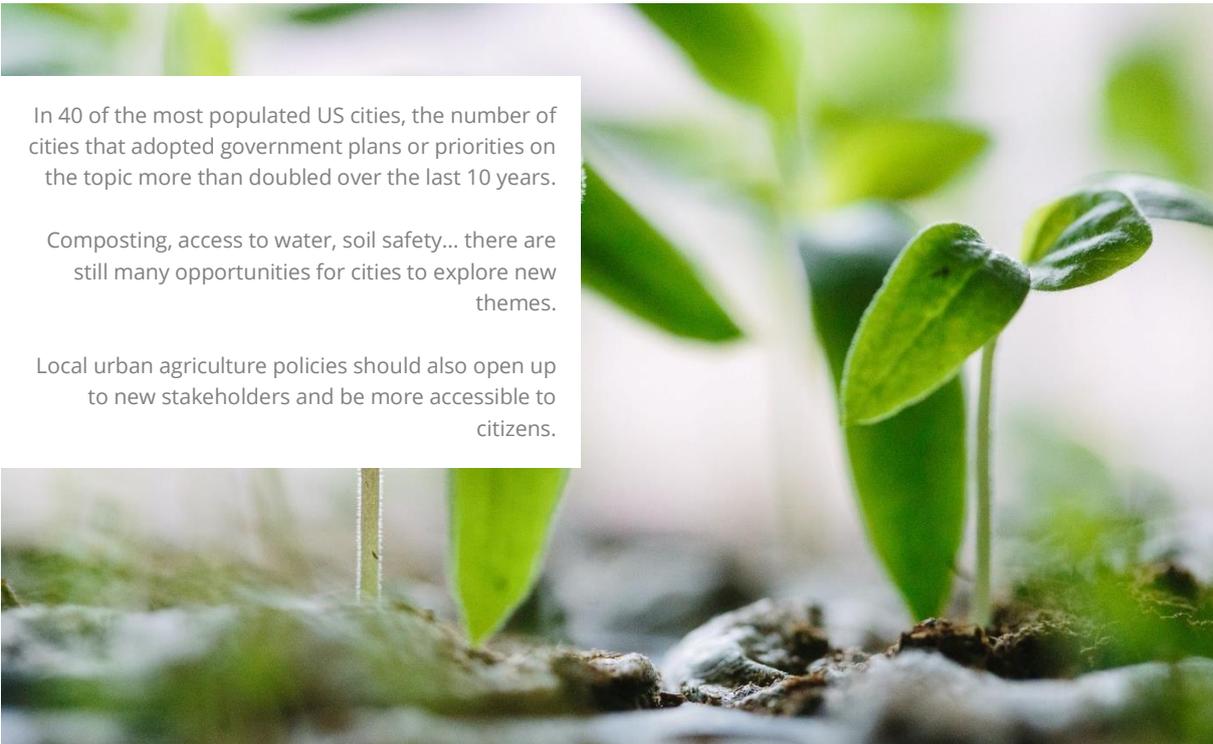


Where do US cities stand on urban agriculture?



In 40 of the most populated US cities, the number of cities that adopted government plans or priorities on the topic more than doubled over the last 10 years.

Composting, access to water, soil safety... there are still many opportunities for cities to explore new themes.

Local urban agriculture policies should also open up to new stakeholders and be more accessible to citizens.

Local urban agriculture policies have gained momentum since the turn of the XXIth century. However, it is difficult to get the bigger picture of where we stand after twenty years of policy development. For this reason, researchers from Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future reviewed past and current urban agriculture policies in 40 of the most populated US cities. For this review, they examined regulations as well as plans, guidance, programmes, and policy recommendations. They show that urban agriculture policies have greatly developed but that there are still many opportunities for them to explore new themes, open up to new stakeholders, and be more accessible to citizens.

Navigating the urban agriculture policies maze

Urban agriculture has fully entered the local policy agenda. Indeed, **the number of cities among the 40 examined that adopted government plans or priorities on the topic more than doubled over the last 10 years.**

However, **the first thing that surprised the researchers is how difficult it is to identify urban agriculture policies.** Indeed, they are scattered across different government departments/agencies, plans, and programmes that may not be labelled as such. And there is often no one-stop-shop where citizens can learn about their city's actions on urban agriculture and what they are eligible for (and subject to) if they want to start growing food. So even if urban agriculture policies have greatly developed since the 2000's, they remain a hard-to-identify policy.

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Once they managed to identify such policies, the researchers put together a database to analyse them. What struck them is the great variation in the number and scope of policies across cities. Even more intriguing, this variation cannot be explained by basic statistical differences between cities (number of inhabitants, location...). The results show that practitioners in some cities receive substantially more support for urban agriculture operations from municipal government compared to those in other cities, and also highlight areas where even cities with relatively robust policies could go further

Animal husbandry and land regulation

What are the themes that are most often tackled in these policies? The first one is animal husbandry. **Zoning and health-related regulations around animal husbandry are generally the oldest urban agriculture-related policies.** Most cities have such regulations. They went through an interesting evolution, though. Indeed, when they were first implemented, they were quite prohibitive. They aimed at limiting the sanitary impacts related to having animals in dense settings such as cities. **With the new interest surrounding urban agriculture from the 2000's onwards, they became more permissive.** For instance, a Nashville 1963 ordinance prohibiting chicken keeping was overturned in 2012.

The second theme is **land use**. This includes zoning, defining whether a special permission is required to practice urban agriculture, organising interim land use prior to development, or regulating accessory structures (such as sheds).

The database also revealed a great variety of other themes that are included by some cities, and that can serve as an inspiration to others.

This can be, for instance: soil safety, food sales, composting, water access or use, aquaculture, plant husbandry...

Finally, the search for policies pointed to opportunities for cities to incorporate urban agriculture into other policies, such as Adopt-a-Lot programmes.

Therefore, there is great scope for existing urban agriculture policies to develop further.

Who contributes to policies?

The researchers then looked at the governance processes that led to the urban agriculture policies that had been adopted. They showed that a common point between many cities was the fact that **urban agriculture policy is commonly created in partnership with actors outside of local government.** These can be members of food policy councils, networks of urban growers, non-profit service providers, urban agriculture entrepreneurs, private foundations, local restaurants... For instance, all cities but 5 have an active (or recently dissolved) food policy council.

These actors take part either in the design of the policy or its delivery (for instance, through the management of urban agriculture sites on public land). Public-private partnerships are often used to identify priorities or policy recommendations for the city, or to facilitate the implementation of programs supported by the city. For example, in Kansas City, Missouri, a local non-profit (Kansas City Community Gardens, KCCG) operates a program that provides grants to support water access for community

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gardens. The program is sponsored by the City of Kansas City and administered by KCCG.

This makes urban agriculture a very open policy that echoes the turn to greater participation in public policy. **It does, however, raise issues around social equity and food justice.** Indeed, the content of the policy will reflect the interests of the stakeholders involved in its making but may overlook the interests of other actors (such as community members traditionally underrepresented in policymaking processes, including people of color and people living in poverty).

Another risk that this article highlights is that of urban agriculture policies being submitted to stop-and-goes as municipal administrations change. For instance, mayoral initiatives, launched by a mayor or a county executive, may become inactive if they are not re-elected. Only 63% of the cities included in this analysis had a city council resolution on urban agriculture. If these policies are to be developed over a long period, they may require legislative or voter approval routes to ensure their permanency.

A database for everyone to get inspired!

The researchers are continuing to explore the database in more detail over the next few months, with specific papers focused on public land access and soil safety policies.

But they also want to share it with a wider audience of urban agriculture practitioners and policy makers. Indeed, [anyone can access it here](#) to have a look at what other cities are doing, identify topics others are tackling, and get inspired!

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