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2-1-2021

Examining Race in America: Food Equity

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University Park, IL,
February
01,
2021

Examining Race in America: Food Equity



Growing up in a small town outside of Los Angeles, [Governors State University](#) Professor Don Culverson lived a life of perpetual summer, with access to the sun, the mountains, and the beach. It was a good life in a safe neighborhood made even better by something that he took for granted— access to healthy food in grocery stores.

"Living in a Black suburban community in the late-60s, we had two full-service grocery stores, and that wasn't that uncommon," said Dr. [Culverson](#), a Professor of Political Science and Social Justice Studies.

But in the early-'70s, one of the stores near the Culverson home closed, soon followed by the other. Today, that same community is left with a string of fast food restaurants and discount grocery chains such as Food 4 Less and Bargain Discount Grocery Store. While the grocery stores do offer fresh fruit and vegetables, it is often at lower-quality thresholds, Culverson said.

Food deserts, according to the United States Department of Food Administration (USDA), impacted 37 million people in 2018. A food desert exists in communities that are more than one mile away from the closest grocery store or supermarket. Furthermore, food deserts are usually in low-income neighborhoods.

There is research that links food deserts and food insecurity, defined by the USDA as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy lifestyle. This often leaves residents to rely on lower quality fresh food, or high-fat, high-salt fast food. In the Southland, incidents of food insecurity range from 7.2 percent in parts of Will County to 12.2 percent in parts of rural Kankakee County.

"What we're seeing is a link between what people are eating and how they are living," Culverson said. "In children, we see increased birth defects, cognitive problems, aggression and anxiety, asthma, obesity, behavioral problems, depression, and suicide ideation. In adults, we see increased rates of mental health problems, depression, diabetes, hypertension, hyperlipidemia, obesity, overall poorer health."

He said these emerging patterns of inequities are the result of grocery stores leaving poorer areas. Culverson said the trend started decades ago and follows racial patterns.

"What you see is more and more resources leaving Black and poor areas, and moving to white, suburban, and more affluent areas. This is a system of racial inequity," said Culverson, who examines the relationship between retail redlining, the concentration of low-level enterprises like fast food outlets, gas stations convenience stores and dollar stores in African American communities and worsening health conditions.

Click [here](#) to watch Dr. Don Culverson discuss one Southland neighborhood suffering with food insecurity and possible solutions for healthy food shortages in America.

Visit "[Examining Race in America](#)" to view the full multimedia series.

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