

Conversations on Food Justice: Urban Planning and Food Apartheid

February 27, 2023

IN A NUTSHELL

It is well known that some communities in the US have more access to healthy food than others, and that the neighborhoods with less are more likely to be areas with larger populations of color. The systems that led to this difference in access has a long history rooted in real estate, home loans, the rise of the auto industry, and ultimately, structural racism.

For the speakers in this presentation, this difference was palpable in their own lives. Dr. Ashanté Reese recalls teaching in urban Atlanta early on in her career and fielding questions from students about why her neighborhood had a grocery store and theirs didn't. Keith Carr grew up in Connecticut and would wonder why his mom drove two towns away to buy groceries, only to note later on that the store that was within walking distance was of far lower quality. Dr. Dick Sadler of Flint, MI grew up comparing his experiences living in the suburbs to participating community activities in the city and the lifestyle differences that he observed between the two.

These early experiences drove our panelists to different tactics for addressing food insecurity and access in urban settings. From research on the historical context and root causes of food access inequality, or the evolution of stores in communities, to tangible programs to connect communities with healthy food, to influencing policy and practices, the panel gathered to discuss what needs to be done to ensure more equitable food access in cities across the nation.

“ [F]undamentally, when we talk about these food access inequalities, it boils down to the disinvestment patterns that the US has had that a lot of other countries just haven't had to the same degree. ... I think centering that it's in part a reflection of structural racism in our society and not an inevitability of urban development. [W]e don't have to have these patterns in our urban environment if we choose to build better cities and, and resolve this dysfunction in our society.” *Dr. Dick Sadler*

KEY TAKEAWAYS/QUOTES

- **Terminology:** “Food Desert” was coined in Scotland in the early 1990s, and has been commonly used since then to describe areas with poor access to healthy, affordable food. However, this term is imprecise and outdated; it brings about assumptions of a complete absence of healthy food and a stigma for the people who live in those areas. Some terms that might better describe the issue as a whole are:
 - o “Food Apartheid” - accounts for the ways systemic racism has influenced urban development, but doesn't apply as much in rural areas
 - o “Food Swamp” - applicable in areas that have plenty of food, but most of it contributes to hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and other chronic diseases
 - o “Food Access Inequality” – is clunky, but accurately describes the difference in geographical and financial access to healthy food and will be used through the rest of this report
- **Food Access Inequality is a problem unique to the US.** The US has had systematic segregation due to structural racism for generations. Redlining was the official practice from 1934-1968 of banks

denying home loans in “high risk” neighborhoods - often Black communities living in older districts in city centers. When the policy ended in 1968, there was a follow-on effect called Blockbusting, when real estate agents would target adjacent areas, convincing white homeowners to move out of the newly integrated neighborhoods and into the suburbs. Those homes would then be rented out to low-income families, who were very often people of color. During the course of one census period, the demographics in those blockbusted neighborhoods changed by 50-70%.

- **Starting in the 1960s, the US started to see Supermarket redlining.** While this was not a institutionalized, grocery store chains, which had been growing in size and variety since as late as the 1930s, moved further outside the city where there was more space for larger stores. New locations were placed conveniently near highways, both a reflection of and emphasis on a reliance on family vehicles. Land requirements were not the only reason stores used to move or build further outside of cities – in Memphis, one large retailer shut down four stores within the city limits in favor of building in the suburbs, citing low profits, but it was later reported that one actually was profitable.
 - o **Supermarket redlining also reflects the difference in the shopping experience.** Ashanté noted that during her research in Washington, DC, some stores in predominantly Black neighborhoods were heavily policed and the patrons felt surveilled while shopping which was not a positive experience

“... [I]t's not just where something is that matters to a community, it's also the experience they have when they're there, and whether or not their concerns are gonna be heard. Because often in... this store community members did not feel their concerns were heard until there was a big exposé about the quality of food [there].”

Dr. Ashanté Reese

- **We need to challenge our assumptions about local stores.** While we might imagine that they only have fast, unhealthy options, many store owners make efforts to stock some fresh produce. Work is also being done across the country to connect corner stores to local produce, and to strategically arrange the layout of small stores to make the healthy choice the easy choice.
 - o **Corner stores play an important role for local communities.** They can serve as a place for residents to gather and a source of local jobs. They can also be an important resource for local elders; some community stores pick up grocery lists from the car, shop for them, and return the groceries to the car, making it an overall safer way to shop.

“In one year, Bedstuy lost four grocery stores, and Bedford Stuyvesant is only three square miles... [T]hese stores were anchors in the community. I mean, they hired kids for the summer. They charged people's cell phones. They delivered groceries to their seniors. And... entrepreneurial minded children would go there and like, can I carry your bags out? Can I bring your bags to the car? So this was a devastating blow to a lot of those communities.” *Keith Carr*

- **Gentrification has contributed to the lack of equitable food access.** Small, local stores that provided jobs and healthy foods have been pushed out or had rents raised to the point of closure. Residents with lower incomes (often People of Color) who have remained in the neighborhoods have been effectively “trapped behind enemy lines.” Essential resources that previously were walkable have moved out of the neighborhood in favor of more expensive, less important services that are desired by the new, higher income residents. This leaves longer-term residents to have to rely on buses or taxis to reach affordable grocery stores, further increasing the cost of grocery trips.
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OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

- **When we think of a future with more equitable access to healthy food, there are a lot of opportunities.**
 - o Cities and neighborhoods experiencing gentrification can open more food co-ops, providing more sovereignty to communities, easier access to healthier foods and local jobs
 - o During the pandemic, many states and cities banded together to connect those with excess healthy food to those who needed more. That type of connection can continue to improve food access in cities and support farmers.
- **For long-term improvements towards food access equality, we need a sea change, and some imagination.**
 - o The reliance on cars in the US needs to be scaled back in favor of train systems or public transit. We can look to other developed countries for ways to better connect people
 - o We can learn from the past and how communities worked together to grow and share food
 - o There is a need to rethink everything we know – public policy, land ownership, and whether cities are even the best use for place and space in an equitable society

“I think about what Ruth Wilson Gilmore says all the time, which is ‘capitalism's job is to save capitalism.’ And if capitalism's job is to save capitalism and we keep thinking about... big box stores at the center of our food system, then... our imaginations are already too constrained... I love when people ask me questions about solutions and [I think], we change everything. [N]o one wants to hear that. But that is actually fundamentally a part of what it means for us to think about what is something that is more sustainable and equitable.” *Dr. Ashanté Reese*

CONTINUED LEARNING AND ACTION



Read more about the intersection of food and Black lives and neighborhoods through Dr. Ashanté Reese's [research](#) and [books](#) or her [essay](#) on scarcity and abundance



[Read more](#) of Dr. Sadler's research and keep up to date with his latest projects



Volunteer with or donate to organizations like City Harvest or other local food pantries



Read about lived experiences with food access inequality in [Houston](#) and the work one community store (and partner of Share our Strength's Cooking Matters) is doing to combat it



Support your local community stores to continue to offer healthy, affordable and accessible food



Call or email your legislators to let them know that expanding SNAP benefits is a priority for you. [You can find your legislators here](#) or search “Find my legislator” and your state.



Advocate for SNAP Benefits and eligibility requirements during elections



Keep an eye out for Dr. Ashanté Reese's books on Sugar and Carcerality and Racial violence and Black people gathering

FEATURED PANELISTS



Keith Carr is the Senior Manager, Policy and Government Relations at City Harvest. He works to advance the organization's hunger, food insecurity and food access policy priorities and keeps abreast of timely city, state and federal policies and proposed legislation and their implications on City Harvest's clients, our food pantry and soup kitchen partners and the communities we serve, and works to develop advocacy strategy around key issues.

Prior to joining City Harvest, Keith consulted for small businesses and nonprofits, community-based organizations, and cultural arts groups. He provided them with strategic planning, fund development and marketing solutions, as well as advising on board and organizational development. He has also worked with the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce, Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz, and the Office of Minority Health at the NYC Department of Health, and served as Senior Advisor on Economic Development to State Senator Kevin Parker.

Keith studied economics and marketing at the University of Connecticut and has completed the Columbia Business School's Developing Leaders Program for Nonprofit Professionals.

He has lived in Brooklyn for 33 years. Originally from Hartford, CT, Keith spent his childhood summers on his grandparents' farm in northeastern Connecticut where they grew the best Silver Queen corn, Kentucky Wonders, collards and callaloo you have ever tasted.



Dr. Ashanté Reese is assistant professor of African and African Diaspora Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. She earned a PhD in Anthropology from American University and a bachelors of arts in History with a minor in African American studies from Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. Broadly speaking, Dr. Reese works at the intersection of critical food studies and Black geographies, examining the ways Black people produce and navigate food-related spaces despite anti-Blackness. Animated by the question, who and what survives?, much of Dr. Reese's work has focused on the everyday strategies Black people employ while navigating inequity. Her first book, *Black Food Geographies: Race, Self-Reliance, and Food Access in Washington, D.C.*, takes up these themes through an ethnographic exploration of anti-Blackness and food access. *Black Food Geographies* won the 2020 Best Monograph Award from the Association for the Study of Food and Society. Her second book, *Black Food Matters: Racial Justice in the Wake of Food Justice*, is a collection co-edited with Hanna Garth that explores the geographic, social, and cultural dimensions of food in Black life across the U.S. Her work has been supported by the National Science Foundation, the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, and the Mellon foundation and has been published in a variety of academic and public venues: *Antipode*, *Human Geography*, the *Oxford American*, and *Gravy Magazine* among others.

Currently, Dr. Reese is working on a project tentatively titled, *The Carceral Life of Sugar* in which she explores the spatial, economic, and metaphorical resonance of the plantation in the early 20th century convict lease system in Texas and the ongoing carceral significance of sugar in everyday (Black) life.



Richard (Dick) Sadler, PhD, MPH, is an associate professor in the Department of Public Health at Michigan State University. He is an urban/medical geographer with expertise in environmental science, GIS, food systems planning, and land use policy in legacy cities. His research interests include integrating urban planning and public health topics related to neighborhood/built environmental effects on health. Recently, this has revolved around uncovering elements of structural racism in the housing environment and determinants of urban development that exacerbate racial and socioeconomic inequality. Methodologically, Dr. Sadler combines spatial analysis and community-based participatory research

approaches to address challenges in the urban environment. While his research focus remains on his hometown of Flint, Michigan, he aims to use the lessons learned from this work to bring a unique lens to existing collaborations in Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, Grand Rapids, Ontario, and beyond. Some of his service contributions include serving on the boards of Edible Flint, the Flint Fresh Food Hub, the Flint & Genesee Food Policy Council, and the Flint Mission Zone of the United Methodist Church (which runs the South Flint Soup Kitchen). Throughout his work, the overarching goal is to strengthen the understanding between the built environment and health behaviors/outcomes with the objective of shaping land use policy to build healthier cities.

Moderated by



Ken Kolb is a professor and the chair of the [Sociology Department at Furman University](#) in Greenville, South Carolina and an inaugural [Aspen Food Leaders Fellow](#). Ever since returning from the Peace Corps in Paraguay to finish his Ph.D. in sociology, he has spent the past 20 years conducting community-based research by spending time with neighborhood groups and talking to people one-on-one. As an ethnographer seeking to facilitate social change, Kolb documents the everyday realities of struggling communities so that he can equip them with the data they need to convince their policymakers to take their complaints seriously. His most recent book, [Retail Inequality: Reframing the Food Desert Debate](#), analyzes how institutionally racist infrastructure policies of the past created the disparities within our food systems today. In it, he argues that simply adding new grocery stores is not enough. Improving food access requires systemic change. Ken and his team recently published **Racial Displacement in Greenville, SC: An Exploration of Historic and Current Population Shifts in the City of Greenville and Surrounding Greenville County**.