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Odoms-Young's research focuses on understanding social, cultural, and environmental aspects of dietary behaviors and diet-related health issues among low-income people of color. She is involved in several organizations and advisory committees related to nutrition and health including serving on the Board of Directors of the Greater Chicago Food Depository and Blacks in Green.

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IMPROVING HEALTHY FOOD OPTIONS IN MUSLIM-RUN STORES IN BLACK COMMUNITIES

Introduction

How does the environment in which people live contribute to racial and economic disparities in dietary behavior? What interventions will improve nutritional equity?

Retail food stores in African American neighborhoods commonly carry foods that can promote obesity and offer fewer opportunities for healthy eating as compared to those in predominantly White neighborhoods. Previous studies show that African American neighborhoods have fewer chain supermarkets, more liquor/convenience stores, fewer options for fresh fruits and vegetables, and fresh produce of lower quality than predominantly White neighborhoods. Because of the ubiquity of corner and small grocery stores in African American communities, improving healthy food availability in these stores is the focus of many policy initiatives and programs to promote healthy eating and reduce health disparities. In Chicago, the majority of small store owners operating in African American communities are Arab American immigrants, however there are few models for addressing the needs in these stores.

In collaboration with the Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN), interviews were conducted with store owners participating in their Muslim Run campaign, a program that seeks to address the barriers faced by small Arab American store owners to provide healthy foods, increase community demand for healthy foods, and improve race relations between store owners and African American customers.

Findings

- Even though several store owners expressed that they have good relationships with community residents, race continues to be at the center of daily interactions between most store owners and community residents. African American patrons feel as though they are being treated poorly by "outsiders" who have come to do business in their neighborhoods, while Arab American store owners often do not have the resources to pay higher rents in alternatively high-income neighborhoods.
- Like other small business owners struggling with increasing competition from discount stores and large corporations, corner stores operate within a low profit margin. Owners feel like they need to make critical business decisions to ensure they can "make a living" and support their family. Because of the relatively low cost and longer shelf-life of "junk" food compared to nutrient-dense foods, a common business decision has been to stock foods that promote obesity.
- Store owners feel both economic pressure and pressure from the community to provide what they believe consumers want even if those foods are unhealthy and inconsistent with Islamic dietary requirements.

Recommendations

To address health concerns related to poor nutrition in underserved African American neighborhoods, policy initiatives would do well to work with corner store owners to increase their capacity to provide healthy food options in these neighborhoods and foster better relationships with community residents. As a result of this project and the Muslim Run campaign, IMAN is working to support these types of initiatives by appealing to owner's religious beliefs as a way to encourage stocking healthier foods and limit the sales of alcohol and tobacco products; locating financial incentives for store owners and educating consumers to increase demand for healthier foods; fostering long-term partnerships between community residents and store owners that are mutually beneficial; working to establish store owner purchasing cooperatives to increase buying power; and linking owners to local suppliers as a way to provide healthier options while keeping costs down.



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