



How Food Projects Can Exacerbate Urban Inequality

Chhaya Kolavalli, University of Kentucky

A growing number of U.S. cities are funding food projects such as urban farms, community gardens, and farmers markets. Aiming to address food insecurity, vacancy, and “blight,” such infrastructure projects are a top priority for many urban planners and policy makers, in part, because walkable cities that include green amenities are a major draw for investors and developers. Unfortunately, even though urban food projects are often heralded as an unequivocal boon to cities, these initiatives can exacerbate urban inequality in various ways.

My research explores this topic through an ethnographic study of green urban development in Kansas City, Missouri. I investigate how low-income minority residents engage with urban food projects, in order to better understand green urban development’s impact on urban hunger and economic disinvestment. My findings echo those of other scholars who have found that urban food projects, if not thoughtfully designed, can end up exacerbating urban racial divisions.

Gentrification and Housing Inequality

In Kansas City, my research shows, the launch of food projects is linked to an increase in rent and property values for surrounding properties. Residents of low-income neighborhoods often find any increases in rent or yearly property tax payments unaffordable, so urban food projects can accompany and promote gentrification by making neighborhoods more attractive to economically mobile populations. A study in California illustrates the point by showing that real estate agents are pointing to nearby urban food projects — such as community gardens, farmers markets, and city farms — to market housing listings and raise rents. Similarly, studies in New York, Portland, and Vancouver, find that urban food projects are linked to an increase in home prices, rents, and cost of living. Unfortunately, cost of living increases can push out low-income residents that green neighborhood amenities are supposed to benefit.

The Myth of Green Job Development

Many city governments are hopeful that urban food projects will bring job opportunities to urban residents, but the data do not support this argument. In Kansas City, for example, city officials enacted Urban Agriculture Ordinances partly as a means to encourage urban job growth. The ordinances offer tax breaks for urban farming businesses, provided that they offer at least one job. However, my research finds that a majority of jobs created by urban farmers in Kansas City are seasonal, part-time, and pay less than minimum wage (one farm apprenticeship program pays \$3 dollars an hour). For most urban residents, these “green-collar” job opportunities are not reliable sources of income. Not surprisingly, the jobs are often taken by those with outside sources of income, who are able to afford the limited pay offered by these apprenticeships. Other studies indicate that business owners as well earn meager incomes from urban farming. A 2012 nation-wide

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survey finds that many U.S. urban farmers struggle to make ends meet, earning on average less than ten thousand dollars per year. In short, policymakers cannot assume that urban food projects will bolster job markets or business earnings in the urban core.

Impacts on Urban Food Insecurity

Urban agriculture is also commonly pitched as a good way to counter hunger in low-income households as well as food desertification — a term that refers to the loss of grocery stores and other food outlet in distressed urban areas. For example, a common refrain in urban farm marketing materials is “x farm grew more than xx pounds of food in the urban core last year.” But increasing the proximity of urban residents to produce does not reduce food insecurity, just as more food production on a global scale does end hunger. My research in Kansas City shows that farm projects located in food deserts often distribute their produce to high-end farm-to-table restaurants located outside those areas. In many cases, little of the food grown in food deserts is actually consumed by local people who cope with hunger and limited food options.

Another oft-stated goal for urban food programs is to help urban residents eat healthier foods and understand where their food comes from. But this draws on false assumptions. In Kansas City, and many other cities, black and brown communities have lengthy histories of urban food production. My interviews show that a vast majority of them had family traditions of growing and cooking their own food and kept doing so amid busy and unpredictable work schedules. Yet urban gardening has negligible links to healthier eating except among upper-middle class people. For poorer households, wage increases are more consistently linked to increased consumption of fruits and vegetables; poverty, not ignorance, is the greatest hindrance to health.

How Can Cities Pursue Racially Equitable Green Development?

These concerns about their potential impacts do not mean that urban food projects cannot be valuable assets in U.S. cities. Scholars have linked urban greenspace to numerous indicators of improved quality of life. My research shows that many low-income Kansas City residents want urban greenspaces in their communities yet worry that they will raise the cost of living — suggesting that city officials who want equitable urban greenspaces should:

- **Design programs with racial equity explicitly in mind.** Research shows that considering racial equity from the start, not just class and income inequalities, can result in more racially equitable urban food projects.
- **Implement participatory decision-making to include the voices of long-term neighborhood residents.** The community land trust model — in which advisory boards of neighborhood residents guide new development — can help support equitable food projects.
- **Consider rent control in areas where green urban development infrastructures are enacted.** Cities should use mechanisms such as rent control to ensure that the development of green amenities do not price out existing neighborhood residents. Without these protections, the people who could most benefit from urban greenspace will likely be displaced.

Read more in Chhaya Kolavalli, "Whiteness and Food Charity: Experiences of Food Insecure African

American Kansas City Residents Navigating Nutrition Education Programs," *Human Organization*, 78, January 24, 2019 <https://scholar.s.org>

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