

Growing Urban Agriculture: Equitable Strategies and Policies for Improving Access to Healthy Food and Revitalizing Communities



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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for Improving Access to Healthy
Food and Revitalizing Communities

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Foreword

A vibrant movement is changing the landscape, economic outlook, and vitality of cities across the country. The recent recession affected many low-income communities—taking with it manufacturing centers, jobs, and people while leaving behind abandoned homes and vacant lots. Now a new crop of urban farmers, along with activists, and community organizations are turning that land into productive use and turning around their communities.

Urban farming brings a multitude of benefits to struggling communities: improved access to healthy food, workforce training and job development, and neighborhood revitalization. Innovative programs and policies are cropping up nationwide; and city governments are creating urban agriculture-friendly policies to support urban farming.

While the movement is exciting, PolicyLink is committed to ensuring that it is an inclusive one. Many of the emerging policies could better target low-income communities and communities of color—the very communities that would so greatly benefit from the economic opportunities and revitalization offered by urban farming.

Growing Urban Agriculture lifts up the policies, practices, and programs that are working to sustain urban agriculture efforts in low-income communities and communities of color, drawing from the Urban

Agriculture and Community Gardens tool in the PolicyLink Equitable Development Toolkit (located on our website). The report is grounded in extensive conversations with farmers, advocates, and policymakers to better understand the operational, financial, and social challenges that arise in making this work responsive and relevant to the needs of underserved communities. It highlights the creative solutions that are being implemented to make certain that the products remain affordable and accessible and that community interests are represented in the process. Tough issues like land security and access to water are addressed.

The scale of the efforts is impressive and the commitment to finding solutions no less so. Urban agriculture is not an oxymoron. It is a beautiful, productive, and unifying movement that is making a difference in our communities. With this report, we hope it will only continue to grow. The time is ripe to embrace such a system of food production.



Angela Glover Blackwell
Founder and CEO
PolicyLink

Executive Summary

In urban communities across America, urban agriculture is taking root as an innovative solution to increase access to healthy food while, at the same time, revitalizing the economic and social health of communities. For the purposes of this report, urban agriculture includes small and mini-sized agricultural operations in metropolitan areas that may include distribution, processing, and marketing efforts. *Growing Urban Agriculture* details the benefits of this new trend, lists many of the common challenges and solutions, and presents policy recommendations for further growing an equitable movement.

Improving Access to Healthy Food

In many low-income communities, the only places to buy food are fast-food and convenience stores that sell fatty, sugary, processed foods. Some communities have no food vendors of any kind. This lack of access to healthy foods makes it difficult for families to eat well, fueling the country's growing obesity epidemic and the severe health problems that accompany it. Studies have consistently shown that there are fewer supermarkets and other retail outlets selling affordable, nutritious food in low-income communities than in wealthier ones, and in predominantly African American and Latino neighborhoods than in predominantly white neighborhoods.¹ However, there is good news: Studies show that residents with greater access to fresh produce consume healthier diets and have lower rates of diet-related diseases than their counterparts in neighborhoods lacking food access.² Urban agriculture is one such innovative approach to improve access to healthy food. Strategies to distribute healthier food through urban agriculture include the following:

- **Sell produce through farm stands, farmers' markets, and community**

supported agriculture (CSA). Farmers can choose from a variety of these retail options to provide healthy foods to their communities and surrounding neighborhoods. Many urban farmers offer sliding price scales and accept EBT (Electronic Benefit Transfer) cards for low-income families in their community. (EBTs allow state government benefits—including food stamp benefits—to be deposited into electronic accounts similar to credit card or ATM accounts so that recipients can pay for food.)

- **Use community gardens to improve healthy food availability for farmers themselves, along with their families, friends, and neighbors.** Families who participate in community gardening are able to offset typically 30 to 40 percent of their produce needs by eating food grown in their own gardens.³
- **Use urban farms as an opportunity to grow and sell culturally appropriate food and connect multiple generations.** Many farming projects support often healthier ethnic diets and help people grow culturally appropriate foods for their families and communities, all while connecting multiple generations through farming and diet.

Improving Economic Health

The economic environment of a community—job opportunities, homeownership, and the presence of diverse businesses—affects the economic health of a community. Urban agriculture can improve that economic health by creating jobs, providing job training and skills development, incubating and attracting new businesses, and saving families money.

- **Create jobs by growing an urban farm's capacity, including choosing appropriate crops, growing techniques, and scaling up production.** Urban farms that offer packaging and processing in addition to cultivating are typically able to create a considerable number of jobs. Farms often spur additional business development and entrepreneurship opportunities.
- **Provide job training and skills development.** Numerous urban agriculture projects focus on helping individuals find jobs and providing basic job skills and support within their communities, all while using urban agriculture to provide productive and empowering transitional employment.
- **Save families money by offsetting produce expenditures.** Urban farmers and community gardens can supply most if not all of their families' produce needs, sometimes saving what can add up to a significant amount of money.

Revitalizing Communities

The physical environment in which people live, work, and play greatly impacts their health. Neighborhoods with safe and clean outdoor spaces for people to gather, exercise, and play have a positive impact on residents' health. Urban farms are often planted on previously vacant or underused urban spaces and are then transformed into safe, attractive, and welcoming places. Urban farms offer the following benefits to communities:

- **Provide safe, attractive, and welcoming spaces for neighbors to gather and play.** Many urban farm projects incorporate community gathering spaces in their plan site and typically offer open spaces to congregate as well as to hold educational workshops, gardening training, and food preparation classes for the surrounding community.
- **Foster a sense of community and create safer neighborhoods.** Community gardens often link different sectors of the city, including youth with elders; and diverse race, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, all of which are in pursuit of one goal. Neighborhoods with community gardens also typically report reduced rates of crime, trash dumping, fires, and violent deaths, and an unexpected advantage: increased voter registration and civic responsibility.
- **Divert organic waste from city landfills into compost.** Many urban farms productively use food wastes from local retail outlets, restaurants, and residents, recycling this waste to generate compost for their farms.

Strategies for Addressing Common Challenges

Urban agriculture projects have great potential for improving neighborhood conditions; however, farmers face many challenges and obstacles when establishing and growing a garden in an urban environment. For instance, some of them face issues of land security, access to water, contaminated soil, high start-up and operating costs, inadequate business training, and insufficient income generation. Fortunately, communities are finding creative solutions to overcome these challenges.

- **Secure either long-term use of land, encourage investment in infrastructure through local government policies and land trusts, or secure permanent land ownership.** Some farmers hesitate to invest in infrastructure such as processing and sorting facilities, refrigeration, trucks, and on-site buildings because they fear their farms may be taken away either because of permitting or zoning issues or because they lack secure ownership of the land. A local government that owns the land can dedicate its use to urban agriculture through easements or informal agreements; organizations can also purchase and hold land in trust for an urban farm.
- **Work with the city or neighbors to make water more accessible.** Unlike traditional rural farming, many urban farmers set up their operations on a range of properties—from abandoned property to parking lots.

Accessing water lines is often very expensive and cost prohibitive for farmers who, consequently, have developed a variety of creative arrangements for accessing and paying for water. In some instances, farmers negotiate with nearby neighbors who have access and, in turn, pay them for usage; in other instances, city governments allow use of city hydrants at a set rate.

- **Deal with soil-quality issues by using raised beds, or hydroponics,^b if soil is contaminated.** Urban farms are often built on former gas stations, abandoned industrial sites, and parking lots—all with potential soil contamination. Soil remediation is often too costly for many farmers, who alternatively choose to use raised beds to avoid planting in contaminated soil.
- **Decrease high start-up and operating costs by collaborating with other farmers.** Urban farms are often small because of size constraints and, therefore, do not produce enough to warrant purchasing a lot of equipment. Small farmers can work together, sharing trucks, tools, refrigeration, and other farming needs. Pooling resources allows them to reach new markets, such as those that often require liability insurance, trucks, refrigeration, and sorting and distribution systems.
- **Identify resources offering technical assistance and business instruction to address inadequate business training.** Urban farmers often cite inadequate business training as a limitation to their growing and sustaining a business. Now available to them are urban farming programs, state extension offices, and the Small Business Administration,⁴ which offer business training for urban farmers wishing to start or expand an operation.
- **Increase potential revenue generation by extending the growing season and introducing economies of scale.** Urban farms can diversify the market to create

multiple income-generation opportunities, identify the market early to plan ahead, and evaluate success. Sustaining and growing an urban farm is often difficult, given the smaller size of the farm and lacking economies of scale. However, using greenhouses or hoop houses (greenhouses with plastic roofing wrapped over flexible piping) to extend the growing season can help create more efficient economies of scale and even move farmers into new markets. Farmers can increase profitability by selling food directly to consumers, grocery stores, corner stores, and community co-ops or by creating a value-added component, such as making salsa, to their operation. Strategic planning such as identifying the market early and establishing plans to sell and distribute food can also help pave a path towards financial sustainability and success. Finally, data supporting urban farming are important to help farmers to either change their operations or investigate potential financial opportunities.

Policy Considerations and Recommendations

Advocates and policymakers are instituting policies to support urban agriculture. While some of these policies support low-income communities and communities of color, there is still room to advocate for policies that focus more on the very communities that stand to greatly benefit from urban farms in their neighborhoods. Examples of supportive policies include the City of Seattle’s Department of Neighborhoods, which has inventoried land for urban farming with a concentration on low-income communities and individuals of color. The Brownfields Economic Development Initiative (BEDI), a federal grant program, assists cities with redeveloping abandoned, idled, and underused industrial and commercial facilities. The program primarily targets the redevelopment of such brownfields sites that increase economic opportunities for low- and moderate-income individuals. Following is a summary of several policy approaches for building an urban agriculture movement:

^b Hydroponics is the cultivation of plants by placing the roots in liquid nutrient solutions rather than in soil.

- **Identify and provide land for farming.** Local governments can identify vacant lots and make this information publicly available, authorizing contracts with private landowners.
- **Provide grants and low-interest loans.** Local, state, and federal governments can financially support start-up and operating costs. Governments can tap into workforce development dollars, state bond initiatives, and programs and funding opportunities offered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).
- **Provide city services to reduce costs.** Localities can provide trash collection, composting, and access to water, tools, and storage to help reduce urban farmers' expenses.
- **Include urban agriculture-friendly policies in general plans and adopt urban agriculture-friendly zoning policies.** Cities and counties can adopt urban agriculture-friendly language in their zoning codes and general plans, which will help shield urban farmers from redevelopment and encourage them to invest in infrastructure.
- **Pass resolutions, initiatives, and legislation supporting urban agriculture.** Urban agriculture-friendly policies can and should be passed at all levels of government—local, state, and federal. At the federal level, Representative Marcy Kaptur (D-OH) introduced the Community Agriculture Development and Jobs Act to create an office of Community Agriculture in the USDA that would better support urban agriculture efforts.
- **Increase funding for programs that train urban farmers and offer technical assistance.** Numerous resources are available to help farmers operate more efficiently by teaching them skills in nonprofit management or business operations as well as skills in agriculture production—for instance, cooperative extension agencies, community colleges, and Small Business Administration programs.

Authors' Biographies

Allison Hagey, a senior associate at PolicyLink, is a leading authority on innovative policies and strategies for increasing access to healthy foods and decreasing obesity and diet-related diseases in low-income communities.

Solana Rice is a senior associate at PolicyLink. As a researcher and policy advocate, she works to advance opportunity for low-income communities and communities of color by promoting equitable solutions to community development through wealth building, small business development, and other economically focused strategies.

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