attended college but shortly dropped out to support my mother and my older sister who was a newly born. But that itself is an achievement. It gave us the upper hand, but regardless my father would have to work a minimum wage job at a restaurant for practically my whole life until I turned 16. Seeing how my dad was able to break barriers that many of our close families and friends weren't able to do I can still see the disadvantages especially when I was growing up among other Hispanics. In my apartment complex, there were a good handful of Hispanic people, one family in particular, both parents were immigrants and weren't able to read or write in English and Spanish. They were known to be the “poorest” and “unhealthy” family in our complex because they were obese and their dad was only able to get jobs as a dishwasher and same with their mom. Neither of them had any education, which ultimately led to no money, so they would religiously spend their little money on fast foods and take out such as pizza for the sake of it being cheap. This insight into my own life and those around me was an eye-opener growing up when I became more aware of the racial

disadvantages that many of these groups face and how very lucky I am compared to families who don't have parents like my dad.

In my recent passages, I mentioned that access to fast foods, take-outs, and unhealthier foods tends to be a trend in oppressed communities of Blacks, Hispanics/Latinos, and Native Americans. I had purposely mentioned this quite frequently to emphasize the importance that these communities are at higher risk of facing health conditions. In *Access to Foods That Support Healthy Dietary Patterns* (OASH, n.d.), they discuss individuals who struggle with food insecurity, in the previous passage those who are more likely to experience food insecurity are Blacks, Hispanics/Latinos, and Native Americans, now keep in mind as you read this statement: “Adults who are food insecure may be at an increased risk for a variety of negative health outcomes and health disparities...a study found that food-insecure adults may be at an increased risk for obesity...higher rates of chronic disease in low-income, food-insecure adults between the ages of 18 years and 65 years. Food-insecure children may also be at an increased risk for a variety of negative health outcomes, including obesity. They also face a higher risk of developmental problems compared with food-secure children...”(OASH, n.d.). In the statement above food insecurity isn't simply not being able to enjoy the luxury of having healthier foods that probably taste better, but if one is unable to afford food, health care is probably another luxury they aren't able to access and ultimately a health concern starts to brew and makes it more prominent for those around them as well. Health concerns that are associated with a bad diet tend to be a long list, such as obesity, heart, and blood pressure conditions, and diabetes, all three can unfortunately cause death. Being Mexican, many people in my family, at least, are obese or suffer from diabetes. When I hear my family members talk about their loved ones who are at risk of diabetes or obesity, they talk about it as if it were a curse, and in a way, they have every reason

to believe so. We are part of the marginalized group that faces food insecurity, seeking foods that are not healthy simply because that's all we can afford. It doesn't make matters better when diabetes is already hereditary on my mother's side.

The secret of a healthy life is eating healthy, and it can go a long way for your physical and mental health. Focusing on the mental health aspect that is hindered because of food insecurity in systematically oppressed communities, Blacks, Hispanics/Latinos, and Native Americans suffer drastically, mentally just solely on generational and systematic trauma, but having a healthy diet and health can inhibit one's overall mental health. In a research conducted by Candice A. Myers, *Food Insecurity and Psychological Distress: A Review of the Recent Literature* (2021). She states, "Their analysis demonstrated that young adults who reported food insecurity had greater odds of mental health problems, including depression and anxiety or panic disorder. They further found that food insecurity was associated with poorer sleep outcomes including trouble falling asleep and staying asleep." I had always felt like there was already enough stress with not fitting in because I did go to a school that was predominantly white people, and it wasn't until sixth grade I started to be around Hispanics. Before sixth grade, not being able to fit in was always hard. I wasn't wearing the same kind of brand or style of clothing or surprisingly, I simply didn't look like any of the white kids in my school. As kids, we tend to follow what the majority of the kids are doing, and since the majority of the kids happened to be white, I felt like the odd one out. This feeling of being left out was hard enough when I visually didn't look like them and not being able to meet their "cool kid" agenda was stressful just by itself. As a kid who already had enough to handle, I had no way of getting money to get materialistic items such as clothes and shoes since it was saved for food or rent. Together, my mental health was affected. Although my story alone may not grasp the whole reality of how it may impact adults who carry more of the

burdens, it's just a broad sense of how it feels to struggle mentality while knowing you and your family struggle with food insecurity.

Through my research, I hope it has opened your eyes, similar to when I realized that my father's education meant something way more than just a piece of paper called a diploma. Politicians must acknowledge this problem to transform areas and bring more to communities that deserve it, such as Native Americans. *Dream of Wild Health* is a Native American organization that originated in Minneapolis-Saint Paul. It is an organization that tries to keep the culinary traditions and incorporates access to affordable healthy and traditional foods (Dream of Wild Health.org). Ethnic groups such as Natives need to keep traditions going since it's a big factor in who they are. Having food shouldn't be scarce to anyone, it's a depressing concept that groups that have been systematically oppressed also have to endure more and that being is food limitation. Regardless of where they wished to live, food is a human right, with that being said, deeper research and personal experiences this is much more than an essay, it's a call for action.

Author's Note

Out of the three essays, I would say this is a topic I had already been researching. This topic of BIPOC and food distribution came to me when I and my sister were discussing the obesity rate and homeless rate and how both are related. This topic was already a conversation worth discussing and why I believe I had fewer revisions in this essay compared to my last two. I understood from previous work to be more personal, so I picked a topic that I was more knowledgeable about considering I am Mexican. Overall, I believe I grew as a writer, I noticed fewer mistakes and I'm glad how it all turned out.

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