

Housing & Food Access

The relationship between race and food insecurity/hunger is complex and intertwined with economic and social disadvantage brought on by concentrated levels of poverty, unemployment, incarceration, and disability. African Americans, as a collective, have experienced this concentrated disadvantage for generations dating back to the time of enslavement. Since the abolishment of slavery, African Americans have faced discrimination in the workforce, educational system, legal system and in public health. Among health scientists and public health workers, there is a growing recognition that structural racism is a key contributor to inequity in health behaviors and outcomes.¹

Racial discrimination limits African Americans' access to educational and employment opportunities which in turn leads to social and economic disadvantage which can lead to food insecurity. Food insecurity and hunger are byproducts of structural racism (i.e., historic and contemporary racist and exclusionary policies and practices deeply embedded into our systems).² In 1910, for example, African American land ownership was estimated to have peaked at the same time that African American farmers made up approximately 14% of all farmers in the United States. In Los Angeles County, however, African Americans were prohibited from owning or renting land because of restrictive covenants which remained legal until the mid-1940's and redlining which continues today.³ The same exclusionary housing policies also made supermarkets and grocery stores less accessible to County residents in predominantly African American neighborhoods. Department and grocery store chains followed white residents to the suburbs leaving African Americans and other non-white residents with few options to purchase fresh food and other goods for their families. Further exacerbating the problem was the building of government subsidized highways making it easier to get to Los Angeles suburbs but also cutting right through African American neighborhoods making it more difficult to access shopping centers and other services.⁴

Adequate housing remained a challenge for African Americans since their arrival to California, particularly during the Second Great Migration when African Americans were forced into overcrowded areas such as Bronzeville, a short-lived African American enclave in downtown Los Angeles that replaced Little Tokyo when the government displaced Japanese

¹ Odoms-Young, A., & Bruce, M. A. (2018). Examining the Impact of Structural Racism on Food Insecurity: Implications for Addressing Racial/Ethnic Disparities. *Family & community health, 41 Suppl 2 Suppl, Food Insecurity and Obesity* (Suppl 2 FOOD INSECURITY AND OBESITY), S3–S6. <https://doi.org/10.1097/FCH.0000000000000183>

² Odoms-Young and Bruce, *ibid.*

³ Moon, Emily. "African-American Farmers Make Up Less Than 2 Percent of All U.S. Farmers." *Pacific Standard*. Pacific Standard, April 5, 2019. <https://psmag.com/news/african-american-farmers-make-up-less-than-2-percent-of-all-us-farmers>.

⁴ Scott Kurashige. *The Shifting Groups of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (2010).

Americans and sent them to internment camps at the height of the Second World War. The overcrowding in Bronzeville gave rise to crime, the spread of disease, and heightened racial tensions. To ease the housing crisis the Los Angeles Housing Authority built several housing projects including Imperial Courts (1944), Jordan Downs (1944), and Nickerson Gardens (1955). By the 1970's, African Americans constituted 70% of the residents in these housing facilities. However, the Watts section of Los Angeles County was largely underdeveloped. This meant that area residents often had to travel considerable distances to purchase food for their families or rely on neighborhood convenience stores which had limited selection of fresh meats, fruits, and vegetables.

Unresponsive government policies contributed lack of healthcare, housing, and food access combined with high unemployment rates were some of the many conditions which contributed to civil unrest in Watts in 1965.⁵ Almost three decades later, similar conditions culminated in rebellion. Following the Los Angeles (Rodney King) rebellion of 1992, a special report of the California Assembly found that nearly 33% of residents of South Los Angeles lived below the poverty line.⁶ Nearly twenty years following the 1992 rebellion, South Los Angeles continues to have high rates of poverty which contribute to disparities in resources to address food insecurity and hunger. South Los Angeles has one supermarket serving twice as many residents after supermarkets in West Los Angeles with the South Los Angeles markets less likely to carry fresh fruits and vegetables.⁷ Simultaneously, South Los Angeles has more fast food restaurants and four times as many liquor stores per square mile than West Los Angeles.⁸ Research shows that a proliferation of fast food restaurants and the lack of chain grocery stores in South Los Angeles is correlated with adverse health statistics in the area.⁹ Residents of the Westmont section of Los Angeles, for example, have no access to farmer's markets with only 20% of residents living within close proximity to a supermarket or grocery store. Westmont residents also have significantly higher rates of obesity at 32% compared to the County average of 24%—nearly double the rate of adults diagnosed with diabetes (20% compared to the County

⁵ New York Law School Racial Justice Project., "Unshared Bounty: How Structural Racism Contributes to the Creation and Persistence of Food Deserts. (with American Civil Liberties Union)." (2012). Racial Justice Project. Book 3.
http://digitalcommons.nyls.edu/racial_justice_project/3

⁶ Assembly Special Committee on the Los Angeles Crisis, To Rebuild is Not Enough: Final Report and Recommendations of the Assembly Special Committee on the Los Angeles Crisis, Spec. Comm. 1992-0445-A, Reg. Sess. (1992), available at <http://www.usc.edu/libraries/archives/cityinstress/reb/i.htm> (select "The Causes of the Urban Unrest")

⁷ New York Law School Racial Justice Project; Amanda Shaffer, L.A.'s Grocery Gap: The Need for a New Food Policy and Approach to Market Development 20 (2002)

⁸ New York Law School Racial Justice Project.

⁹ Amanda Shaffer, L.A.'s Grocery Gap: The Need for a New Food Policy and Approach to Market Development

average of 10%) and are diagnosed with colon cancer at a rate of 32% higher than the county average.¹⁰

Though it is often believed that health is determined by personal choices, research shows that dietary habits are circumscribed by structural racism, poverty, and community neglect. It is no wonder that African Americans' overall measure of health in Los Angeles County ranks the lowest of all racial and ethnic groups on most indicators.

¹⁰ Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, *City and Community Health Profiles: Westmont*. June 2018.