

One major change, though, was in the amount of money spent targeting black viewers—it increased by half from 2013 to 2017. Most individual companies increased their spending on black-targeted television between 2013 and 2017, and Hershey, PepsiCo, and Domino's Pizza dedicated the biggest chunk—around 4 percent—of their advertising budget to that group.

In addition, the gap widened between the number of food-related advertisements black and white children and teens saw. In 2013, black children and teens saw 70 percent more ads than white peers, and in 2017, that grew to 86 percent. While the amount of ad spending on black-targeted television might have contributed to the growing gap, it also might be due to the changing amount of time the groups spend watching television. “The amount of time spent watching TV is going down, but the declines are much greater for white teens than black teens,” Harris says.

Socioeconomic factors might contribute to that discrepancy, she says: Wealthier, white communities might be more likely to pay for and watch television on services like Hulu or Netflix. “That’s great, but if you’re in a lower income household, you might not be able to afford that.”

Research shows that kids consume more junk food when they’re exposed to junk food advertising, and that ads help solidify brand preferences in children—so if black and Hispanic kids have more exposure to these ads, they’re more likely to eat more unhealthy food. “[Companies] would argue that they’re not increasing consumption of sugary drinks overall, or fast food overall,” Harris says. “But when sugary drinks are marketed, it grows the whole category, not just the one product.”

Black and Hispanic communities are already disproportionately affected by certain diseases that are exacerbated by an overconsumption of junk food, so the advertising targets compound an existing public health problem.

“These companies are targeting kids in communities where their families have higher rates of

obesity and diabetes and heart disease, which these products contribute to,” Harris says. “They’re not even trying to market healthy foods to these kids, which doubles down on it being unhealthy. I’m sure they’re not thinking of it that way, they’re trying to grow their business. But looking at the bigger picture, it’s really harmful.”