



“When We Have Better, We Can Do Better” Community Action to Increase Demand for Healthy Foods in African American Communities

Contributors to this research include faculty at the University of Illinois at Chicago and staff at the Chicago Department of Public Health Englewood Neighborhood Health Center. Angela Odoms-Young, Shannon Zenk, Loys Holland, April Watkins, Jacqueline Hoskins-Wroten, Nefertiti Oji-Njideka, Susan Ellis, Iona Davis, Angela Webb, and Daryl Sharp

The focus of this study was to better understand food access and availability issues that impact African American families. Evidence suggests that African Americans are especially at risk for suboptimal intakes of healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables, low-fat products, and whole grains; disproportionately at risk for many diet-related health conditions; more likely to live in neighborhoods with limited healthy food availability; and a strong target for unhealthy food advertising. Nevertheless, few studies have examined these issues from the perspective of the families who are most at risk. The goal of this project was for these families to share their own stories and propose recommendations for community action and policy change:

1. Many families were concerned about the limited selection of foods available in their community, specifically the lack of retail food stores and high-quality food products. Participants expressed that neighborhood stores should not only offer a wide selection of food options, but provide high-quality goods at reasonable prices. Perceptions of neighborhood food environment varied based on individual/family resources, food preferences, and the locations where they shopped. Most participants indicated that they were satisfied with the foods provided at restaurants in their community. However, many acknowledged neighborhood restaurants mostly provide foods that were high in fat and calories.
2. Price was a major concern for families in the study. Several participants indicated that they looked at

store circulars to determine the locations with the best prices and commonly shopped at discount chains due to lower prices. When participants had extra money, many reported that they purchased food at restaurants but still used special pricing, including the dollar menu or 2-for-1 deals, based on cost.

3. Families expressed the need for more black-owned stores and restaurants in their community. Several participants described conflicts between community residents and immigrant store owners. Most participants felt that the conflict was based on store owners' lack of respect for the community; while a few participants attributed responsibility to unruly customers. Some participants mentioned that immigrant store owners who have a long history in the neighborhood, help people in the neighborhood, and/or embrace African American culture, have a better reputation compared to owners overall. Owners with these characteristics were also perceived by participants to sell better-quality products.
4. Marketing and advertising seemed to influence purchasing mostly through weekly price promotions provided in store circulars, window ads, and/or word of mouth.
5. Participants mentioned the importance of other factors when accessing food including environments within (e.g., cleanliness, customer service) and around (e.g., safety) restaurants and stores.

Conclusion:

In the last decade, increasing attention has been given to the need for better food and marketing environments in low-income communities and communities of color. Efforts to expand food access needs to be informed by members of the communities who are most at risk for low food access. In addition, once policy and community efforts are implemented, the impact of these strategies on the health and well-being of African American individuals and families needs to be considered. For additional information about this research please contact **Dr. Angela Odoms-Young at odmyoung@uic.edu.**

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