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U study in north Minneapolis asks: Do we eat more fast food because we want it or because it's there?

Brooks Johnson : 16-21 minutes : 4/21/2022

Queen Frye started questioning her local food landscape at a young age.

Growing up in north Minneapolis, she concluded the choices available were "conditioning us to eat a certain way, which is predisposing us to health risks."

Looking at the dozen fast-food restaurants on West Broadway today, she still wonders: "Is that what we want because that's how we eat, or do we eat it because it's here and those are our options?"

Her question is now the focus of a University of Minnesota research project that seeks to "challenge the legacy of fast-food outlets in north Minneapolis."

U professor and researcher Fernando Burga's work will explore historical policies and planning documents to explain how and why the area has attracted so many fast-food outlets and so few other choices.

Whatever the causes, researchers say the result is a neighborhood that is less of a "food desert" lacking any choices and more of a "food swamp" with plenty of unhealthy food options.

"Research on food swamps is relatively new, but driving around north Minneapolis, the phrase makes intuitive sense, as there seems to be an abundance of cheap and convenient food sellers offering items loaded with empty calories," according to a report from the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis.

The negative health implications of concentrating fast food have been documented — food swamps are a [clear predictor of higher obesity rates](#), said Kristen Cooksey Stowers, a professor at the University of Connecticut and a leading researcher on food environments.

"This is something we should think about, especially if we care about health inequities, health disparities," she said. "Over time, our neighborhoods and built environments are designed for disease."

This kind of environment is more often found in low-income areas with higher percentages of nonwhite residents. But Cooksey Stowers said she has found that "regardless of the level of income inequality, the food swamp effect persisted" — meaning that having an abundance of fast food in an area is, all by itself, a predictor of negative health outcomes.

Historical redlining, white flight, transportation inequities, barriers to lending and entrepreneurship for local residents, concentrated poverty, outdated zoning rules and other factors have led to food swamps in other cities, research has found.

But understanding why north Minneapolis specifically became so populated with fast-food restaurants — and who made those decisions — remains unstudied.

Burga said his research goal is "more than just asking the question, finding the answer and moving on." It will involve public outreach and input from residents.

"I aim to make it into a process that fits the community and one that makes it useful to them," he said. "It involves more than just being an academic at the university who looks in archives and actually engaging people about their history."

Frye, co-founder of the urban garden nonprofit R. Roots, said there is proven demand for a more diverse set of food options found in abundance in other parts of the metro.

"We've talked to the youth, and they want to see a Tropical Smoothie or Chipotle or Crisp and Green," she said. "Why don't we help them have that for their future?"

Frye said she doesn't want to put any restaurants out of business but instead encourage developers — and residents — to take a chance on alternative options.

"I don't want it to be, 'You need to change this now,' " she said. "I want it to be this gradual thing and people don't even know their lifestyle shifted."

Appetite For Change has been supporting "slow food" in the neighborhood for a decade. The nonprofit runs Breaking Bread Cafe and the West Broadway Farmers Market and has a keen interest in what the U study uncovers.

"I think there's a lot of perceptions and misalignment around food values," said Michelle Horovitz, co-founder and vice president of innovation at Appetite For Change. "People are so used to leaving their community to get what they need and want."

Horovitz questions why other parts of Minneapolis and the metro don't have the same problem.

"You don't see Edina getting flooded with fast-food options," she said.

Frye said the biggest benefit that the research can provide is knowledge — how the food landscape has been shaped by outside interests and how that can change.

"When you think about the options you have, you have to think about the history of this neighborhood," she said. "When people feel like they don't have power or choice, now I really understand how far back that goes — it's layered and embedded into policies."