Exploration of Food Insecurity Relating to African Americans and Discrimination: A

Literature Review

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Introduction

Food insecurity in the black community is an ongoing problem and leads to significant disadvantages for this population. Food insecurity is a growing concern within the United States as around 12.6% of households experience it as more families and individuals find themselves in poverty (Myers, 2019). Current data reveals that food insecurity is disproportionally prevalent within minority households. Specifically, African American households experience varying degrees of hunger at a rate of 10.4% while the overall national average sits at 5.6% creating a significant gap among different ethnic communities (Allen, 2018). Factors that contribute to this overwhelming disparity are heavily influenced by systematic racism and discrimination which may typically lead to high rates of unemployment, limited access to healthy and affordable food, and a lack of available resources for support. African American communities are then more likely to experience physical/mental health concerns as food insecurity is closely correlated to the development of chronic disease (Paschal, 2019). Therefore, food insecurity has emerged as a social justice issue as the detrimental outcomes plague those who are disadvantaged economically, socially, and environmentally (Paschal, 2019). Seeking to gain insight on the impact food insecurity has on African Americans, as well as the involved factors can help identify current health-related inequalities in the country. It also presents an opportunity to think about ways to address them adequately to establish a more just society.

Literature Review

Sociodemographic Factors

Sociodemographic or environmental factors are natural and unique circumstances that make up an individual's life. These factors may include age, race, education, occupation,

income, etc. The African American population often experiences sociodemographic factors that result in negative outcomes leading to increased susceptibility to hunger/food insecurity in comparison to other populations. For example, low socioeconomic status (SES) is associated with income, education, and employment which has also been shown to be one of the leading causes of food insecurity (Burke, 2018). Therefore, African Americans find themselves at high risk of food insecurity as SES is heavily impacted by racial discrimination and stigma which is primarily an issue that affects this population daily (Burke, 2018). This discrimination can take on various forms in this context such as substantial wage gaps, fewer employment opportunities, and racial bias in classroom settings or hiring processes (Burke, 2018). The environment surrounding African American communities is also critical as these neighborhoods tend to be in rural/ poverty-stricken areas creating barriers to nutritional resources that pose hardship. This can be attributed to discrimination that has taken place for years in the housing/mortgage sector which led to African Americans being pushed into low-income and less advantageous areas through the process of redlining (Burke, 2018). Lastly, a great deal of these neighborhoods have also been known to reside in areas referred to as food deserts. Food deserts are defined as cities holding few grocery stores/supermarkets, with outstandingly less access to quality fruits and vegetables, and limited public transportation to get to these stores. (Paschal, 2019). Therefore, sociodemographic factors are crucial to take into consideration as they drastically impact food intake within African American households and the quality of life.

Individual/ Lifestyle Factors

Lifestyle factors are characteristics specific to each person that reflect on personal knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and traits that people develop over time. These factors can influence behaviors that affect food security (Paschal, 2019). While these characteristics differ

depending on each individual and their own distinctive life experiences, many people who identify within the same racial/ethnic group have had various hurdles to overcome or life circumstances meaning they may share very similar values. One example of a lifestyle factor tied to food insecurity is dietary intake and this focuses primarily on the access to and consumption of healthy well-balanced meals/snacks. Part of being food secure is not just having food in the household, but also having foods that provide the nutrients necessary to promote optimal physical health. Therefore, the consumption of fruits, vegetables, dairy, etc. becomes critical to food security (Paschal, 2019). This becomes a problem for African American households as previously mentioned because many are located within urban neighborhoods that become more susceptible to fluctuations in food prices, and therefore, grocery stores with both affordable and quality produce (Allen, 2018). It also poses an additional barrier for the African American population as residing in an urban community means there is geographically a lack of land/space available to make attempts to grow their own food (Cohen and Garrett, 2010). These lifestyle factors impose a greater strain on black families in making and practicing healthy lifestyle choices in their everyday lives which ultimately leads to significant disparities in health outcomes for African Americans such as diabetes, hypertension, metabolic disorders, and mental illness (O'Reilly, 2020).

Social Relationships/ Community Engagement Factors

The principle behind community engagement is that there is strength and unity when people residing in the same area pull together working as one toward a common goal or to find resolution to a shared problem. Therefore, part of establishing a general sense of community involvement in neighborhoods that are lacking is through building strong social relationships. This factor becomes critical for the African American population as it has the potential to be

used as a strategy/coping mechanism to combat the negative effects of food insecurity

disproportionately impacting black people (Myers, 2019). However, establishing community

cohesion in predominantly black urban neighborhoods regarding food insecurity comes with

challenges. While it is more accessible for those living in urban areas to receive help through

formal assistance programs there is a major lack of informal safety nets that contributes to on-

going food insecurity impacting African Americans. (Cohen and Garrett, 2010). There are

various informal safety nets that would prove extremely beneficial to combating food insecurity

in urban areas. Community gardens would create a space for food-insecure households to get

free and easily accessible fruits and vegetables. Community kitchens which can be held in public

spaces such as churches, schools, or community centers can give individuals a chance to connect,

plan, and share healthy low-cost meals. Putting in place more resources such as these in

predominantly black urban neighborhoods is crucial because it can minimize the already existing

barriers for low-income African Americans in acquiring food (Meyers, 2019). Furthermore, these

resources are also key to improving social connection within these black communities as they

provide opportunities for individuals to meet and potentially form relationships with others going

through similar struggles and find ways to cope together. This alone can help bolster a sense of

pride/resilience for African Americans which can also strengthen overall mental health for this

substantially food-insecure population (Myers, 2019).

<u>Conclusion</u>

Food insecurity impacts thousands of individuals across the country. However, it is an

issue that particularly plagues African Americans continuously and creates a society where equal

access to basic needs for all is not being met. Sociodemographic, lifestyle, and community

involvement factors all have the power to influence food insecurity and the level of impact it has

on the African American population. Finding ways to reduce some of the negative effects of these factors requires seeking to understand discriminatory practices and cycles that play a role in some of their development, and the overall acknowledgment that this remains a social justice issue in the United States.

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