

Diets of Latinos and blacks have greatest environmental impact per dollar spent on food

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Despite spending less than white households on food overall, black and Latino households have more impact on the environment per dollar spent on food than white households, according to a new study published in *Environmental Engineering Science*.

The report suggests that black and Latino households tend to spend more on foods that have greater negative environmental impacts, such as grains and protein (e.g., cereals and chicken), and buy more [food](#) to eat between meals.

"Our current study shows that the food purchasing patterns of Latinx and black households have greater negative impact on the environment per dollar spent compared to white households because the foods they tend to purchase are more environmentally intensive to produce," said Joe Bozeman, a graduate student in the University of Illinois at Chicago Institute for Environmental Science and Policy and first author on the paper. "But because white households spend more money on food overall, their impact on the environment, in general, is still greater."

Bozeman believes that black and Latino households may be motivated to buy more food for in between meals due to feelings of food scarcity, driven by low household income.

In a previous study, Bozeman and his colleagues found that white people's eating habits were responsible for producing the greatest amount of [greenhouse gas](#) compared with Latinos and blacks.

In the current study, Bozeman and his colleagues explored the environmental impact of food consumption patterns among blacks, Latinos and whites in the U.S. per dollar spent. They analyzed household income and food spending data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and food consumption estimates from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's What We Eat in America—Food Commodity Intake Database.

They developed a novel quantitative metric that included the overall environmental impact of common foods in the fruit, vegetable, protein, dairy and grain categories; the amount spent on food; and socioeconomic status. The researchers evaluated environmental impact by looking at the amount of land affected, water used, and greenhouse gas emitted in the production of basic food items.

They believe that the higher per-dollar rates of environmental impact for Latino and black household food purchasing are attributable in part to relatively low average household incomes among these demographic groups. Lower [household income](#) has been linked to the purchase of more inexpensive, energy-dense foods such as cereals and snacks, which can have a greater negative impact on the environment per dollar spent compared with lower calorie foods like fresh fruits and vegetables, which tend to be more expensive.

When the researchers analyzed the percentage of food consumed for each food category, they found that black households consumed the highest proportion of grains and protein in their diets, whereas white households consumed the most milk. Black households spent about 18% less on grains, 6% less on protein, and 32% less on dairy on average than white households over the course of a year.

Latino's purchasing patterns had the highest environmental impact. The foods they consumed use 59% more land, produced 16% more greenhouse gases and used 12% more water compared with white households on average annually. Foods consumed by black households use 52% more land, produced 5% more greenhouse gases and used 12% more water than white households annually.

"Different messaging and tactics relevant to particular demographic groups may be needed to encourage environmentally friendly and healthier food spending behavior," Bozeman said.

"Incentivizing particular demographic groups to shift to more fish or plant-based foods, which, based on our study and literature review, are better for the environment. This can be done through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or by adding environmental impact information to dietary guidelines to help raise awareness and hopefully reduce the environmental [impact](#) of everyone's eating patterns."

Bozeman said that addressing food access issues could also help facilitate the purchase of less environmentally intense foods.

More information: Joe F. Bozeman et al, Distinguishing Environmental Impacts of Household Food-Spending Patterns Among U.S. Demographic Groups, *Environmental Engineering Science* (2019). [DOI: 10.1089/ees.2018.0433](https://doi.org/10.1089/ees.2018.0433)

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