Food Apartheid

April 6, 2021 | Kaija Schlangen

Food connects us to each other, yet it is also used to target and disempower specific groups of people.

Human connection to food separates us from many other species. Preparing, making, sharing, and eating food with others are deeply human interactions. Food identifies us with our families, our cultures, and our communities. Food connects us (https://globalgastros.com/food-culture/role-of-food-in-human-culture#:~:text=The%20human%20relationship%20with%20food,our%20emotional%20connection%20with%20food) to each other. We all deserve access to food that is fresh, healthy, sustainable, and good, yet millions of people (https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america?zsrc=Y21XG2F1Y&s_subsrc=c&s_keyword=+food%20+deserts&gelid=CjwKCAjwxuWCByATElwAIJz0ZnuoW0wgTVWmgs-pmqIFPhmgXQDU915j6X9R27eO3ts3FQjeSdgxoCL-zAQAvD_BwE&gclid=aw ds) in the United States experience food insecurity daily. Additionally, 19 million people (https://www.cnbc.com/2020/08/20/trader-joes-kroger-walmart-supervalu-and-americas-food-deserts.html) live in a food desert, which means that at least ⅕ of the population lives more than one mile away
from a grocery store in urban areas. For rural communities, food deserts exist if the nearest grocery store is more than 10 miles away.

**Food Apartheid**
Some argue that the term “food desert” is not enough to describe the systemic targeting of specific groups of people, particularly BIPOC who live in low-income communities. Community activist [Karen Washington](https://www.guernicamag.com/karen-washington-its-not-a-food-desert-its-food-apartheid/) has replaced the term “food desert” with “food apartheid” to define food injustices. To her, the label “food desert” is a complacent term that doesn’t acknowledge the human decisions and actions that have created these inequitable food systems.

Not only does food impact our wellbeing, but it directly and disproportionately affects our health. According to the [CDC](https://www.cdc.gov/ped/issues/2019/18_0579.htm), 38.4% of Black adults in the United States are obese compared to 28.6% of non-Hispanic white adults. These disparities are the work of years of oppression, segregation, and continued food discrimination. Many BIPOC in low-income communities lack access and affordability to healthy foods, which is an issue that doesn’t impact privileged white neighborhoods.

**Privilege and Discrimination**
The COVID-19 pandemic has increased pressure on many of our inequitable systems. The consequences of these intentional, unjust systems include disproportionate COVID-19 cases and deaths of BIPOC people. Many of these individuals have disproportionately suffered because of discriminatory diets and food access.

Some have blamed the cultural and traditional diets of many BIPOC for these health disparities. Soul Food is one example that gets thrown into conversations about food injustice. However, Soul Food is viewed as celebratory and not usually eaten on a regular basis. This argument blames individuals so that accountability for the systemic targeting and discriminatory policies against Black people are ignored. The real problems with food and health can be linked to environmental racism, racist policies like redlining and segregation, and continued oppressive tactics like zoning policies.

Assistant professor [Kristen Cooksey-Stowers](https://civileats.com/2020/05/05/people-of-color-are-at-greater-risk-of-covid-19-systemic-racism-in-the-food-system-plays-a-role/) at the University of Connecticut states that many BIPOC neighborhoods and communities experience “food swamps,” which describe "areas with a high-density of establishments selling high-calorie fast food and junk food.” These communities are specifically targeted by fast-food chains and convenience stores, which drastically limits food options. These zoning policies allow fast-food and convenience stores to open up in low-income areas and become the main access for food for many residents.

Another issue in the food justice systems is that the movement is dominated by privileged voices. White people and people from affluent backgrounds tend to be the ones creating and enacting food access solutions. Many of the people who decide how to help these communities have never lived in them or experienced food insecurity and their implementations can miss the true issues.

**Proposed Solutions**
In 1967, the first known “food bank” ([https://www.foodbank.org.au/our-story/?state=au](https://www.foodbank.org.au/our-story/?state=au)) opened in Phoenix, Arizona. Today, tens of thousands of food banks and food shelves around the United States operate to increase food access for people. Food shelves provide emergency support to people; however, they are band-aids to a bigger issue. Instead of providing emergency support, they are routinely depended on by communities because there are no other food access options available.

Additionally, many food shelves are only open a few times a month, which is inconvenient for many people and makes them reliant on a system that only provides short-term solutions to food insecurity. Food shelves are invaluable to communities, yet...
they shouldn’t be the only support people receive. We need to address our systems and the discrimination that has led to this gap in food justice. [Dream of Wild Health](https://dreamofwildhealth.org/programs/youth-programs) owns and operates a farm in Hugo, Minnesota. The group works to provide fresh food to Native communities and offers youth programs to teach youth about farming and operating a business. Indigenous activists like [Nephi Craig](https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/04/04/470071043/going-green-is-really-going-native-western-apache-chef-nephi-craig) are also challenging current food issues by promoting Indigenous food systems and methods for growing, cultivating, and making food.

**Call to Action**

As an individual, you can help challenge injustices in our food system and pressure larger systems to change. One place to start is looking at your own diet and trying to fit in social justice. [Ray Levy Uyeda](https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/coronavirus-community-power/2020/05/11/whats-in-a-social-justice-diet/) proposes several methods to add justice to your diet. First, increase your food literacy by learning about the history of our lands, our food systems, and how they continue to target and discriminate against specific groups of people. You can also try to source some of your food from local and regional sources, instead of big chains or name brands. This helps decrease the number of food miles and supports your local economy, and frankly, it just TASTES better! Finally, boost people and their platforms that are demanding change in their communities and support their efforts to increase access to fresh, healthy foods by volunteering and/or donating. [Community Action Duluth](https://www.communityactionduluth.org/mobile-market) has a mobile food market that brings a grocery-store-on-wheels to food deserts like Lincoln Park and Morgan Park.

Learning about food apartheid is an actionable item for the [2021 Campus Ecochallenge](https://campus.ecochallenge.org/). You can [join our team](https://campus.ecochallenge.org/participants/join?referral_code=d2a8dead-86b2-46bb-aeef-28d84a60d71a&team_invitation=true), Green Bulldogs, and earn points for completing different challenges regarding sustainability. You can earn five points for our campus team just for signing up! The challenge runs from April 12-25.

**Tags**

Sustainability

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[Social media links](https://champ.d.umn.edu/sustainability/news/food-apartheid)