Assessing the Potential for Urban Produce Gardening on Vacant Land

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Fruit and vegetable consumption is associated with decreased risk of chronic diseases and some cancers. Affordability, accessibility and limited transportation are some of the challenges to obtaining fruits and vegetable in low income communities. Community gardening is one means of increasing access to fresh produce in low income communities. An increasing number of local governments are providing opportunities for urban agriculture through policies that support food production, such as vacant land leasing. However, some vacant land may not be viable for food production for various reasons. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the viability of vacant land for use as urban gardens in an urban Midwestern city.

The study utilized observational, “ground-truth” methodology. Trained researchers conducted field site visits to government-owned vacant land properties. A field assessment tool was used to assess tree cover, proximate water access, and proximity to community assets such as public transit and bike lanes. One hundred and fifteen land parcels were assessed during early spring of 2013. Only 4% of land parcels had a nearby water source. We found that 92% of the land parcels had an adjacent sidewalk; 24% were located along a bus line. There were very few (6%) parcels that had a bike lane nearby. A total of 93% of the land parcels had at least one nearby structure that could be an asset for supporting the community garden, the most common structure being church. Tree cover was evaluated and we found that most had adequate shade.

This study shows the viability of vacant land for urban garden use. This information is valuable to community groups, churches and individuals who want to engage in community gardening. The next step for this work is to develop a report of this information to the low income communities to help them when planning.

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