

New study: Lack of food access tied to discrimination

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David Gladow dgladow@tulane.edu

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Discrimination is linked to inequities in food access. (Photo by Getty Images)

Researchers have known for some time that people of color in urban environments are often faced with inequities in food access. A new study from the [Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine](#) sheds further light on the subject.

Lead author and Assistant Professor in the Department of Social, Behavioral, and Population Sciences [Chelsea Singleton](#) recently published “Structural racism and geographic access to food retailers in the United States: A scoping review.” The

paper, [published in *Journal*](#), aggregated previous research on food retail access disparities and identified a link with structural racism.

That link emerged from a shift in study in recent years from a symptoms-focused approach (e.g., identifying food deserts) to a closer examination of root causes and systemic issues that drive poor access to healthy food in affected communities.

The new paper is unique because it is the first to outline the indicators of structural racism that have been identified in the food access research space.

“Researchers are now exploring racist and discriminatory practices (e.g., mortgage redlining, racial segregation, block busting, etc.) in order to link these practices to inequities in food access,” Singleton said. “Since the field is growing, there was a need to summarize findings from studies that have linked an indicator of structural racism to disparities in food retailer access in the US.”

According to Singleton, the structural racism that has endured for decades in communities of color takes several forms. It can range from chronic disinvestment resulting in a lack of larger grocers, to predatory dollar stores which often target low-income communities at the expense of other retailers, to broader concerns such as crime, blight, poor transportation, and limited economic resources.

“All of these factors negatively affect healthy food access and healthy eating.”

Singleton cites a real-world example to further illustrate the point.

In the course of conducting a qualitative research study with farmers’ market managers in Chicago’s low-income Black communities, Singleton uncovered that the managers’ biggest challenge was attracting and maintaining vendors like local farmers, growers, and artisans.

Many of the potential vendors wanted to sell their products at markets located in more affluent areas of the city. Despite this sort of discrimination, local champions of healthy food access still managed to continue their initiatives.

“I’m happy that scholars in my field are moving away from just focusing on the ‘food desert’ issue,” Singleton added. “This is a social justice and nutrition equity issue, so we are treating it as such now.”