

Grow Some!: Building Strong Communities through Community Gardens



Naomi Hill, Sociology

Research Mentor: Robin L. Jarrett, Professor, Human & Community Development and African American Studies

Abstract

This project focuses on the effects of community gardens on impoverished inner-city African-American neighborhoods in Chicago. The thesis for this study is that patterns of social organization associated with stable, well-functioning neighborhoods can be replicated in communities through gardens. My research explores how small-scale efforts of community gardeners have the potential to serve as building blocks for larger-scale community revitalization efforts and addresses the following questions: 1) What are the characteristics of the neighborhood in which community gardens develop? 2) What is the role of gender in community gardens? 3) What community building processes are associated with community gardening? 4) How does this research contribute to sociological theories? 5) What are the applied implications of the research? Findings emerging from this study provide insight into five themes of community gardening: 1) how they are created, 2) the mission of community gardens, 3) motivations for involvement in community gardening, 4) contributions of the garden to both individuals and the overall community, and 5) envisioned futures of community gardens. Results indicate that community gardens are established through collective efforts by community members and maintained through active participation and ongoing recruitment. While there is no explicitly stated mission during early development of gardens, over time, the goal of the community garden is for members to help each other as well as the overall community. Motivations for involvement stem from community gardeners wanting to make efforts to improve their personal wellness, and also build a stronger community. Contributions to individuals and the overall community include a new outlook on the neighborhood, hope for further improvements in the community, feelings of being enabled to pursue other goals, and various positive impacts on families, teens, and children. The future of community gardens rests in the ability to expand in space and plant variety, increase participation, and further develop the garden as a social space.