

Study: Community violence, stress can reduce intention to eat healthy among Black adults

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A new Tulane study reveals that stress can negatively affect healthy eating among Black Americans. (Shutterstock)

Healthy eating requires making intentional choices every day to seek out, purchase and consume nutritious foods.

But many public health efforts to improve diets focus largely on education and food access, without fully accounting for how stressors can drain time, energy and “bandwidth” for planning and following through.

A [new study](#) from Tulane University researchers found that Black adults exposed to high levels of stress and community violence were less likely to report having intentions to eat healthfully in the next two months.

The study, published in [American Journal of Health Promotion](#), surveyed approximately 500 Black adults nationwide, assessing their self-reported exposure to community violence, perceived stress, and intention to eat healthfully in the next two months. The study is the first to examine these factors together as potential barriers to healthy eating intention among Black Americans.

A healthy diet can lower the risk of diet-related chronic diseases such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes and obesity — conditions that continue to take a major toll nationwide and disproportionately affect Black Americans. Researchers found that those who reported the highest levels of exposure to community violence had 46% less intention to eat healthy in the next two months. That figure jumped to 79% among those who reported the highest levels of perceived stress in addition to the highest levels of exposure to community violence.

“We wanted to explore the relationship between crime, diet quality and food insecurity among Black Americans, and I think these results show how environmental factors can impact not just access, but even the intention to access certain resources, such as healthy foods,” said lead author Danielle Gartner, a PhD student at Tulane University Celia Scott Weatherhead School of Public Health & Tropical Medicine.

“Many interventions try to improve diet quality through education, but maybe mitigating other life stressors as well can help those resources or the education go further.”

— Danielle Gartner, PhD student

Gartner says the findings offer new insights into how psychosocial and environmental factors may shape health behaviors. The research draws on the Theory of Planned Behavior, a well-established framework in public health, which posits that intention to participate in a certain behavior is a strong predictor of actually completing the behavior.

Gartner said the findings show that interventions aimed at improving diet quality, such as nutrition education and increased access to grocery stores, may not be enough on their own to effectively enact behavior change and that future interventions must incorporate a more holistic approach to addressing issues of poor diet quality.

“Many interventions try to improve diet quality through education, but maybe mitigating other other life stressors as well can help those resources or the education go further,” Gartner said.