LAWRENCE, Kan. (AP) – Two Lawrence journalism instructors are conducting a study that they hope will shed light on the way the media portrays diabetes among American Indians and lead to better health options.

Teresa Trumbly Lamsam and Rhonda LeValdo-Gayton, who are American Indians, said they've seen the effects that limited food choices on reservations can have and understand the poor health conditions some Native Americans face, and that they believe the media largely ignores the issue, the Lawrence Journal-World reported Saturday.

“I feel like we just really got to step this up,” said LeValdo-Gayton, who teaches at Haskell Indian Nations University. “I feel like we're going to lose people that we don't want to lose.”

They said say hope by conducting their research they can start a conversation that will lead to better reporting on the topic that it could lead to better outlooks for people facing diabetes.

“Mainstream news does influence public opinion and public policy in this country,” said Lamsam, who teaches at the University of Kansas. “How they're telling the story of diabetes makes a difference to what happens in D.C.”

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services says American Indians are three times likely to die from diabetes than the general population. About 16 percent of American Indians have diabetes, more than double the rate for whites. LeValdo-Gayton has lost several family members to the disease and wants to keep her two children from the illness.

The women say diabetes is shortening the lifespan of American Indian elders and pushing younger adults to become keepers of the culture.

“We shouldn't be at this point. We should be having them around us a lot longer to teach that next generation,” said LeValdo-Gayton, who has lost three uncles to the disease. “I am just floored by everything I still have to learn, and I have to seek it from somebody else now.

“I don't want to see our next generation of people having to deal with death like this.”

Part of the study will look at how news articles frame the issue and whether the American Indians are blamed for the rise in diabetes or other factors. It is similar to studies that have looked at how the federal government fights other diseases, such as smoking and the 1960s when public health officials and the media focused on the power of nicotine to cause addictions.

Fighting diabetes could be the next topic that shifts from being an individual responsibility to a wider public health concern, they said.

The women conducted a pilot study over the summer and found that news articles over the past 14 years portrayed American Indians as being responsible for diabetes because of their eating habits or sedentary lifestyles.

The articles didn't address the availability of healthier food options or weight-management programs to help people control their diet and diabetes. The women said if more articles talked about the broader issues around the disease or how others have been able to fight back it could make a difference.

“We're talking about a collective culture, not an individualistic culture,” Lamsam said. “If people on a reservation see their friends and neighbors are living more healthy, it would probably make

it easier for them to live healthy lives as well.”

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Information from: Lawrence Journal-World, http://www.ljworld.com