

POLICY BRIEF

Community Gardens as Urban Greening: Cutting Crime & Improving Wellbeing

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Vacant Land in Buffalo

- Between 1970 and 2009, Buffalo's population declined by 16.3%
- There are 27,879 vacant housing units in Buffalo, with the majority of them abandoned
- There are over 12,000 vacant and abandoned properties total
- These "zombie properties" are a physical manifestation of the city's economic decline
- Buffalo's overall population continues to decline

The Problem of Vacant Lots

In the late 20th century, many cities across the United States experienced rapid population loss due to deindustrialization. In these Rust Belt cities, including Buffalo, around 15 percent of the land is now made up of vacant properties, which are largely concentrated in low-income neighborhoods.ⁱ More than just unsightly, these vacant lots create significant problems for both community members and city governments.ⁱⁱ For officials, maintaining these properties can be expensive and, unsurprisingly, often falls by the wayside. However, the last few decades have shown that the cost of *not* maintaining these properties is greater.

The presence of vacant properties has been associated with:

- Higher levels of crime and illegal activity including homicide, assault, prostitution, drug sales, and adolescent drug useⁱⁱⁱ
- Lower property values
- Higher incidence of cardiovascular disease and asthma among neighborhood residents^{iv}
- Higher rates of depression and stress^v

Greening Vacant Lots

The practice of greening vacant lots is *restoring and remediating distressed or abandoned properties*.^{vi} It focuses government funds and energy on transforming these parcels into places of respite for the benefit of the entire community. These spaces may be turned into green spaces, parks, rain gardens, or community gardens.^{vii}

"Without intervention, many of these surplus properties will eventually become blighted as the spiral of decay spreads from block to block...Vacant properties, however, are also raw materials communities can use to develop a vibrant urban environment."

-Schilling & Logan, 2008

Case Study: Philadelphia

“Those lots were bad when I first got here. Drugs and all that. Kids up to no good . . . But they fixed it up pretty soon after I got here. Put them tables in—big umbrellas, too. Kids started coming around. We got the garden going. Before, everybody would avoid this block. It was ugly, and dangerous, ‘cause you didn’t know who was gonna jump out of those bushes. Now it’s a lot better.”

-Joyce, North Philadelphia Resident



The City of Philadelphia is home to over **40,000 vacant properties**. Since 2010, the city has partnered with the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society to green at least **4,436 properties** and manage 2.3 million square feet of vacant land.^{viii} The Philadelphia LandCare program’s greening entails trash removal, grading the lot, planting grass and trees, and installing a low wooden fence. PHS estimates that it costs between \$1.25 and \$1.50 per square foot to stabilize a property. Maintenance costs on average, \$0.50/sq ft., and as little \$0.15/sq. ft., each year.^{ix} As the average lot in Philadelphia is around 1,000 square feet, it costs roughly \$1,250 to turn an abandoned lot into a green space that the community can enjoy, which can then be maintained for around \$150 a year.^x The program has been demonstrated to have huge impacts, including:

- a 39% reduction in gun violence in and around remediated buildings and a 5% reduction of gun violence in and around vacant lots^{xi}
- a 41.5% decrease in depression^{xii}
- a 62.8% decrease in self-reported poor mental health^{xiii}

For every \$1 invested, simple treatments of abandoned buildings and vacant lots return between \$5 and \$26 in net benefits to taxpayers and \$79 - \$333 to society at large^{xiv}

“When sites are clean and green, they allow people to see the potential of what could be there.”

-Keith Green, Associate Director of the Philadelphia LandCare program^{xv}



Community Gardens & Their Benefits

As defined by the American Community Gardening Association, a community garden is “a single piece of land gardened collectively by a group of people.”^{xvi} While they can be found in municipalities of all sizes of all sizes, community gardens were rarely a part of city planning. Unlike green spaces such as botanical gardens or city parks, which are often designed by top-down efforts, **community gardens are often bottom-up, collaborative creations.**

Community gardens can take many forms, with accompanying purposes, including:

- vegetable gardens for food or revenue
- therapeutic gardens for respite and therapy interventions
- teaching gardens for environmental education
- sensory gardens for play therapy
- work gardens as vocational training center

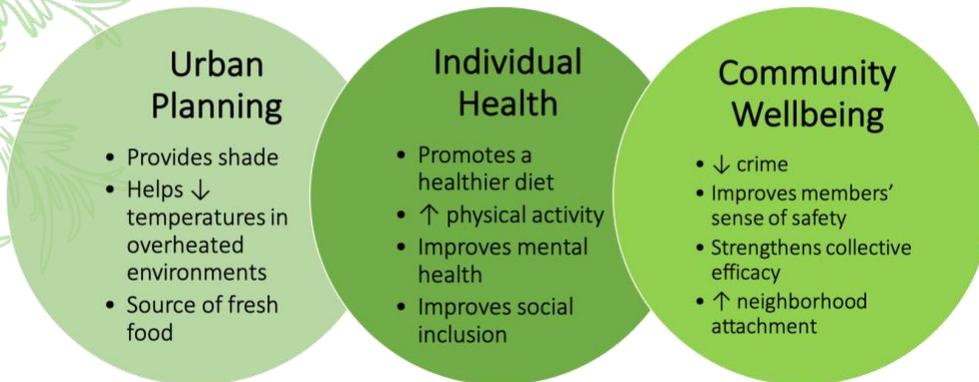


“They’re safe havens...the farms and gardens are giving people a peaceful place to go. Young people, old people...and we need that, because you can’t have a community without a community space.”

-Cordia Pugh, founder of the Chicago Hermitage Community Gardens project

Benefits of Community Gardens

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“Community gardens should be considered as a primary and permanent open space option as part of master planning efforts; gardens should be developed as part of land planning processes rather than as an afterthought in neighborhood redevelopment projects.”

American Public Health Association, Policy Statement: Improving Health and Wellness through Access to Nature, 2013

How a Community Gardens as Urban Greening Program Benefits Buffalo:

- Saves the city money
- Improves public health
- Increases public safety
- Grows access to healthy food
- Creates jobs
- Attracts positive attention

Why Urban Greening Is Right for Buffalo

1. IT'S IN LINE WITH THE CITY'S GOALS:

According to the Buffalo Land Use Plan (2016), "vacant land must be managed creatively, keeping as much as possible in active uses to reduce the negative impacts on neighboring properties."

2. IT'S ACHIEVABLE THROUGH THE BUFFALO GREEN CODE:

The Uniform Development Ordinance (UDO), also known as the Buffalo Green Code, was signed into law in 2017 and is an exemplar of rethinking zoning and land use, winning the 2019 Richard H. Driehaus Form-Based Code Award.^{xviii} Form-based coding is a land development regulation that uses physical form, rather than separation of uses, as the organizing principle for the code.^{xix} When it passed, the Buffalo Green Code was one of only three citywide form-based codes in North America.^{xx} The UDO specifically simplifies and supports the use of city land for purposes that benefit communities, such as gardens.^{xxi}

3. WE HAVE MANY VACANT LOTS: Buffalo's 12,000 vacant lots account for ~15% of the city's land.^{xxii} With the city's population still in decline, there is no reason for the city to keep all of these problematic properties.



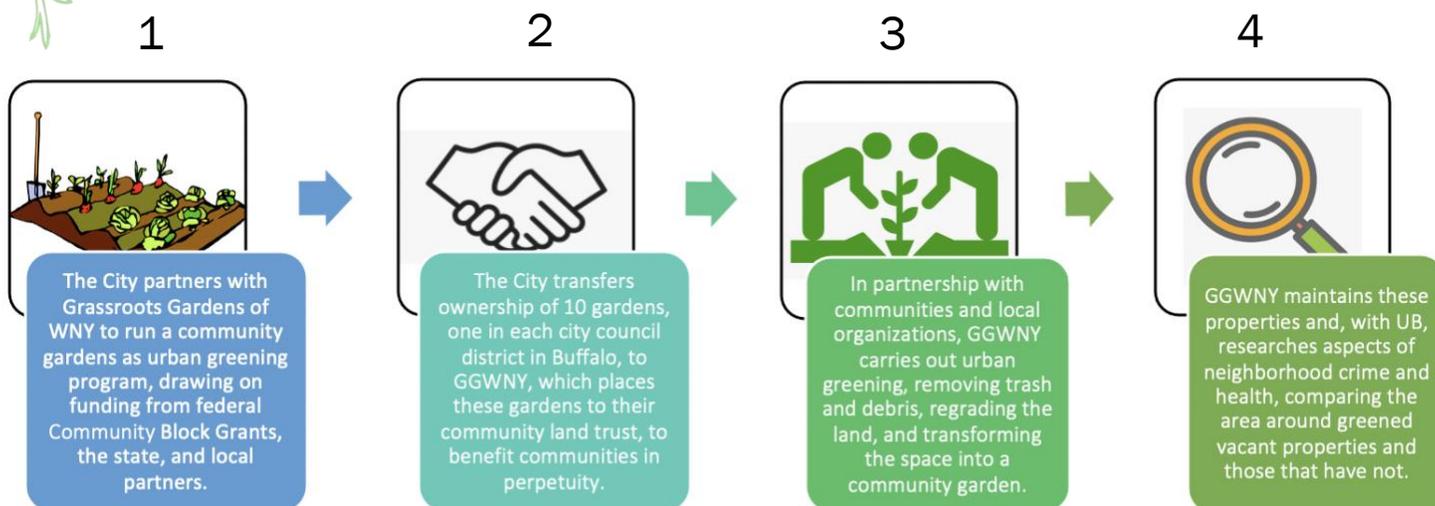
4. WE HAVE A STRONG ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNER:

Buffalo has a robust network of community gardens (around 100), managed by the nonprofit Grassroots Gardens of Western New York. GGWNY works with the city to negotiate and hold a master lease for the garden network, as well as city council members to support gardens in their districts.

5. WE HAVE LOCAL SUPPORT:

Local organization Partnership for the Public Good and PUSH Buffalo have both long advocated for urban greening in the form of greened lots, community gardens, and rain gardens. Additionally, modeled after Philadelphia's Community LandCare, this program could involve neighborhood-based organizations by engaging individuals in the creation and care of these properties.

Bringing Urban Greening to Buffalo



“The lot itself, our water spigot, that it’s like a park in the summer—all of it shows that City Hall can work for us. It changes the whole way we function together. It’s the reason we garden together.”^{xxiii}

-Ellie Dorritie, Activist & Gardener
Buffalo Cottage District Garden

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