

Fried chicken and fresh apples: Racial segregation as a fundamental cause of fast food density in black neighborhoods

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Abstract

As rates of overweight and obesity have surged in the US, researchers have turned attention to the environmental context of diet and disparities in access to healthful foods. Despite evidence that Black neighborhoods are disproportionately exposed to fast food, few explanations have been advanced to illuminate explanatory mechanisms. This paper contends that race-based residential segregation is a fundamental cause of fast food density in Black neighborhoods. Segregation's effects on population and economic characteristics, physical infrastructure, and social processes work in tandem to increase the likelihood that Black neighborhoods in urban environments will bear a disproportionate burden of fast food restaurants.

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Introduction

At one of the primary intersections of Northton there sits a large old brick structure with a newly remodeled façade and eating area that serves hoagies and other fast foods as well as providing check cashing and other financial services... there is almost always a line of Black people standing at the long counter, waiting to be served cheese steaks, hoagies, fried chicken, French fries, and various sandwiches (Anderson, 1990).

In his ethnographic study of a gentrifying, urban US city, Anderson describes a scene commonly

played out in many Black¹ neighborhoods. Fast food is abundant in these communities, and disproportionately so when compared to predominantly White neighborhoods. The purpose of this essay is to examine the ways in which race-based residential segregation acts as a fundamental mechanism through which fast food density is determined. I focus in large part on New York City, but also draw upon urban contexts in other large, racially segregated cities such as Chicago, Boston, and Washington, DC. I argue that fast food may be dense in Black neighborhoods due to the downstream effects of segregation through four

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¹I use “Black” and “African American” interchangeably to reflect typical usage in different literature, and to acknowledge that Black people of varied ethnicities experience segregation.

pathways: population characteristics, economic characteristics, physical infrastructure, and social processes (See Fig. 1). The paper will show how segregation tends to create localized geographic areas for targeting by fast food restaurant corporations and operators; fosters economic and business conditions and land use characteristics that increase the likelihood of fast food proliferation; concentrates unemployment and economic disinvestment, which provides available labor pools and increases community receptiveness to fast food restaurants; and weakens community political strength, thereby reducing possible opposition to siting.

In this paper, fast food refers to restaurants whose primary menu items include such foods as hamburgers, hot dogs, and fried chicken. These national chains and local establishments do not provide table service, serve patrons at cash registers or drive-thru windows, and require payment before eating (National Restaurant Association, 2005). Other restaurants and retail outlets in urban areas serve food rapidly and without table service (e.g., delis, Chinese take-out), but for our purposes they will not be considered traditional fast food, particularly because they tend to have a greater variety of options than “traditional” fast food restaurants. However, this does not imply that the arguments that follow could not also be applied to these restaurants.

The prevalence of fast food in Black communities is of critical health import given the prevalence of overweight and obesity and attendant chronic illnesses. Although obesity has risen steadily across

demographic groups in the US, the highest rates occur among the most disadvantaged groups (Drewnowski and Specter, 2004). According to NHANES data, overall obesity prevalence for Blacks was 45% in 2003–2004 (Ogden et al., 2006). By gender, between 1971–1974 and 1999–2000, prevalence of obesity among Black women of medium education rose from 20.7% to 54.4%, and from 16.1% to 22.6% among their male counterparts (Zhang and Wang, 2004). Class 3 obesity (extreme obesity) is also highest among Black women, with 6% prevalence in 2000, compared to 2.2% among White women (Freedman et al., 2002).

The association between poverty and obesity is mediated partly by the low cost of energy-dense foods (Drewnowski and Specter, 2004), and fast food is characterized by extremely high-energy density, presenting heretofore unknown challenges to appetite control systems (Prentice and Jebb, 2003). Fast food is also low in several important nutrients, but high in calories, fat, and cholesterol (French et al., 2000), and contributes strongly to dietary fat intake (Daroszewski, 2004). Some research finds a positive association between fast food consumption and BMI/obesity (Jeffrey et al., 2006), and regions with greater numbers of fast food restaurants have higher morbidity and mortality and from coronary syndromes (Alter and Eny, 2005). Taken together, these data illuminate the need to theorize determinants of the restaurant landscape in Black neighborhoods.

I begin with an overview of the food environment in Black neighborhoods. Second, I briefly review the

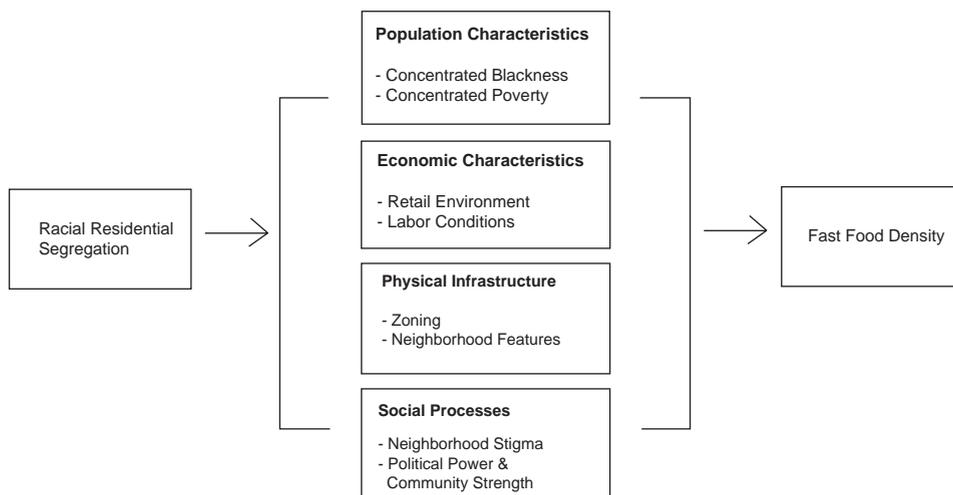


Fig. 1. Four pathways through which segregation shapes fast food density.

current status of segregation in US cities and its role in shaping the social and built environment. Finally, I use the construct of fundamental causes to offer four pathways through which segregation could increase fast food density in Black neighborhoods, and suggest directions for future research in each.

The food environment in Black neighborhoods

The notion of food deserts—socially marginalized areas where residents have little to no access to healthy and affordable food—came to the fore in the UK during the 1990s (Cummins and Macintyre, 2002; Wrigley et al., 2003). Since then, some international research has found that not all inner-city neighborhoods are food deserts (Smoyer et al., 2006) but in communities with low access, households must make a number of choices about how to meet dietary needs (Whelan et al., 2002). In the US, predominantly Black neighborhoods often embody the characteristics of food deserts, where “it is easier to get fried chicken than a fresh apple” (Brownell and Battle Horgen, 2003). It is difficult to get “fresh apples” (metaphorically speaking) because African Americans do not have adequate access to supermarkets (Morland et al., 2002; Zenk et al., 2005). Conversely, it is much easier to purchase “fried chicken” because African American neighborhoods have greater prevalence of fast food (Block et al., 2004; Lewis et al., 2005) and the proportion of total restaurants that are fast food also tends to be higher (Lewis et al., 2005). The local food environment has important effects on health. Cross-sectional studies reveal that available food sources affect intake and obesity (Morland et al., 2002; 2006), and retail interventions designed to address food deserts have shown positive effects on dietary intake (Wrigley et al., 2003). Thus, it stands to reason that the relative ease of procuring “fried chicken” serves to intensify health disparities.

Certainly, fast food restaurants are not entirely absent from predominantly White neighborhoods. On the contrary, the long tradition of fast food as part of automobile culture (Jakle and Skulle, 1999) makes it a common feature in the suburban landscape, and American suburbia is often predominantly White. In addition, fast food is located in busy commercial areas to target lunchtime crowds, and those that target travelers are placed near highways, airports and tourist sites (Micham and Mazze, 1998). However, in residential areas of US central cities, the downstream effects of

segregation make fast food more prevalent in Black neighborhoods.

It is possible that the high fast food density documented by researchers simply reflects higher demand, as health data shows higher consumption among Blacks (Pereira et al., 2005). However, a primary motivation for consuming fast food is convenience (Emerson, 1990), and there is no reason why African Americans would intrinsically find fast foods more appealing or convenient than others. Indeed, a 2001 consumer survey revealed that 63% of Whites but only 55% of Blacks indicated that the value they received for the price paid at fast food restaurants met their expectations (National Restaurant Association, 2002). In addition, the most well-established demographic market for fast food is young people, particularly males aged 18–24 (Cuthbert, 2006; Emerson, 1990). Finally, neighborhood characteristics are not fully accounted for by resident characteristics (Diez-Roux, 2003); and in the US, segregation is key in determining neighborhood structure.

Black–White segregation and fundamental causes

An extensive literature has documented the marked race/income inequality in US cities and the sequelae of postwar segregation. Black–White segregation levels have seen very little change since the civil rights era, despite moderate declines in some metropolitan areas (Adelman, 2004; Charles, 2003; Dawkins, 2004; Fischer and Massey, 2004; Logan et al., 2004; Wilkes and Iceland, 2004). White hostility and violence remain concerns for Blacks who consider moving to predominantly White areas (Krysan and Farley, 2002), and Whites report many negative attitudes about Black neighbors (Krysan, 2002).

Critically, the effects of segregation are not restricted to low income communities. Segregation between higher and lower SES African Americans declined throughout the 1990s (Iceland et al., 2005), and African Americans with higher incomes are less able to reside in neighborhoods commensurate with their socioeconomic status (Alba et al., 2000; Pattillo, 1999). Research also shows that income and housing costs do not explain segregation levels. In St. Louis, if income differences were the only cause of segregation, the Black–White dissimilarity index would be 10.8, but it is 73.0, equal to the overall segregation level for the St. Louis area. Indeed, there is no household income level at which African Americans experience much less segregation

than the overall level (Farley, 2005). Similarly, in New York, even wealthy, college-educated African Americans are ghettoized, and live in neighborhoods that are 30% poorer than comparable Whites (Logan and Alba, 2002) and suburbia in many cities remains largely inaccessible (McArdle, 2003). Thus, because of persisting segregation, more affluent Black areas will tend to experience many of the same environmental insults as poorer areas. For these reasons, the four pathways described below apply to Black neighborhoods of varied income strata.

The bifurcation of US cities by race has led some to argue that racial residential segregation is the cornerstone on which Black–White disparities in health status have been built; that is, it acts as a fundamental cause (Williams and Collins, 2001), just as socioeconomic status does (Link and Phelan, 1995). Fundamental causes shape access to the resources (e.g., money, knowledge, prestige) that assist people in avoiding health risks or minimizing disease if it occurs (Link and Phelan, 1995). Segregation creates “different Americas” (LaVeist, 2003) by creating inequality in several key factors related to health: individual and neighborhood SES; educational opportunity; employment; housing quality; medical care (Williams and Collins, 2001); and disproportionate siting of hazardous land uses (Bullard, 2002; Downey, 2003; Wing et al., 2000). If the cumulative effects of residential segregation increase the prevalence of fast food restaurants, this is yet another means by which it acts as a fundamental cause of health risk. Following is an elaboration of the four key pathways that relate to fast food density.

Pathway 1: population characteristics

Segregation affects population characteristics by concentrating individuals of African descent generally, and those of low incomes in particular—two consumer characteristics that are targeted by fast food operators. To be sure, African Americans are not the only focus of fast food marketing; mothers with young children are another important market segment. However, mothers are not segregated into particular neighborhoods.

Concentrated blackness

A primary reason why Black neighborhoods have a high prevalence of fast food restaurants is because

African Americans are actively sought by fast food companies, and segregation creates a ready, spatially concentrated target area. From a purely rational business perspective, the high prevalence of fast food restaurants in Black neighborhoods is itself suggestive of purposeful targeting. When opening a business, owners must consider location characteristics, including neighboring shops and local business climate, the crime rate, quality of public services, condition of homes, buildings, and lots, relationship to competition, and the spatial relationship to the target market (Pinson and Jinnett, 2000). In many Black neighborhoods, such a location analysis would reveal: a retail climate that generates few customers; a relatively high crime rate; public services that have faced years of cutbacks and neglect; visibly deteriorated buildings; and several competing fast food restaurants. In other words, there would be few incentives to open a store in a neighborhood with these characteristics, unless a primary goal was to target the individuals who reside there.

Still, we need not infer purposeful targeting from location profiles and restaurant prevalence alone. Fast food operators clearly perceive “minorities” as a valuable market (Bunn, 1997; Perlik, 2005), and market their products to this population in a variety of media (Harrison, 2006; Tirodkar and Jain, 2003). Indeed, industry pundits have argued that “chicken and fish fast food operations usually capture high sales in black neighborhoods, especially if the units are located in proximity to a major health service, drugstore, supermarket, or liquor store” (Melaniphy, 1992, p. 83). While consumer stereotyping and discriminatory practices do inform targeting practices, the restrictiveness of total market availability for fast food is also critical. In 1996, it was argued that as trends in the population at large moved away from high fat foods, increased marketing towards low income and communities of color would take place, as was seen with cigarette and alcohol advertising (Airhihenbuwa et al., 1996). As US dietary patterns, consumer spending, and market penetration has changed (Russell, 2003; Datamonitor, 2005) targeting African Americans has become increasingly important (Moore, 1993).

General downturns in the US economy also provide the impetus for strategies to target urban African American neighborhoods, which historically have been neglected by retail (Romney, 2001; Field, 2006). National fast food chains do so by seeking name recognition, trust, brand loyalty, and

perceptions of beneficence, particularly through the sponsorship of African American cultural events and community organizations (Semmes, 1996) and the provision of youth scholarships (Cebrzynski, 1998). For example, in 2002, White Castle held a “Fastest Griddle Operator” contest and donated food in East New York, Brooklyn (White Castle’s local contest, 2007), a neighborhood that has long struggled with poverty, racism and disinvestment (Thabit, 2003).

Concentrated poverty

Given that fast food represents a low price point for eating out, it is logical to expect that these foods would be dense in communities with lower incomes. And, because African Americans have high rates of poverty (Proctor and Dalaker, 2003), and segregation spatially contains poverty in discrete neighborhoods, it thereby concentrates fast food. In general, empirical research demonstrates an association between low area income and fast food prevalence in the US (Burdette and Whitaker, 2004; Stewart and Davis, 2005) and internationally. In Australia, individuals living in the poorest SES category had 2.5 times the exposure to fast food than those in the wealthiest category; indeed, individuals in the two highest SES categories had no exposure at all (Reidpath et al., 2002). Similarly, in Scotland and England, area deprivation was inversely related to the mean number of McDonald’s outlets per 1000 residents (Cummins et al., 2005) and to other restaurant chains as well (Macdonald et al., 2007).

The parallel association between area income and fast food density in both domestic and international contexts may suggest that African Americans are simply a “special case” of low-income targeting by the fast food industry, and may beg the question of whether fast food in Black neighborhoods reflects “race” or “class.” However, this question does not adequately confront the issue. In a racialized social system such as that in the US, economic, political and social ideological levels are arranged in part by the placement of actors in racial categories (Bonilla-Silva, 1996). The fact that in the US, targeting poverty often means targeting Blackness is not due to chance—racial differences in SES are the predictable result of institutional policies (Williams and Collins, 2001). That Blackness and economic disadvantage is conflated is firmly embedded in the imagination of both corporations and the general populace (albeit, without connections to

institutional racism as a driving force). In that vein, any targeting of “poor people” would quickly map onto race as well. Still, it is worth reiterating that this paper argues that *multiple* effects of segregation are likely to lead to higher fast food density—not simply consumer targeting. Moreover, because African Americans are segregated by race rather than class, the insults and conditions that are endemic to segregated neighborhoods are experienced by individuals of varied socioeconomic backgrounds. For that reason, even in the absence of purposeful targeting by the fast food industry, segregation creates environments ripe for fast food.

It is also worth noting that researchers who wish to conduct empirical research to disentangle the role of race and income level in US fast food marketing are handicapped by an inability to fill all the cells. That is, the dearth of concentrated poverty in urban White neighborhoods precludes investigations of whether poor Whites are exposed in the same way as poor Blacks, and fewer high-income African American neighborhoods compromises studies of within-group exposure by SES. As a case in point, a study in Oakland, California sought participants in low, middle, and high-income neighborhoods stratified by race (predominantly Black, White and heterogeneous). All cells were filled with the exception of high income/Black and low-income/White, for which no neighborhoods could be identified (Altschuler et al., 2004).

Future research

Research on population characteristics as determinants of fast food density should tackle several key questions. First, although some research has demonstrated higher densities of fast food in Black neighborhoods, more empirical studies are needed in other cities, particularly within highly segregated cities in the Midwest and Northeast. Additionally, between-city studies should examine multiple indices of segregation (e.g., isolation, centralization) as determinants of overall fast food density. It is also important to examine restaurant environments in suburban vs. urban contexts, to study the relative influence of racial demographics and automobile-centric planning. Second, the extent to which more affluent Black neighborhoods are exposed at similar rates as low-income Black areas would illuminate disparities by SES level. Third, examination of industry practices regarding targeting are needed,

but a key challenge is access to the types of documents made available on Big Tobacco. Finally, an important unanswered question is *when* did fast food become more prevalent in Black neighborhoods? In the 1950s, although some fast food chains (e.g., White Castle) were in central cities, McDonald's and other chains studiously avoided these areas, instead concentrating on the suburbs (Levenstein, 2003). Thus, at some point, despite extant levels of segregation, social and cultural conditions surrounding the siting of fast food shifted, moving more fast food restaurants into the city and away from suburbia. Changes in the symbolic meanings of fast food over time may be important in this regard.

Pathway 2: economic characteristics

The second pathway by which segregation affects fast food density is by creating economic and business conditions that are amenable to the operation of fast food restaurants. Segregation fosters a weak retail climate and a surplus of low-wage labor, both of which make the proliferation of fast food probable.

Retail environment

The anemic retail climate often found in segregated neighborhoods is a key factor in fast food density. The scarcity of retail establishments in Black neighborhoods has been extensively documented (Berry, 1963; Wilson, 1987; Small and McDermott, 2006), and in many instances entrepreneurship is stymied (Fischer and Massey, 2000). Infrequent bank siting (Graves, 2003) and low lending rates in Black areas (Immergluck, 2002) contribute to less viable retail sectors. Ultimately, a modicum of retail trade and high vacancy rates leaves a void that can be filled by fast food, particularly because everyone needs to eat, but supermarket retailers often avoid urban locations, citing such concerns as higher construction costs, less access to highways and declining middle-class populations (Pluto et al., 2004; Nayga and Weinberg, 1999; Pothukuchi, 2005).

In segregated neighborhoods, lackluster retail areas minimize competition and at the same time provide lower rent for store owners. In contrast, retailers seeking access to White neighborhoods battle over scarce real estate and high operating costs, and potential restaurateurs face extremely

high rents, burdensome zoning regulations, and high levels of competition from other restaurants (Reyes, 1996). As job growth has appeared primarily at the lower end of the employment sector, fast food has also become a viable means for self-employment among immigrants (Talwar, 2002), but entry difficulties and high operating costs in White neighborhoods make it more likely that both larger franchises and smaller immigrant-owned outlets will open in Black neighborhoods.

Labor conditions

Because segregation concentrates poverty and joblessness in contiguous areas, Black neighborhoods contain a spatially defined labor surplus that does not exist in White neighborhoods. Proximity to appropriate workers is critical to employers (Rae, 2005; Fernandez and Su, 2004) and some industries thrive based on their ability to successfully target cheap labor in low-income neighborhoods. In Chicago, temp agencies specializing in day labor find their viability in the exploitation of depressed inner-city labor pools, and situate themselves geographically to do so, even around homeless shelters and welfare offices (Peck and Theodore, 2001). Still, in that context, African Americans have not experienced increased access to the contingent labor market, as the racialized structure of the market tends to target Latino (particularly undocumented) workers and neighborhoods as site locations (Peck and Theodore, 2001).

For fast food operators, recruiting and retaining employees is a primary challenge (National Restaurant Association, 2002). Unlike other retail businesses, labor costs in restaurants are a major factor in profits, because much of what is being sold is produced on site (Nelson, 2001). Fast food outlets minimize costs by requiring fewer and less complex tasks and having them carried out by a more unskilled labor force (Nelson, 2001), and in some neighborhoods, they may pay less as well. In Atlanta, Black workers earn less than their White suburban counterparts, and have greater numbers of competing fast food restaurants nearby (Ihlanfeldt and Young, 1994). Despite the disadvantages of fast food work, inequalities in access to employment (Mouw, 2000; Schultz et al., 2002; Wilson, 1996) and institutional racism make these jobs a critical gateway into the labor market for many African Americans. In New York's predominantly White suburbs, labor scarcity for fast food

jobs is a problem for employers. However, in Central Harlem, the ratio of applicants to jobs is 14:1 and advertising is not required—fast food employers can depend upon a constant stream of applicants (Newman, 1999).

Fast food restaurants have also been a means to community development and economic growth. Until the late 1960s, Black restaurant franchisees were extremely few in number (Love, 1995; Schlosser, 2001). When store owners began to gain access to store ownership, they viewed the restaurants as neighborhood revitalizers, particularly by providing Black youth with their first work experience (Love, 1995). This strategy for community empowerment has continued over time (Gite, 2001; Roberts, 1987; Newman, 1999; Zuber, 2000). Thus, Black communities may welcome the entry of fast food, creating an uneasy tension between economic and health needs.

Future research

Research on economic characteristics should investigate varied aspects of the retail environment as determinants of fast food density. This could include area vacancy rate (likely to be positively related), cost of commercial rent, assessed land value, and density and diversity of retail goods and services (likely to be negatively related). Additionally, in terms of the labor market, relationships between unemployment rates and fast food density would be useful, particularly in longitudinal studies or with retrospective census data that could illuminate whether restaurants open in areas where unemployment levels are high.

Pathway 3: physical infrastructure

Segregation also exerts effects on the form and function of neighborhood physical infrastructure, which in turn shapes the density of fast food. Growth machine theory (Logan and Molotch, 1987) argues that land is a market commodity that provides wealth and power, and as a result, the essence of a locality is its operation as a growth machine. Thus, development is seen as a universal good that increases cultural opportunities for residents, expands the tax base and creates jobs (Troutman, 2004). Community residents, however, are concerned with the use value of the land, and how growth may harm local economies, quality of life or neighborhood character (Halebsky, 2004).

These themes have frequently undergirded fast food siting (e.g., see Lewis, 1990; Thompson, 1980), and the manner in which segregation affects the distribution of desirable land characteristics and liabilities shapes the prevalence of fast food outlets.

Zoning

Zoning organizes land use by outlining where and which kinds of buildings are placed, the types of activities that take place on the land and the densities of people that inhabit it. In New York, fast food occurs both in high-bulk commercial areas where shopping and business is located, and in smaller commercial overlays on residential areas, which create mixed-use land. In these areas, retail needs serve the needs of the surrounding neighborhood, and include uses such as grocery stores, restaurants and beauty parlors (New York City Department of City Planning, 2006). In Brooklyn Heights, residents once sought to forbid fast food restaurants through zoning restrictions, but zoning classes could only forbid restaurants altogether, not only those that sold fast food (City of New York Department of City Planning, 1976). However, cities such as the small town of Calistoga, California, have prohibited “formula” (fast food) restaurants in its municipal code (Fernandez, 2006). The importance of controlling land use highlights the import of racial segregation, as these processes are strongly determined by residents’ ability to influence political processes. Areas with wealth, property, political power and connections are able to enact desirable zoning changes and prevent undesirable ones (Schultz et al., 2002), and those with less political influence and wealth often end up on the losing end of the equation (Maantay, 2001). As will be seen, communities on the other end of the spectrum have brought considerable power to bear on fast food siting.

Neighborhood features

Regardless of area income, segregated Black neighborhoods are burdened with negative neighborhood features such as deteriorated housing, disorder, and vacant lots (Adelman, 2004; Accorino and Gary, 2000). Additionally, fortification—a heightened sense of defense, security measures and stalwartness in building structure—bristles in the form of metal shutters, sealed windows, and behind

bullet-proof glass (Vergara, 1997). Taken together, these negative features mark neighborhoods as “the ghetto” further reproducing the likelihood of fast food.

The designation of landmark or historic status is one means by which neighborhoods are protected from infrastructural liabilities. In New York City, individual landmarks are structures that are at least 30 years old and possess special character, historic interest, or esthetic value, and historic districts are those that have architectural and historic significance and a distinct “sense of place.” That these designations fall overwhelmingly in predominantly White areas of the city suggests that these attributions of value are made for White space. In addition, policies such as urban renewal have erased historic cultural and architectural sites in Black neighborhoods (Fullilove, 2004), thereby leaving fewer sites available for future landmark designation. Because land use changes to landmarked buildings or districts must be approved by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, and must conform to a number of details regarding design, scale and materials, the end result is that Black neighborhoods are rendered more freely alterable, with fewer regulations to govern the inclusion of particular land uses, including fast food. Moreover, the fact that Black spaces are rarely designated as embodying an historic and valued sense of place implies a distinct lack of value that fosters the dumping of unwanted land uses (such as fast food) in these neighborhoods.

Future research

Future research on physical infrastructure and fast food could investigate how neighborhood features align with race whether they contribute unique variance to fast food density. For example, investigations could analyze differential distribution by race of zoning classes and amendments and other municipal codes that present obstacles to fast food. Additionally, research should examine the presence of vacant lots, caretaking institutions (e.g., drug treatment facilities) fortification, or payday lenders and check cashing outlets as determinants of fast food density. These features may evoke perceptions that stimulate the placement of facilities (including fast food) that are thought to be concordant with spaces lacking in economic and cultural capital.

Pathway 4: social processes

Neighborhood stigma

In many predominantly White neighborhoods, fast food has been seen not only as tawdry culinary detritus, but as a magnet for undesirables and outsiders (Crow, 2002; Levy, 1980). Because Black neighborhoods are stigmatized as spaces inhabited by undesirables, it is not surprising that fast food is disproportionately located within them. As Anderson (1990) has argued, areas with high numbers of middle- or high-income Whites enjoy associated spaces of houses, buildings and parks that are seen as valuable, but segregated Blacks on similar property pay a “racial tax.”

Black neighborhoods, regardless of socioeconomic profiles, are stigmatized as culturally inferior (Pattillo, 2003), as exemplified by the ACORN (A Classification of Residential Neighborhoods) profiles of consumer markets. These profiles describe the putative sociocultural and spending characteristics of neighborhoods. For example, “successful suburbanites” are upwardly mobile individuals who enjoy investments and home ownership (ESRI Business Information Solutions, 2003). In contrast, “distressed neighborhoods” are comprised of single parents living in the urban core, who “enjoy eating at drive-in or family restaurants” (ESRI Business Information Solutions, 2003). In these profiles, African Americans only appear in categories with entrenched social problems and low income (see ACORN, 2005), effectively erasing them from the middle class. In this regard, it is not surprising that varied retailers—even some that fall under the umbrella of quick-service restaurants—shun these communities. For example, Starbucks has historically been intent on attracting urban professionals and creating spaces of consumption for individuals with disposable income and abundant cultural capital (Lyons, 2004). By typical marketing profiles, then, Black neighborhoods are not compatible spaces. Only with the reconfiguration of area demographics does Starbucks enter these communities, thus becoming “a beacon marking the transformation of a once-feared neighborhood to one safe for latte” (Newman, 2004, p.35).

Community political strength

At the national level, empirical research has shown that political empowerment affects Black

health (LaVeist, 1992), but because Black neighborhoods are geographically isolated, they are also politically isolated, making it difficult for them to form political coalitions (Massey and Denton, 1993). For example, the residential integration of varied White ethnic groups historically supported the formation of pluralist political machines; political patronage provided to one group was beneficial for several others as well. In contrast, because no one but Black residents lives in segregated neighborhoods, when important services are cut or removed, coalition partners are few and far between because no other groups have self-interest in meeting community needs (Massey and Denton, 1993). This racial fracturing of the political landscape allowed for the making of the “second ghetto” through the placement of public housing projects solely in Black neighborhoods (Hirsch, 1998) and the implementation of planned shrinkage—drastic cuts in essential municipal services such as firefighting and sanitation (Wallace and Wallace, 1998). In terms of fast food, segregated neighborhoods must face the proliferation of restaurants on their own, without the political support of other, more powerful neighborhoods.

Cities with large Black neighborhoods may be more likely to elect Black officials, particularly at the level of wards or city councils, although this was not the case in early 20th-century Chicago (Pinderhughes, 1987). In more recent years, some Black leaders have been elected as aldermen, but because of voter apathy, the city’s racial antagonism towards the constituencies, and declining populations, they are unable to ensure a large voting bloc, and are thus marginalized in the city council (Venkatesh, 2006). Additionally, in some cases, Black wards received few material rewards regardless of their productivity (Grimshaw, 1992). For that reason, Black leadership has not always been synonymous with political power. At the neighborhood level, if policies and institutional placements are inimical to community interests, segregated areas have little recourse when their residents do not share spatial or political space with the broader electoral base.

Some have argued that collective efficacy in a neighborhood may mitigate against “undesirable,” but legal businesses; the NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) phenomenon (Ford and Beveridge, 2004). The question becomes, then, are fast food restaurants seen as undesirable businesses? If so, does community empowerment and political strength

work to keep them out? A review of fast food battles waged in urban, White neighborhoods suggests the answer to both is yes. It is true that fast food restaurants target Black neighborhoods, but they do not ignore White areas altogether; they are often simply unable to gain a foothold. In 1974, McDonald’s attempted to open a Manhattan location on the high-income, overwhelmingly White Upper East Side in order to penetrate a historically neglected urban market (Love, 1995). However, the neighborhood’s politically powerful residents were staunchly opposed to the location, and through social, occupational and political resources, they were able to organize several attacks. These comprised petitions that garnered thousands of signatures (including that of David Rockefeller’s wife), news coverage of neighborhood pickets, editorials in *The New York Times*, and the removal of McDonald’s from a brokerage house’s list of recommended stocks. Finally, a financial critique published in *Barron’s* led to a stock market value reduction of \$357 million; McDonald’s relented and abandoned the proposal (Love, 1995).

The point is not that New York’s Upper East Side is representative of most predominantly White urban neighborhoods—few are populated with Rockefellers. Rather, this botched attempt at siting reveals the utility of social and political power in resisting the entry of fast food. Rare is the segregated Black neighborhood that would be able to marshal a blistering political attack simply to keep out a fast food restaurant. Indeed, many Black neighborhoods have fought the siting of fast food outlets and lost (Lewis, 1990; Thompson, 1980). To the extent that segregated neighborhoods are isolated from powerful allies, this will tend to be the case.

Future research

Future research on social processes should investigate whether community empowerment and political power are associated with fast food density. Political power could comprise proportion of Black city council members per Black voting-age population (LaVeist, 1992), financial contributions to campaigns, or voter participation. Empowerment could include factors such as collective efficacy, which has been shown to be negatively related to violence (Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999). This line of research should be contextualized by levels of gentrification, because an influx of White residents

would change the political landscape. Also, by definition, gentrification produces urban space for more affluent users (Hackworth, 2002); thus, research should investigate the extent to which gentrification lowers the density of fast food over time and increases the density of other retail services. Additionally, because incoming gentry may also be Black (Pattillo, 1999), studies could examine the extent to which fast food remains entrenched in neighborhoods that undergo class but not race transformations, which would give further data on the interplay of race and class. Finally, because Black spaces are stigmatized as poor and culturally bereft, research on the concordance between marketing profiles and actual area demographics are needed. In turn, these profiles should be examined as determinants of fast food density.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have offered some of the pathways through which racial segregation may act to increase fast food density in Black neighborhoods by causing decrements in the resources that are implicated in fundamental causes: money, power, prestige, and social connections. In addition to the areas proposed for further research in each pathway, research should also be brought to bear on whether segregation affects fast food consumption. This might be true not only because of a high concentration of fast food outlets, but because the geographic distance fostered by spatially separate neighborhoods leads individuals in highly segregated areas tend to have limited access to the resources concentrated in other areas of the city (Fitzpatrick and LaGory, 2003), which would include the diverse restaurant and food choices that are more frequent in predominantly White areas.

The manner in which segregation acts as a fundamental determinant of fast food density brings to light the relevance of structural factors in changing behavior. It has been noted that without understanding the context that leads to risk, efforts to change diet by education and exhortation are likely to be singularly ineffective (Link and Phelan, 1995). Yet, individual-level interventions are more likely to be implemented and funded in part because of greater receptiveness to individual based interpretations on the part of public policy makers and governmental officials (King and Williams, 1995). Indeed, H.R. 554, the “Personal Responsibility in Food Consumption Act of 2005” was recently

passed by the US Congress in order to prevent lawsuits that hold the food industry liable for obesity (H.R.554, 2005). If health disparities are to be adequately addressed, attention must be paid not only to the role of the food industry, but to the inequalities underlying the production of its markets and patterns in consumption.

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