

**The Grocery Gap in America:
How segregation policies of the past live on through the inequality of food accessibility**


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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received
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Introduction

With the COVID-19 pandemic sweeping across the nation, roughly 23% of households in the United States are currently food insecure, meaning those households have “limited or uncertain access to adequate food” (Silva, 2020; *USDA ERS - Definitions of Food Security*, 2020). Food insecurity is defined as households not having consistent access to enough nutritious food for an active and healthy lifestyle (*What Is Food Insecurity in America?*, n.d.). Those who suffer from food insecurity often live in a food desert, where access to affordable and healthy food options are limited because of a lack of supermarkets within convenient traveling distance. More specifically, a food desert means that there is no supermarket within one mile of one’s home and no access to a vehicle. Instead, options such as fast-food restaurants and convenience stores that sell cheap and unhealthy foods are the go-to because of this unequal distribution of grocery stores. This unequal distribution and disparity of access to healthy foods across communities is known as the grocery gap (*The Food Trust | The Grocery Gap*, n.d.). The lack of supermarkets in low-income communities compared to higher-income areas is a harmful legacy of racist 20th century American policies that targeted the Black people, a claim that is evidenced by the overlap between who and where the grocery gap, and these policies, affects, and affected, respectively. Even with the pandemic being responsible for the recent growth in food insecurity and hunger, there is a deeper-rooted cause: housing segregation and districting policies of the 20th century.

The New Deal in 1933 and the creation of the Federal Housing Administration in 1934 introduced redlining to communities across America. Redlining describes the systematic denial of services and loans by federal and state governments which often purposefully affected African Americans and other communities of color (Gross, 2017). Langdon Winner’s theory of political

technologies provides a useful lens for breaking down how housing segregation policies implemented by all levels of the U.S. government affected, and continue to affect, low-income Americans by way of the grocery gap (Winner, 1980). History and the contemporary world of politics points to a society that used (and uses) policies such as those mentioned above to make a statement about the power the government holds over Black people in America. While overt efforts to segregate communities or to deny certain groups services based on race is illegal today, it is still clear that these racist policies have impacted the way people live and the resources they have access to.

Background & Rationale

Food security is an issue that should be addressed across the globe, as more than 690 million people go hungry every day, even with enough food produced to go around (*World Hunger*, 2018). While in the United States, hunger numbers are not as proportionately high, food security, food deserts and the grocery gap are still topics that need to be looked at as a health crisis to be addressed in the near future. With about 2.3 million American households living in a food desert, people simply are not getting the nutrition they need. Convenience stores and fast-food chains do not often sell foods that are necessary for a balanced diet, such as proteins, whole grains, and fresh fruits and vegetables. In the U.S. almost 40 million people live in an area where it is easier to “buy grape soda instead of a handful of grapes” (*The Food Trust | The Grocery Gap*, n.d.). These food deserts are often made up of low-income families; with 23.5 million people living in food deserts, 11.5 million of those are low-income (Caporuscio, 2020). Additionally, data show that African American families are twice as likely to face food insecurity (Silva, 2020).

Both the immediate issue of a lack of nutrition as well as the root of the food insecurity and grocery gap problem are cause for concern. With a lack of supermarkets that do sell healthy and fresh foods, it becomes much harder to maintain a proper diet. One in three food insecure adults are obese, highlighting an important correlation between a lack of access to a nutritious diet and unhealthy weight gain (Pan et al., 2012). An unhealthy diet can lead to obesity, which can cause numerous other life-threatening diseases such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke and metabolic syndrome. Not only does obesity cause early mortality, but it also leads to an increase in costs for medical care, treatments and procedures (*Adult Obesity Facts*, 2021). A solution to the grocery gap should be sought after in an effort to decrease adult United States obesity rates from the staggering 42.4% that exists today. Potential solutions should start on the smaller scale in communities and local food stores and work their way up to larger areas and broader solutions addressing systemic racism.

Racism and the Continuing Grocery Gap

We must look to the past to address the cause of the grocery gap and understand the issue as an ethics problem. The statistics relating the grocery gap and race are not a coincidence. There is evidence that the grocery gap, disproportionately affecting communities of color, is a legacy of policies such as redlining, that intended to harm African Americans and Latinos in an attempt to create a system benefiting white Americans. Racism lives on today not only through the grocery gap, but perhaps more obviously in law enforcement, education and healthcare. The events of the summer of 2020 related to the Black Lives Matter movement sparked a rise in protests against police brutality and killings of Black people. These events are a continuation of years of racist events and show evidence of a broken system that disadvantages Black people. Additionally, the uninsured rate among African Americans for health insurance is 9.7%, compared to 5.4% among

whites, and African Americans experience illness at higher rates and have lower life expectancies than other racial groups (Taylor, 2019). As I will address later in this paper, justice ethics tells us that all people, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, should have access to proper nutrition and not be afraid of where their next meal will come from. The rationale behind this research paper is that a system-rooted unethical and racist past, should be analyzed to show the connection to the current grocery gap and how the harm might be reversed to provide more equal access to food.

Research Question & Method

How have historical segregation policies, including “redlining,” in America contributed to the current issue of grocery gaps between communities, where lower income neighborhoods have significantly fewer supermarkets than their wealthier and even middle-class counterparts?

In this research paper, policy analysis and historical case studies will be used as primary methodologies to investigate this question. Policy analysis includes studying past and present policy documents including local, state and federal laws, government hearings and institutional guidelines (Patton et al., 2012). Policies including Jim Crow laws that mandated segregation and the National Housing Act created by the New Deal that subtly enforced housing segregation are carefully explained to highlight how the effects of these policies influence today’s society, especially in the area of food security. Additionally, historical case studies will be used to gather information about past events, court cases and policies and show the importance of these in relation to today. The differences between the obvious, outright segregation of the time and the hidden, implicit segregation today will be carefully evaluated. The gathered sources will be organized in a way that brings to light just how broad and deep these effects are today.

STS Framework

The political technologies framework will be used to relate the historical policies of segregation and housing to the current grocery gap today. The political technologies theory was developed by American political theorist Langdon Winner and describes the way artifacts and technologies can have politics and through this, have power and authority (Winner, 1980). To expand on this, Winner said that technologies can become political through technological development, such as a divided park bench, or they can be inherently political, such as an atomic bomb. Through technological development, an artifact can be used to increase the power of some over others; a divided park bench that prevents homeless people from sleeping on them at night puts authority over these people even though the intended design of the bench was not to do so. When an artifact is inherently political, it is made with the purpose of creating a certain power dynamic; the atomic bomb was created with no other intention besides winning World War II.

In relation to the grocery gap in America, housing segregation and districting policies were, and continue to be, used as political technologies. Policies such as Jim Crow laws and the Plessy v. Ferguson court case are inherently political technologies, while The National Housing Act was more closely a technological development. Regardless, the importance of acknowledging these policies as political technologies that work to segregate Americans into certain communities that then create effects relating to education, poverty, health and, as I expand on in this paper, food accessibility, is immense. The bringing together of science (healthy foods), technology (policies used as political technologies) and society (equity through our communities) through this research paper is a necessary step towards reversing harmful effects of a racist past.

There are, of course, criticisms of Winner's political technologies theory that seek to discredit the validity of the theory. German sociology professor Benward Joerges and British

sociologist Steve Woolgar have both argued that the political technologies theory is counterfactual because the “politics” of artifacts can be interpreted in many different ways so anyone could craft a narrative to support their view about what politics an artifact has (Joerges, 1999). Joerges says that this could lead to multiple conclusions about an artifact from the same political technologies theory. He also argues that the main example Winner uses, Robert Moses’s low hanging bridges that were engineered to prevent poor people in buses from using the highways, is simply a “highly successful parable” that uses one specific instance to draw conclusions about human behavior. Even with these criticisms, it is important to note that the other examples mentioned above can be looked at through the theory’s lens, as well as the core argument of this research paper, and are strengthened by the use of the political technologies theory. In the analysis that follows, I will use the idea behind the political technologies theory to show how the Black people in America are at a disadvantage in the area of food access, specifically through the grocery gap, due to years of racist policies put into effect by the U.S. government, as well as the government’s lack of working towards justice.

Analysis & Discussion

Racism is a disease that to this day runs its course in the bloodlines of this country. From the slaughterings of Native Americans when English colonizers first arrived in North America, to the horrible mistreatment of African Americans as slaves, to the many other groups of color in America that suffer daily acts of racism, there is still so clearly a living virus. The United States of America was founded on the idea that white people, more specifically white men, were superior to people of color, especially enslaved African Americans. Slaves were given few rights, were treated as property and were exploited for harsh labor. Even after the American Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation in the 1860s that declared an end to slavery, after the

Civil Rights Movement in the 20th century and the election of the country's first Black President in 2008, racism remains a legacy. Additionally, the Reconstruction Era at the close of the Civil War introduced Black Codes and Jim Crow laws grew from these right-restricting laws (Nittle, 2021). This legacy is so pervasive in almost every aspect of American life, that it is hard to ignore its presence (Allen, 2020). From the all-too-frequent killings of Black people by police to the everyday microaggressions experienced by the Black community, it is clear that the issue has not been solved. While this paper does not claim an answer for how to end racism, it aims to draw connections between policies that enforced racism as a system and the current problem of the grocery gap in America, and offer potential starting points for change.

Racist Policies of the Past

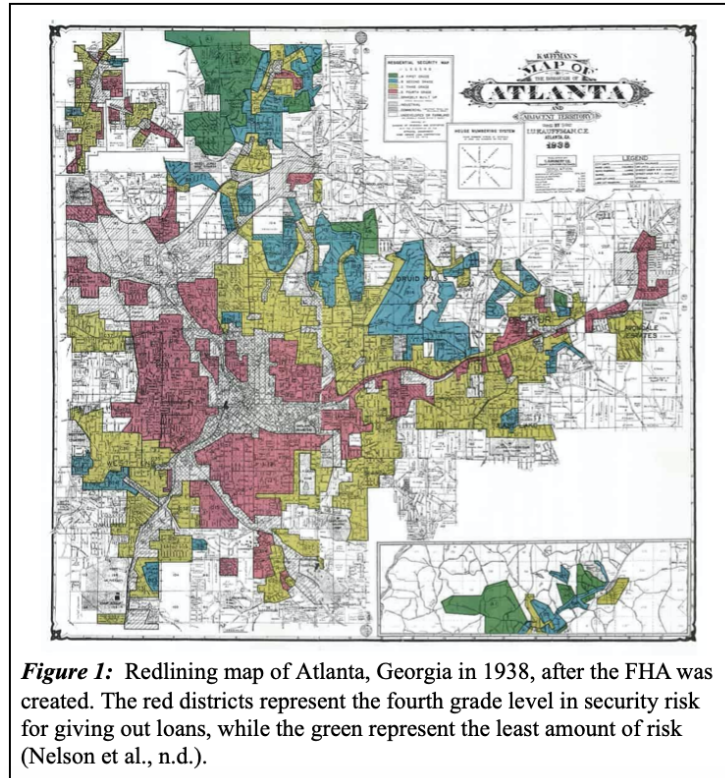
Some of the important policies that are analyzed in connection to today's grocery gap include the Plessy v. Ferguson U.S. Supreme Court case, Jim Crow laws and several housing policies created out of the New Deal starting in 1933. Plessy v. Ferguson was the 1896 case that justified the "separate but equal" doctrine and paved the road for continued segregation in schools and other public accommodations and the more official Jim Crow laws (History.com Editors, 2009). With this ruling, freedoms and rights granted by the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the Constitution – freedom from slavery, the right to citizenship, and the right to vote – were taken away (*Slavery and Civil Rights* | *Boundless Political Science*, n.d.).

The Jim Crow laws that followed enforced racial segregation in the South and sought to establish white people as superior to Black people. These laws, which lasted until the 1960s mandated separation of races in all public places and prevented Black people from voting with literacy tests and the grandfather clause. Even after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which attempted to end segregation in public areas and ban discrimination based on race, color, religion

and sex, racism was still deeply rooted in American culture (*Legal Highlight: The Civil Rights Act of 1964* | U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.).

It is important to jump backward and mention the New Deal of 1933 in more detail, as it created several policies and programs that would leave a lasting detrimental impact. The New Deal programs created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt as a result of the Great Depression did indeed help millions of struggling Americans. However, regardless of intention, minority communities were negatively impacted by the housing policies created by the New Deal. The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) created by the National Housing Act in 1934 aimed to boost home ownership, encourage home financing and support home mortgage lending (*1934: Federal Housing Administration Created*, n.d.). While data shows that the FHA “saved 3 million jobs and half a trillion dollars in economic output”, the positive effects were not felt equally across races and ethnicities (Griffith, 2012).

Minorities, including Black people, were not seen as equal to whites by the FHA; while mortgages were easily lent out to whites, Blacks were often refused mortgages and loans on houses (Gross, 2017). Predominantly Black neighborhoods were seen as risky investments and thus people living near or in those neighborhoods could not get loans, making home ownership far out of reach. This was all in an effort to keep minorities in crowded, urban areas while white Americans lived in the suburbs. The denials of these services, such as loans, based on race is known as redlining. Physical red lines were drawn on city maps to represent “hazardous” neighborhoods that posed high risks, as shown in Figure 1 (Nelson et al., n.d.). As a form of segregation, redlining prevented Black home ownership, and therefore, accumulation of wealth (Jan, 2018).



Studies and data show that even with the Fair Housing Act of 1968 that made redlining illegal, lasting effects are still being felt by low-income and especially Black populations. To this point, areas that were deemed “hazardous” more than 80 years ago now suffer from greater economic inequality, experience residential segregation and show continued effects of redlining, as one study by the National Community Reinvestment Coalition (NCRC) showed (Mitchell & Franco, 2018). 74% of these neighborhoods are low-to-moderate-income today and about 64% of them are minority neighborhoods. It is therefore clear that redlining has left a legacy of inequality, which includes the area of food accessibility.

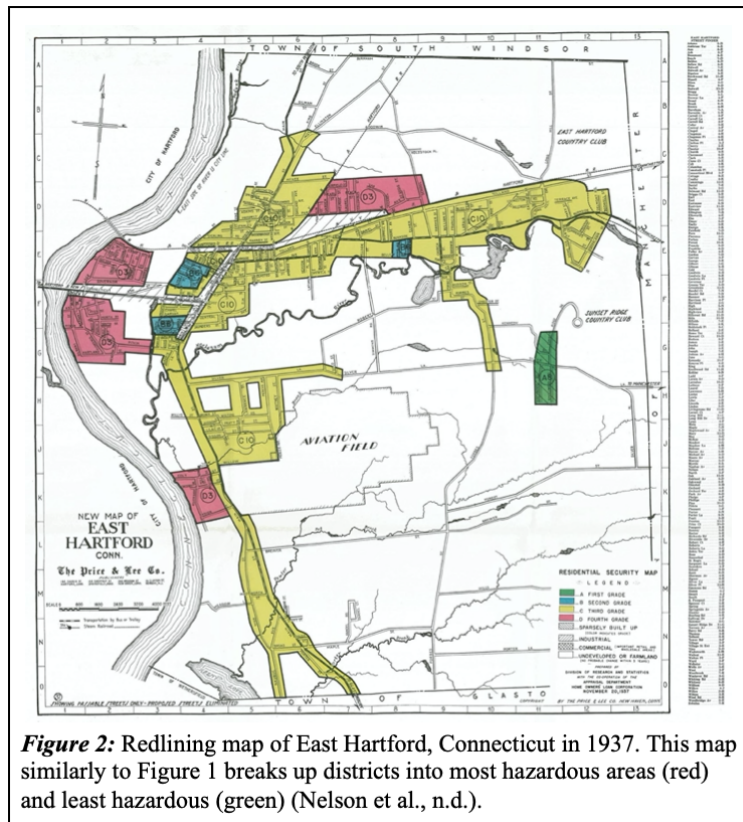
Connecting the Grocery Gap and America’s Racist Past & Present

Food accessibility is one of the main areas where redlining has left a negative legacy. Not only is there an increasing wealth gap between whites and minorities based on [a lack of] home ownership, but there is an increasing grocery gap as well. Food insecurity, as defined previously

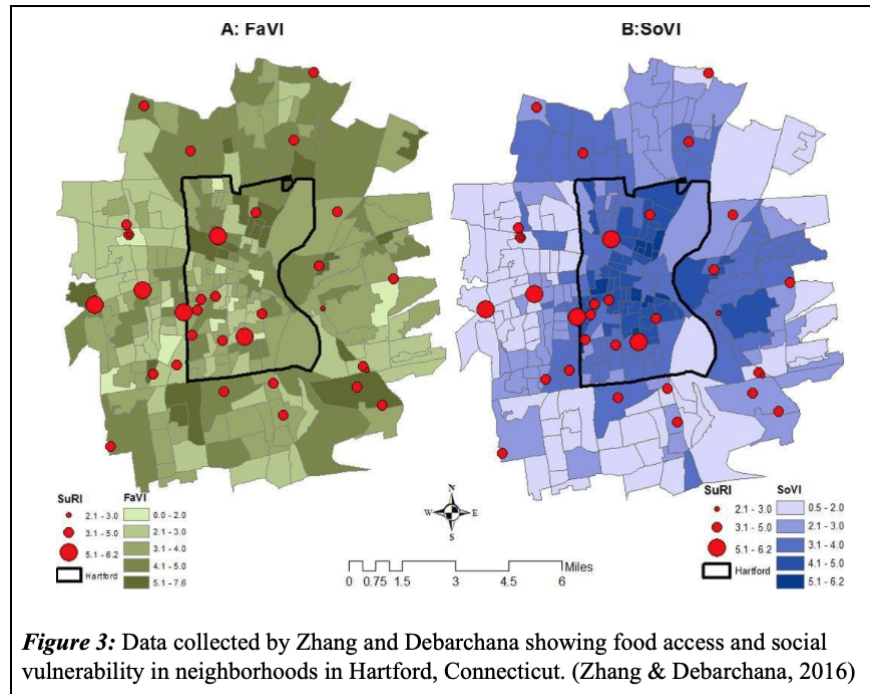
as not having a consistent access to healthy and fresh foods, stems from poverty, which disproportionately affects Black people, indigenous people and other people of color (BIPOC) in America. As just mentioned, most areas of poverty today were impoverished (and predominantly minorities) during the time when redlining was legal, so it is no coincidence that these areas would also suffer from hunger and food insecurity (*Redlining and Food Justice in America 2020*, 2020). One statistic shows that while 31% of whites live in a census tract with a supermarket, just eight percent of Black people live in one (Ploeg et al., n.d.). Additionally, Black people are 2.5 times more likely, and Latinos are 1.38 times more likely to live in an area without a full-service grocery store (*The Food Trust | The Grocery Gap*, n.d.).

Supermarkets themselves often do not want to build in these lower income, previously redlined areas because of high insurance rates in high crime areas, business fluctuations due to the food stamp program and lower demand and thus lower profits (Zhang & Debarchana, 2016). Additionally, oftentimes when large supermarkets close in areas of lower income, new stores do not open in their place, which expands the grocery gap further. A term recently used to describe this phenomenon is, appropriately named, “supermarket redlining” (Eisenhauer, 2001). Zhang and Debarchana argue that supermarket redlining occurs because of perceived urban and logical obstacles, the former including aforementioned profitability, crime rates and cultural biases. The lack of openings and prevalence of closings of grocery stores affects poor communities, especially where redlining of Black neighborhoods in the past occurred.

Specifically, one study conducted in Harford, Connecticut looked at the relationship between supermarket redlining and neighborhood vulnerability (Zhang & Debarchana, 2016). While this study did not take a look at the neighborhoods that were segregated and redlined in the 20th century, comparing the study results and redlined maps is telling. Figures 2 and 3 show



the redlined map of East Hartford in the 20th century and data from the current Hartford study, respectively. The red dots in Figure 3 represent the Supermarket Redlining Impact (SuRI), which combines two additional factors, food access vulnerability (FaVI) and social vulnerability (SoVI). The area to the right of the black-outlined area of Hartford, which is East Hartford, shows similarities that are hard not to notice. Some of the darker green and blue areas in Figure 3 in East Hartford, which represent higher food access vulnerability if a supermarket closes and a higher contribution of social variables to food insecurity, respectively, line up very closely with the “hazardous” districts in Figure 2. As evidenced by the data, the correlation between redlined districts from the era of overt segregation and the more implicit, yet present, grocery gap today in America is clear.



The connections between past policies, as mentioned above, and the grocery gap does not mean that we live in a much-improved, less racist society today. In fact, one of the reasons the grocery gap exists today is that contemporary American policies continue to perpetuate the racist upbringings of the country and they have not been properly addressed. One of the greatest examples of the continuing racism is the racial disparity between Black people and white people killed by police. Between 2015 and 2020, Black people were killed at a rate 2.6 times higher than whites for armed victims and three times higher for unarmed victims (Belli, 2020). In the last three weeks alone, 64 people have been killed by law enforcement officers, with Black and Latino people making up more than half of that number (Eligon & Hubler, 2021). Even so, there has been little accountability for the officers who commit the crime. While the April 20, 2021 court decision that found officer Derek Chauvin guilty of all three charges against him (second-degree unintentional murder, third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter) after he killed the unarmed George Floyd showed hope for the future, Chauvin joins only a

handful of other officers help responsible for their crime. There is still much work to be done to truly break down the systemic racism in our country today.

In an effort to kill the disease that plagues the United States, solutions must be implemented on a small scale to deal with the grocery gap and food accessibility and then work towards addressing systemic racism more broadly. Encouraging corner stores and convenience markets to sell healthier options by way of consultations with the added incentives of cheaper loans, free advertising and business training programs is one starting point (Saltzman, 2017). Creating community gardens, farmers markets and pop-up stores are other ways to bring access to healthy foods into a community before introducing a larger-scale supermarket. Additionally, the government could make it easier for families to utilize the food stamp program, increase benefits for those living in food deserts and increase the minimum wage to a livable level (Decker, 2016).

On a broader scale, it will take significant political commitment by local, state and federal governments to acknowledge how the system disadvantages people of color and actually implement real solutions. People such as police officers, who commit unjust crimes against others, especially Black people, must be held accountable and sentenced according to the crime they commit. Education in schools must be more comprehensive of American history, so as not to downplay slavery, the sufferings of Black people in this country today and the role that white people played throughout. Once this is done and mindsets change about equality and justice for people of color in America, the non-coincidental overlap of redlined districts and food-insecure areas will become less obvious and the gap of food and health disparities between people of color and white people will decrease.

Access to proper nutrition, healthcare and a right to life can be argued from an ethics perspective. Both justice ethics and rights and autonomy ethics offer unique perspectives to understanding why access to proper nutrition and healthy foods is important for all people. Justice ethics states that decision makers should focus on what is fair to all those involved. Specifically, it allows us to point out that people of color deserve just as much access to nutrition as any other group of people. There is no reason why BIPOC should be experiencing food insecurity at much higher rates than whites and the fact that this remains the case is evidence that racial disparities still exist. Additionally, rights and autonomy ethics views the individual as a source of ethics and that individual choices should be protected by a set of rights. Looking through this lens, it is easy to see that food access is a right and that all humans should have access to food, so having a more equal distribution of grocery stores with healthy foods in an effort to close the grocery gap is necessary.

Limitations

The conclusions drawn from this research and analysis are limited in several ways that would be helpful to address for the sake of future research. The main limitation was in the amount of time allotted to conducting the research and analyzing what this research means. While preliminary research started almost six months ago, the analysis of these resources in relation to the STS frameworks only took place over the course of two-and-a-half months. Prolonging the research and analysis time would allow for discovery of more resources, more in-depth analysis and perhaps the inclusion of other aspects of life that the historical policies mentioned have influenced such as education, healthcare and homeownership. Expanding on the issue of ethics in relation to the grocery gap could be done and used to make arguments towards why work should or should not be done to close the grocery gap.

There are also counterarguments that exist to the claim I make in this paper. Specifically, many people in the country would deny that systemic racism still exists in America today. Representative Scott Perry (R-Pa) said that systemic racism does not exist and that because there is no one “operating and nurturing that [racist] system” it cannot exist (Moreno, 2020). Surveys have also shown that 50% of white Americans believe people of color could succeed if they tried harder (Simon, 2020). These opinions and beliefs are dangerous to the necessary fixing of policies, programs and systems. They stem from a lack of education, acceptance of ignorance and a failure to acknowledge that change is needed. If these people were to take the time to do the research, find the statistics or even simply read this research paper, it would be clearer just how deep of a hold racism has in America.

Conclusion

The continuing wealth gap between white Americans and minority populations is cause for extreme concern. More specifically, the grocery gap that exists and creates huge disparities in access to healthy and fresh foods is an ethical issue where equality and justice are not met for all Americans. The United States government cannot sit by idly while policies of redlining from the 20th century continue to be used as political technologies to segregate Black and minority populations. The government has an ethical obligation to create new policy to intentionally reverse the harms of redlining, to ensure that food insecurity does not correlate with where red lines were drawn on maps, and that minority populations do not continue to suffer from issues that should be long gone. Before the grocery gap continues to increase, it is important that the disparities are acknowledged as stemming from a deeply racist past and future solutions are sought out and implemented.

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