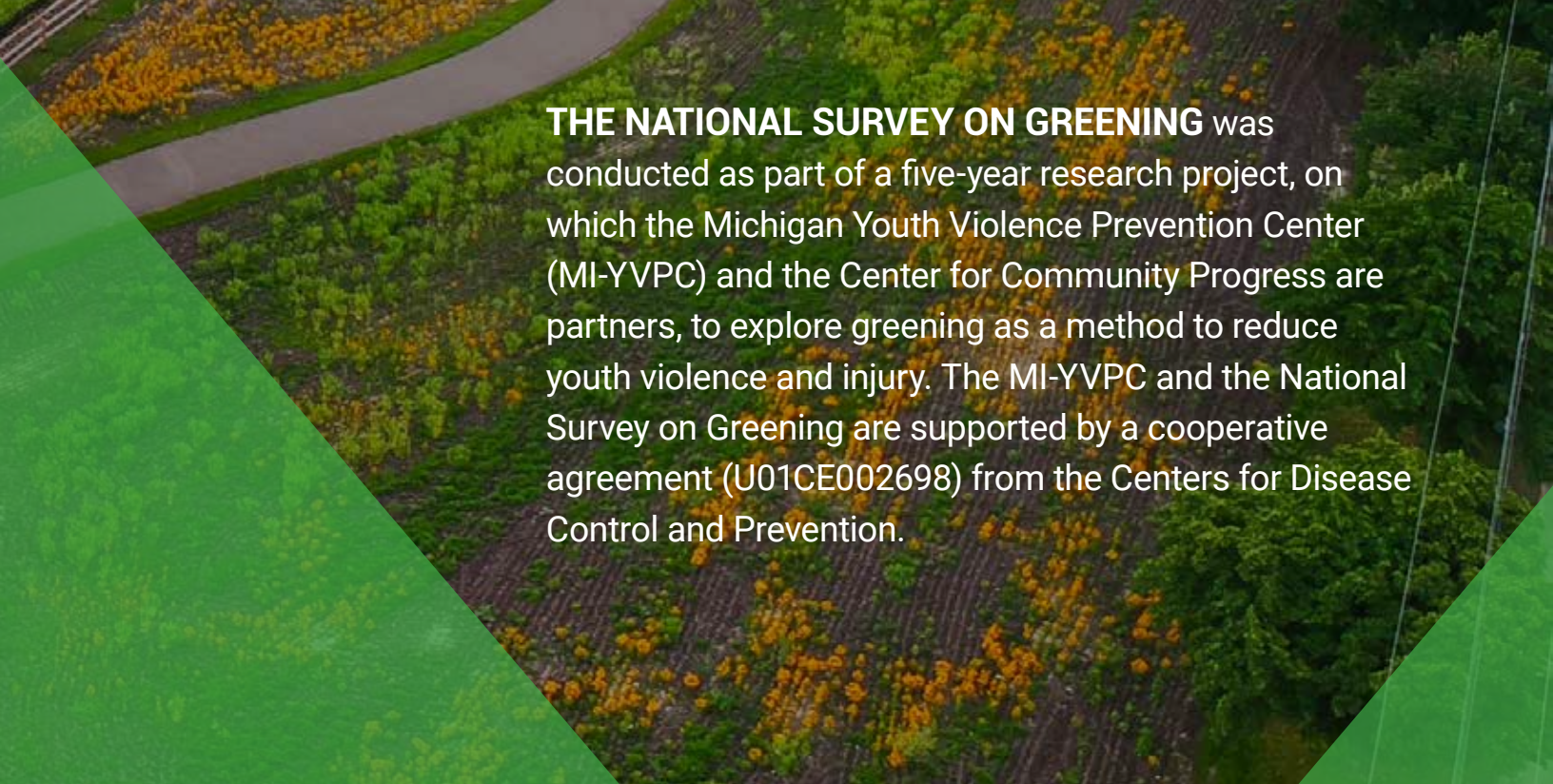




AMERICA'S **VACANT LOT LANDSCAPE**

Insights from the
National Survey
on Greening





THE NATIONAL SURVEY ON GREENING was conducted as part of a five-year research project, on which the Michigan Youth Violence Prevention Center (MI-YVPC) and the Center for Community Progress are partners, to explore greening as a method to reduce youth violence and injury. The MI-YVPC and the National Survey on Greening are supported by a cooperative agreement (U01CE002698) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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We want to express our gratitude to all of the organizations that participated in this survey. Without your time, data, and insights, we would not have been able to glean such valuable information. Thank you for helping to generate the necessary knowledge about vacant land maintenance and greening to move the field forward. Thank you for the work you do each day to benefit your communities.

ABOUT CENTER FOR COMMUNITY PROGRESS

The mission of Center for Community Progress is to foster strong, equitable communities where vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties are transformed into assets for neighbors and neighborhoods. Founded in 2010, Community Progress is the leading national nonprofit resource for urban, suburban, and rural communities seeking to address the full cycle of property revitalization. By nurturing strong leadership and supporting systemic reforms Community Progress works to ensure that public, private, and community leaders have the knowledge and capacity to create and sustain change. It also works to ensure that all communities have the policies, tools, and resources they need to support the effective, equitable reuse of vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties.

More information is available at www.communityprogress.net.


ABOUT MICHIGAN YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION CENTER

The Michigan Youth Violence Prevention Center (MI-YVPC), based at the University of Michigan School of Public Health, is one of five National Centers of Excellence in Youth Violence Prevention funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The MI-YVPC is currently examining the effects of vacant property greening on community violence, injury, and neighborhood social relationships.

More information can be found at <http://yvpc.sph.umich.edu>.

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Omaha residents
enjoy a community
garden and gathering
place, previously a
vacant lot.

INTRODUCTION

How are vacant lots evolving in the United States? What strategies do professionals consider most effective for returning purpose to these properties? What have practitioners learned in the last several years that other municipalities and organizations can benefit from? And what do organizations still need to do this work effectively? In 2019, the Michigan Youth Violence Prevention Center (MI-YVPC) and the Center for Community Progress (Community Progress) conducted the National Survey on Greening to find out.

Survey responses from 119 organizations, including land bank authorities, government agencies, nonprofits, and community organizations across 27 states, Washington D.C. and Puerto Rico, revealed clear trends. As inventories of vacant lots expand across the country, organizations that own, maintain, and green vacant property are implementing innovative strategies to manage vacant lots, repurpose land, and improve neighborhoods. Yet, many of these organizations do not have sufficient resources to meet the rising need for vacant lot greening and maintenance in their communities. This report presents descriptive findings from the survey on the current capacity, practices, and trends these organizations are experiencing and what they still need to effectively manage their growing vacant lot inventories.



KEY TERMS

Vacant properties	vacant lots or lots with vacant structures
Vacant lots	currently structure free lots that were previously developed (not undeveloped land, greenfields, etc.)
Vacant structures	unoccupied or abandoned residential, commercial, and industrial buildings
Maintenance	the basic care and upkeep of vacant properties (e.g. mowing and trash removal)
Greening	intentional enhancement of vacant lots (e.g. fencing, landscaping, community gardens, paths)
Public organizations	government agencies, land bank authorities, and redevelopment corporations
Private organizations	nonprofits, community organizations, and LLCs

ABOUT THE SURVEY & RESPONDENTS



THE SURVEY

Existing scholarship has linked vacant lots and structures to elevated levels of crime, fear of crime, and violence. Yet researchers and practitioners across disciplines increasingly view vacant properties as opportunities to redefine and reclaim spaces to create safe and thriving communities.

Building off their previous research on vacant lot greening as an approach for preventing youth violence and injury, the MI-YVPC teamed up with Community Progress to conduct a national survey on vacant lot greening.

Specifically, the survey was designed to gather information on vacant lot care practices with an in-depth look at the maintenance, greening, and management of vacant lots. Ultimately, the MI-YVPC and Community Progress sought to better understand the current landscape of vacant lot care across the United States. The survey explores the factors that help greening programs scale up and function optimally to bolster public health and safety benefits for communities.

The survey instrument used closed- and open-ended questions to understand the current capacity, practices, and needs of organizations related to inventory, activities, staffing, funding, engagement, and partnerships.

Only organizations that owned an inventory of vacant property or were involved in maintaining or greening vacant property were eligible to participate. In the final sample of 119 responding organizations, 65% were recruited through a list serve of organizations that had previously participated in Community Progress programming and the remaining 35% were recruited through email outreach, social media, and referrals.



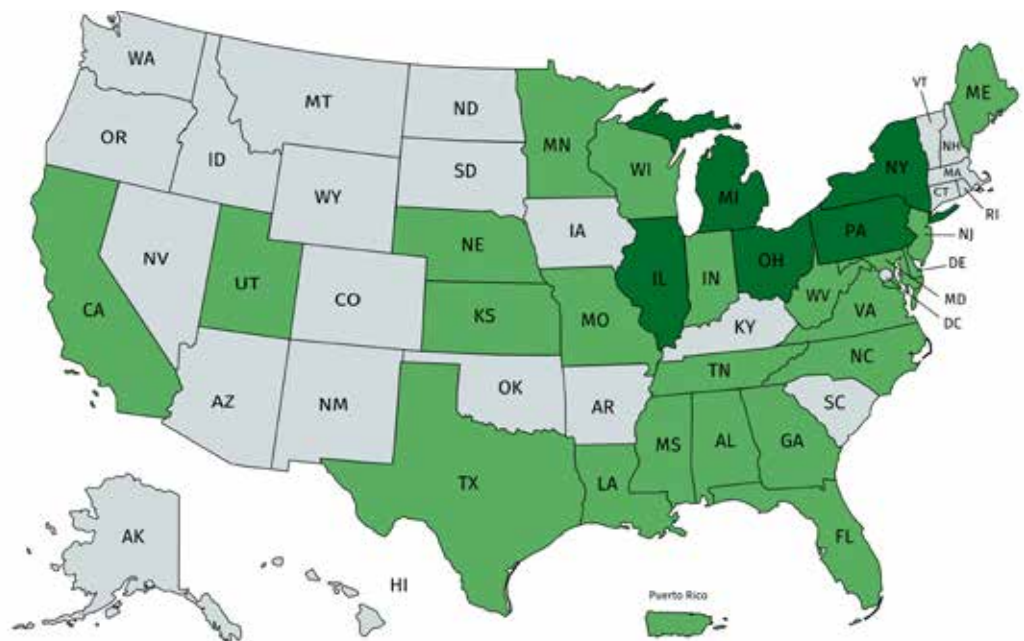
Student volunteers help with spring planting through Terra Advocati's youth engagement program.

Of the organizations that hold title to vacant property and engage in greening activities, nearly three quarters are land bank authorities and government agencies. Of the organizations that engage in greening but don't own property, nearly three quarters are nonprofits.

RESPONDENTS' ORGANIZATION TYPES

- **NONPROFIT CORPORATION (37%)**
- **LAND BANK AUTHORITY (30%)**
- **GOVERNMENT AGENCY (23%)**
- **LLC OR OTHER PRIVATE ENTITY (4%)**
- **COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION (4%)**
(E.G. BLOCK CLUB)
- **REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY (1%)**
- **OTHER (1%)**

Map of Respondents



THE FACTS ABOUT VACANT LOTS

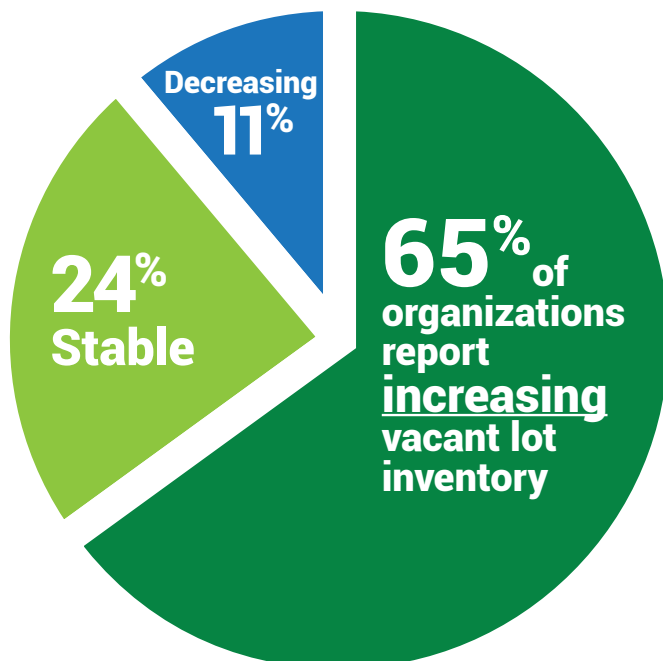
- VACANT PROPERTY INVENTORIES
- ACTIVITY ON VACANT LOTS
- WHO'S WORKING ON VACANT LOTS
- FUNDING VACANT LOT
MAINTENANCE AND GREENING

THE FACTS

VACANT PROPERTY INVENTORIES

Vacant properties are a challenging asset for many communities across the country. Vacant homes and other buildings generally garner the most concern and focus, from news stories to dollars spent addressing them. However, survey responses show that vacant lots make up the vast majority of vacant property inventories. This proportion has been growing due to significant demolition activity over the last decade. While large inventories are generally held by public entities, organizations of all types and sizes are active in managing vacant property inventories. Organizations take possession of vacant lots through a variety of means, ranging from donations to property tax foreclosure.

Vacant Lot Inventory Trends Over the Last Two Years

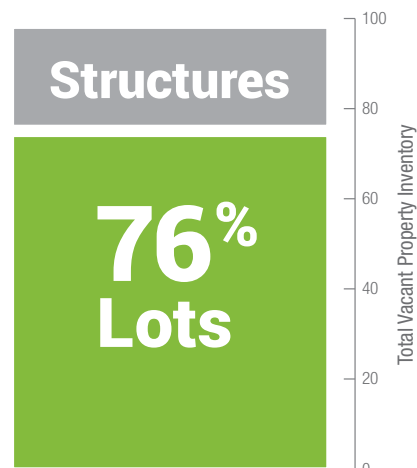


KEY TAKEAWAYS

- » Nearly two thirds of organizations reported that their inventory of vacant lots had been increasing over the last two years.
- » Vacant lots made up over three quarters of all vacant property inventories across the entire sample.



Average Make Up of Vacant Property Inventories

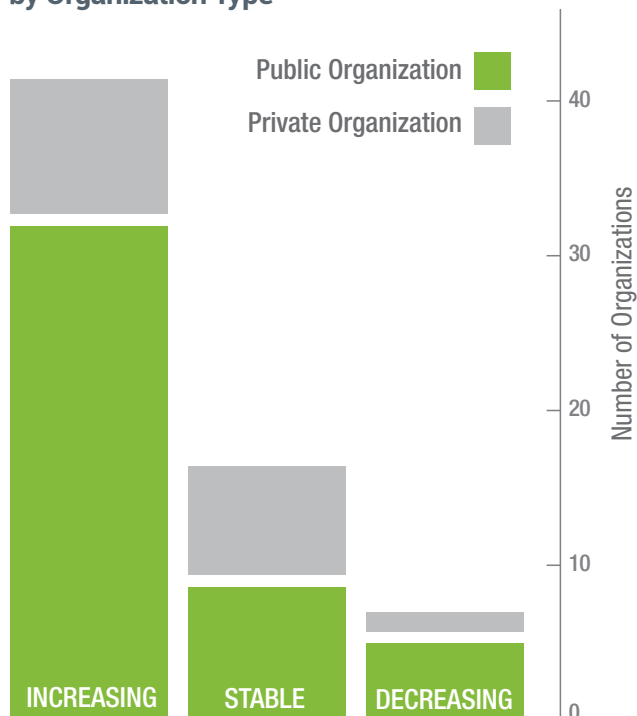


ADDITIONAL FACTS

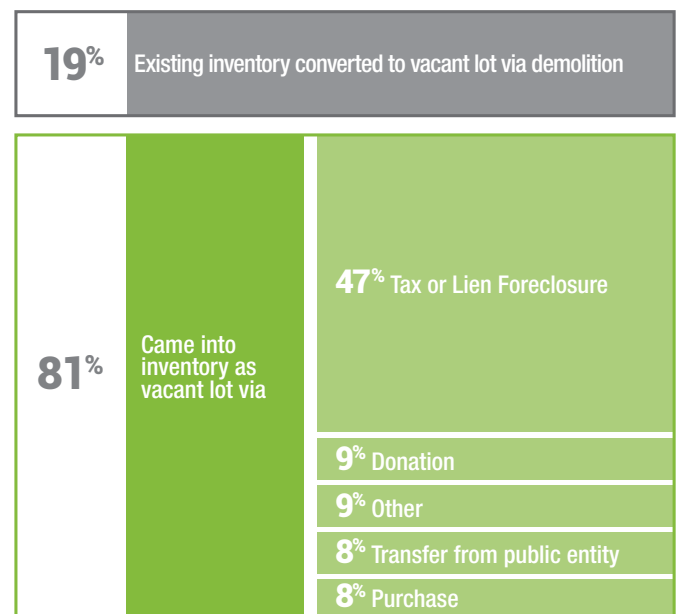
- Government agencies and land bank authorities were the most likely organization types to own a large number of vacant lots, whereas almost all (94%) of nonprofits owned less than 100 lots.
- Among organizations with increasing vacant lot inventories, more than three quarters (78%) are public organizations, and less than one quarter (22%) are private organizations.
- Land banks made up more than half of organizations with increasing inventories of vacant lots.
- Property tax or lien foreclosure was the primary source of vacant lots. Demolition was the second most common source.
- About one third of organizations anticipated that demolition would be decreasing as a source of vacant lots over the next two years.



Vacant Lot Inventory Trends by Organization Type



Sources of Organizations' Vacant Lot Inventories by Average Percentage



THE FACTS

ACTIVITY ON VACANT LOTS

Organizations are engaging in incredible work to transform vacant lots into local assets that help communities thrive. From community gardens to habitat restoration to energy production, organizations are drawing from a variety of approaches to give new purpose to previously vacant lots. While innovations and creative projects are happening, most of the activity on vacant lots is still limited to basic maintenance, such as mowing. Despite the diversity of activity on some vacant lots, very few lots have formal plans for future use overall. Access to lots for greening is also limited as many land-owning organizations provide only one or two options for residents and other stakeholder groups to access their land.

Organizations engage in a range of activities including:

Maintenance

Mowing, trash removal, snow removal, etc.

Basic Landscaping

Creative mowing, border trees, fencing, lighting, planting flowers

Community Gardens

Two or more families working together to grow fruits or vegetables

Market Gardens

Crops grown primarily for market or sale

Green Infrastructure

Rain gardens, bioswales

Orchard

Trees, fruits, Christmas trees, hardwoods, etc.

Natural habitat restoration

Prairies, native plants, pollinator gardens, etc.

Creative placemaking

Art installation, cultural events, etc.

Pop-up establishments

Farmer's markets, food truck rallies, beer gardens, etc.

Parks

New small parks, large parks or trail systems

Energy

Wind, solar, biofuels

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- » The vast majority of organizations that engage in greening only (do not own property) are accessing lots without formal permission or through methods that offer very little site security (i.e. Memorandum of Understanding).
- » No organization had a long-term maintenance plan for their full inventory of vacant lots.
- » Organizations across the country engage in a multitude of improvement activities, ranging from basic landscaping to energy production.
- » On average, organizations reported about 80% of their inventory had no plans for redevelopment.

8

Average Number of Improvement Activities by Organization Type



ACCESS TO VACANT LOTS

To maintain and green vacant lots, communities need a range of options for accessing vacant lots. Yet, access methods are limited, particularly for community residents and adjacent property owners.

Methods to Access Vacant Lots Most to Least Secure

Deed

Restricted or Otherwise

Long-term Lease

5 years or more

Short-term Lease

less than 5 years

License Agreements

e.g. Adopt A Lot

MOU

Memorandum of Understanding

No Formal Permission

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- It was most common for organizations (who own property) to provide only one method for accessing lots and traditional deed sales were the most common method.
- The vast majority of organizations that engage in greening only are accessing lots without formal permission or through methods that offer very little to no site security.

Most Common Methods to Access Vacant Lots for Non-land Owning Organizations

MOU

Memorandum of Understanding

No Formal Permission

Least Secure

ADDITIONAL FACTS

- On average, organizations offered nonprofits, government agencies, and community organizations more methods for accessing lots than they did for adjacent property owners and community residents.
- 16% of organizations do not make lots available in any way to community residents or adjacent property owners.

MAINTENANCE

Mowing, trash removal, and other basic care and maintenance activities are necessary for neighborhood stabilization and facilitating future uses. While the vast majority of organizations are engaged in maintenance activities, few have formal community-engaged maintenance programs and many are unable to maintain lots to their ideal standards.

Average Annual Mowing Expenditures by Inventory Size

\$11,060	1-100 lots
\$97,845	101-500 lots
\$453,004	500+ lots

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- » No organization had a long-term maintenance plan for their full inventory of vacant lots.



ADDITIONAL FACTS

- » On average, organizations reported mowing their lots 3.3 fewer times than they wanted to each year.
- » The majority of respondents were involved in maintenance activities.
- » Only 20% had formal maintenance or greening programs that involve community residents.
- » 8% of organizations that own vacant property reported that they do not mow their vacant lots.

Number of
Organizations
with Long-Term
Maintenance
Plans for their full
vacant lot inventory

0

ORGANIZATIONS

CURRENT & FUTURE USES

Innovative and creative uses are happening all over the country. To see examples of projects, visit our story map at www.communityprogress.net/vacantland.



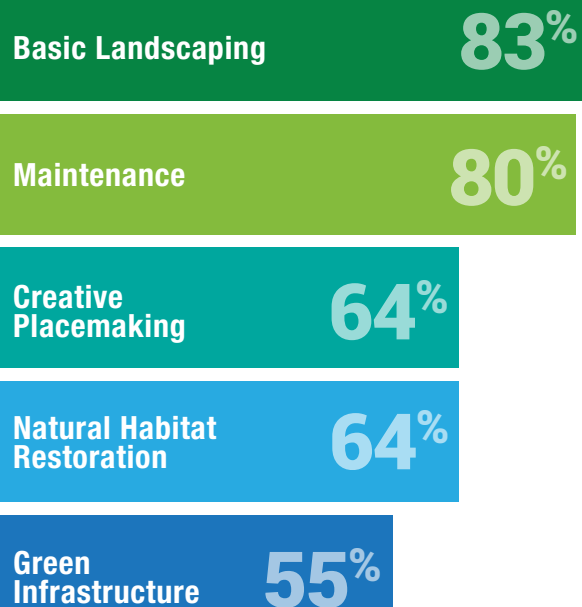
ADDITIONAL FACTS

- On average, organizations reported about 80% of their inventory had no plans for redevelopment.
- Less than half of organizations were involved in larger-scale reuses such as market gardens, energy, orchards, and large parks/trail systems. Other organizations in their communities were more likely to conduct these activities.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Organizations that engage in greening only (do not own property), implement the largest number and most diverse range of activities.
- Across the board, there were no organizations with redevelopment (e.g. new construction) plans for their full inventory of vacant lots.

Top Activities for Greening Only Organizations



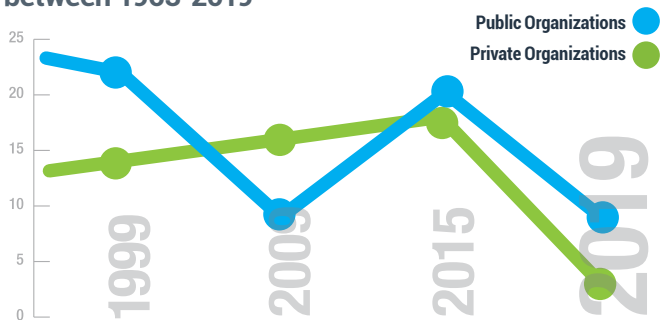
THE FACTS

WHO'S WORKING ON VACANT LOTS

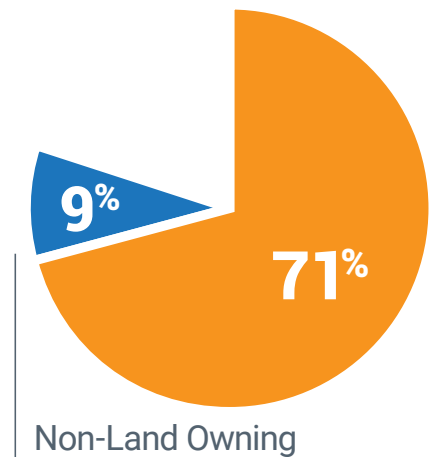
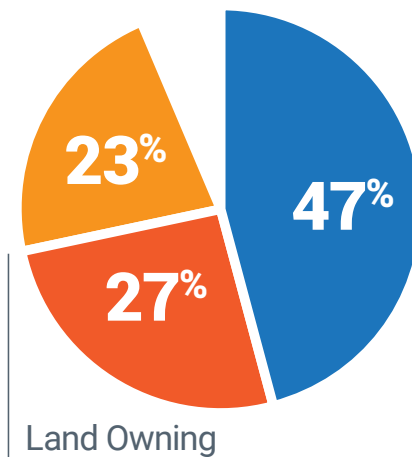


Every type of organization surveyed participates in maintenance and greening work in some way, indicating a wide range of who is working on vacant lots. The number of organizations engaged in greening work has grown rapidly in the last decade – with a significant number of newly founded organizations entering the field following the 2009 housing market crash. These organizations have different organizational structures, staffing, and capacity to leverage volunteer support. Accordingly, they are experiencing different trends in their level of staffing and volunteer support.

Number of Public vs. Private Organizations Founded between 1963-2019



Vacant Property Work by Type of Organization



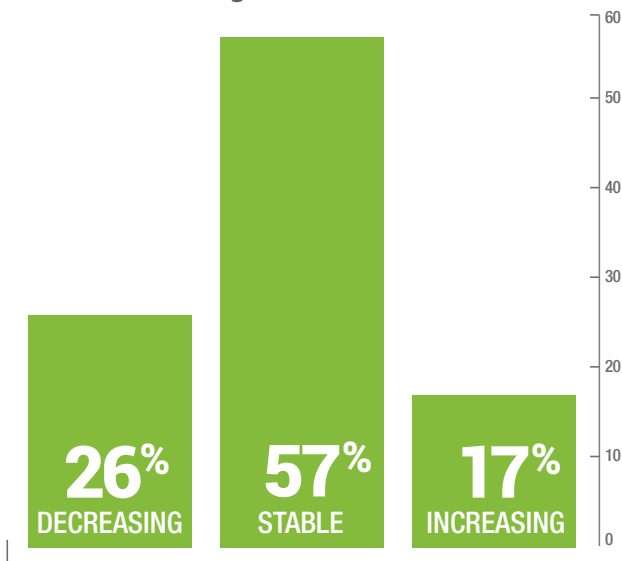
KEY TAKEAWAYS

- » Land bank authorities and government agencies make up nearly three quarters of organizations that both own and green property, while nonprofits make up nearly three quarters of organizations that green only (do not own property).
- » The number of organizations founded reached their peak between 2012 and 2016. On average, organizations started working with vacant property in 2013.
- » The majority of organizations reported stable staffing or increasing staffing. Yet, 1 in 4 government agencies reported decreasing staff.

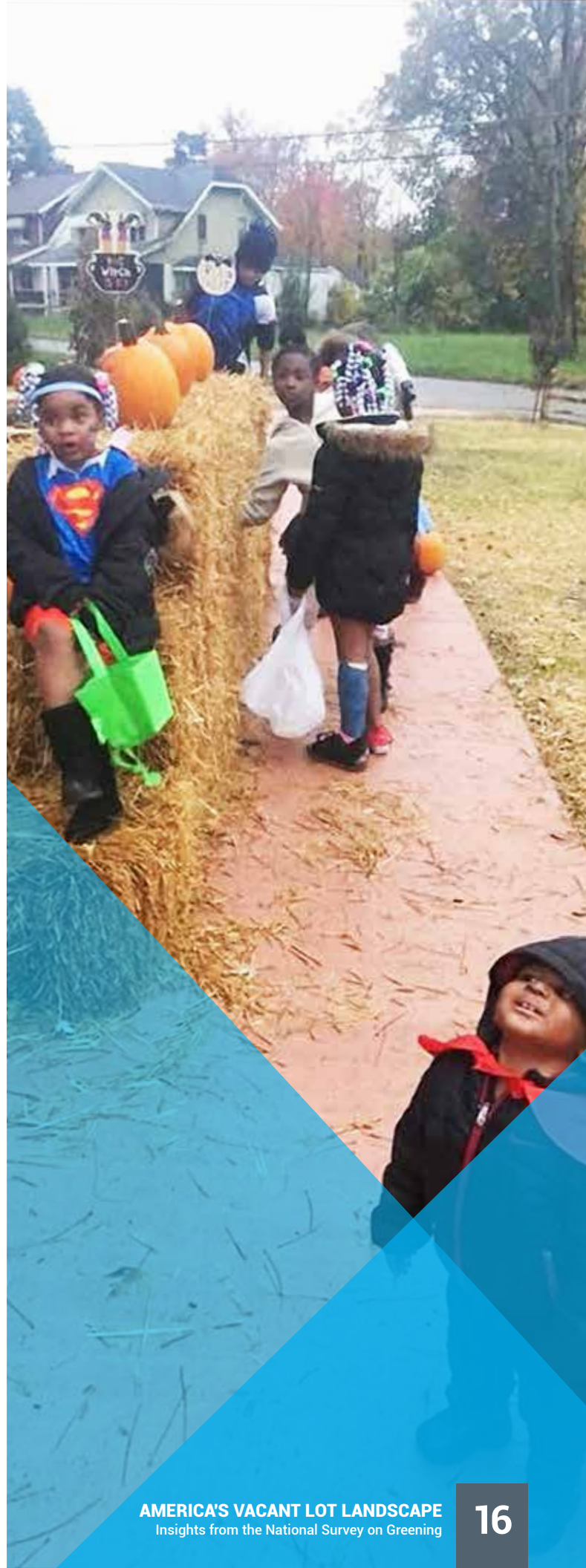
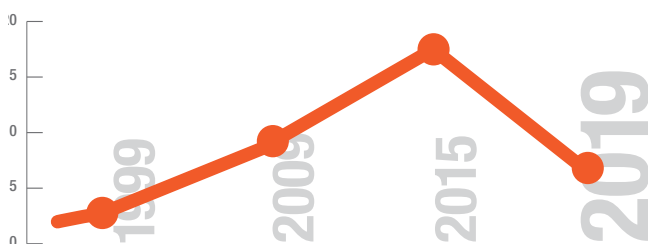
ADDITIONAL FACTS

- › Land bank agencies were primarily founded after 2000, with most land banks founded between 2010-2015.
- › On average, organizations reported having 4 full-time staff and 1 part-time staff.
- › 1 in 5 organizations reported having more than 15 volunteers.
- › Nearly 40% of nonprofits reported that their number of volunteers had been increasing over the past three years and no nonprofits reported that their number of volunteers were decreasing.

Trends in Full-Time Staffing for Government Agencies



Number of Land Bank Authorities Founded between 1963-2019



THE FACTS

FUNDING VACANT LOT MAINTENANCE AND GREENING

Survey results show funding is already insufficient to meet existing inventory needs and is not increasing, despite growing vacant lot inventories. Funding has remained the same over the last two years for both maintenance and greening activities. Reliable, long-term funding was reported as the most significant need to respond effectively to the rising demand for maintenance and greening. Expanding how vacant land work is funded, and by whom, is an important consideration and opportunity for the field.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- » Long-term, sustained funding for maintenance, greening, and capacity building was the #1 biggest need.
- » Funding is not increasing for maintenance and greening, in fact 21% of public organizations reported decreasing funding for vacant lot maintenance and greening.



Percentage of Public Organizations Reporting Decreasing Funding for vacant lot maintenance and greening



Long-term, sustained funding for vacant lot maintenance, greening, and capacity building

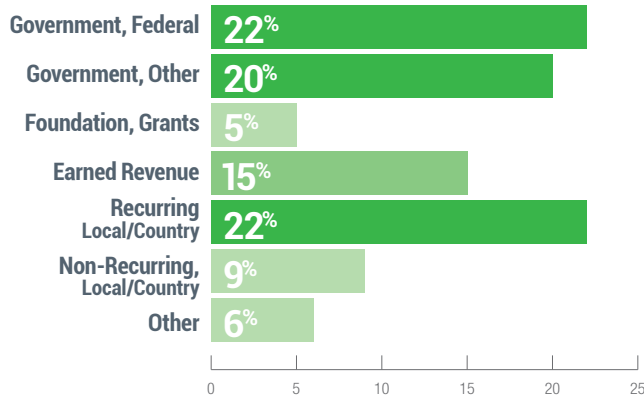
#1 NEED FUNDING

ADDITIONAL FACTS

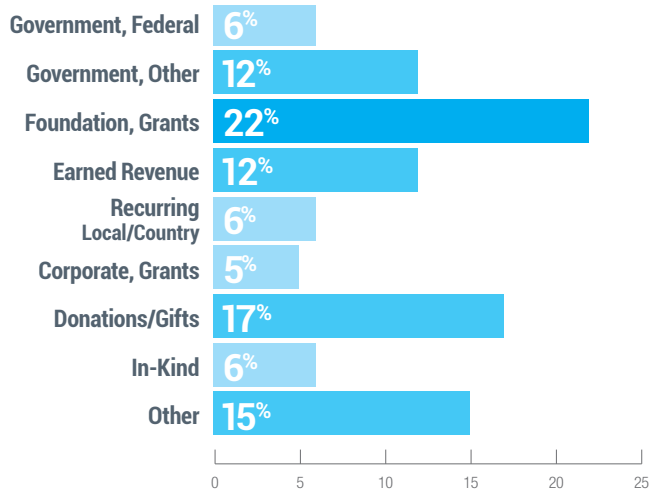
- › Organizational revenue sources look very different for public and private organizations.
- › On average, organizations allocated the smallest percentage of their budgets to vacant lot greening activities.
- › Funding for maintenance and greening appears to be stable to increasing for organizations with smaller inventories (100 or fewer lots), and more volatile for organizations with larger inventories (500+ lots).

Average Make up of Organizational Revenue Sources

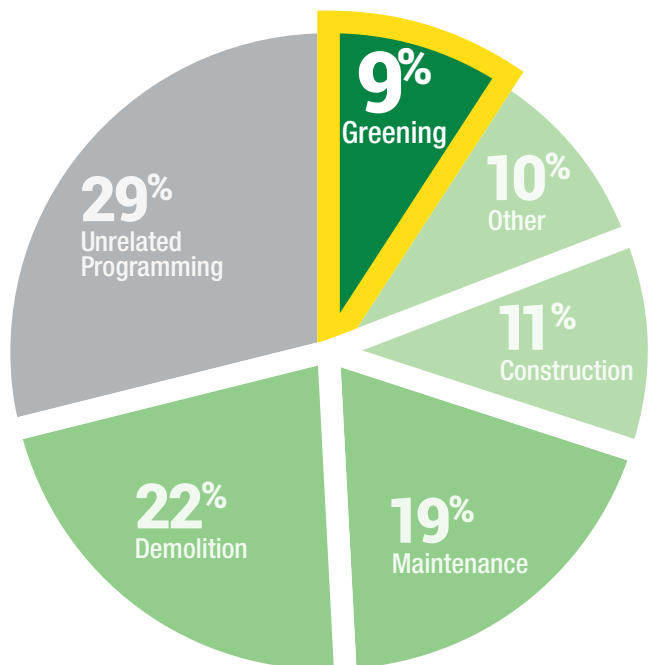
Public Organizations



Private Organizations



Average Percentage of Annual Organizational Budget Allocation Over the Previous Fiscal Year



KEYS TO SUCCESS

- RESIDENT & YOUTH ENGAGEMENT
- PARTNERSHIPS



KEYS TO SUCCESS



In response to the challenges and opportunities vacant lots present, organizations are being resourceful and strategic. Resident engagement and partnerships were the most widely endorsed factors contributing to success despite the challenges presented by scale of inventory, insufficient funding, and lack of capacity. This section draws on qualitative (short-answer) responses to illustrate the key components that have supported organizational success.

For more detail on Keys to Success, visit:
www.communityprogress.net/vacantland.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- » Resident engagement and partnerships are the top two keys to success.
- » Effective resident engagement requires dedicated time and resources. To be successful, organizations need to be continuously responsive to resident needs and priorities and meet residents where they are.
- » Partnering helps organizations leverage complementary capacity to deliver services more efficiently, seek funding, and build public support.

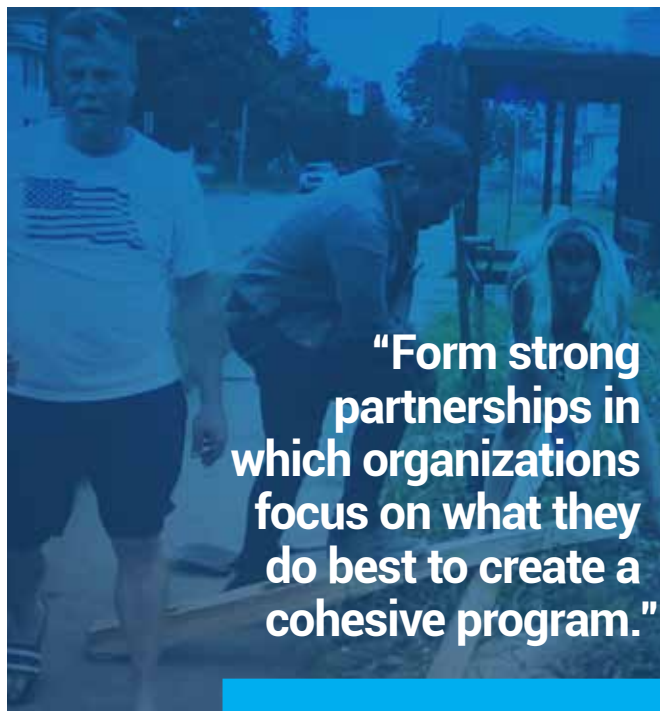
Success Factors

#1 Resident & Youth Engagement

#2 Partnerships



“Form strong partnerships in which organizations focus on what they do best to create a cohesive program.”



RESIDENT & YOUTH ENGAGEMENT



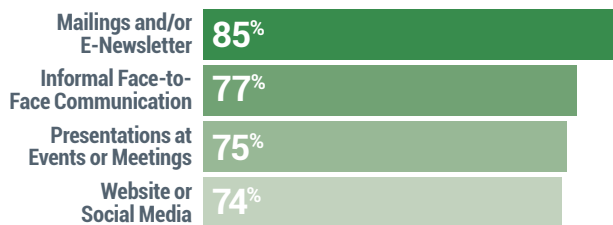
The future of vacant lots most immediately affects residents. Engaging residents closely in the greening process is vital to ensuring the work reflects the will and priorities of communities. Youth are an important group of residents who have talent, energy and local knowledge to support greening and revitalization. When implemented effectively, resident engagement can build trust and support development of responsive programs that are more likely to be embraced and sustained in true partnership with communities.

Levels of Resident Engagement

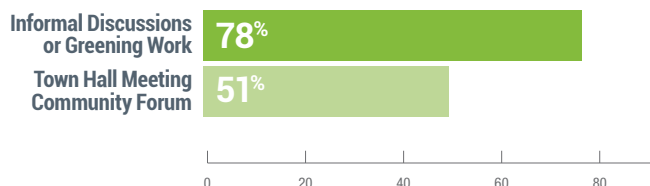


Engagement Activity Details

COMMUNICATION



INPUT



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- » Organizations used a variety of activities to engage residents, from communicating with residents to engaging residents in decision-making and leadership roles.
- » Gathering resident input early and often during planning helped organizations to increase trust and create more responsive programs that were more likely to be accepted and sustained.

55%

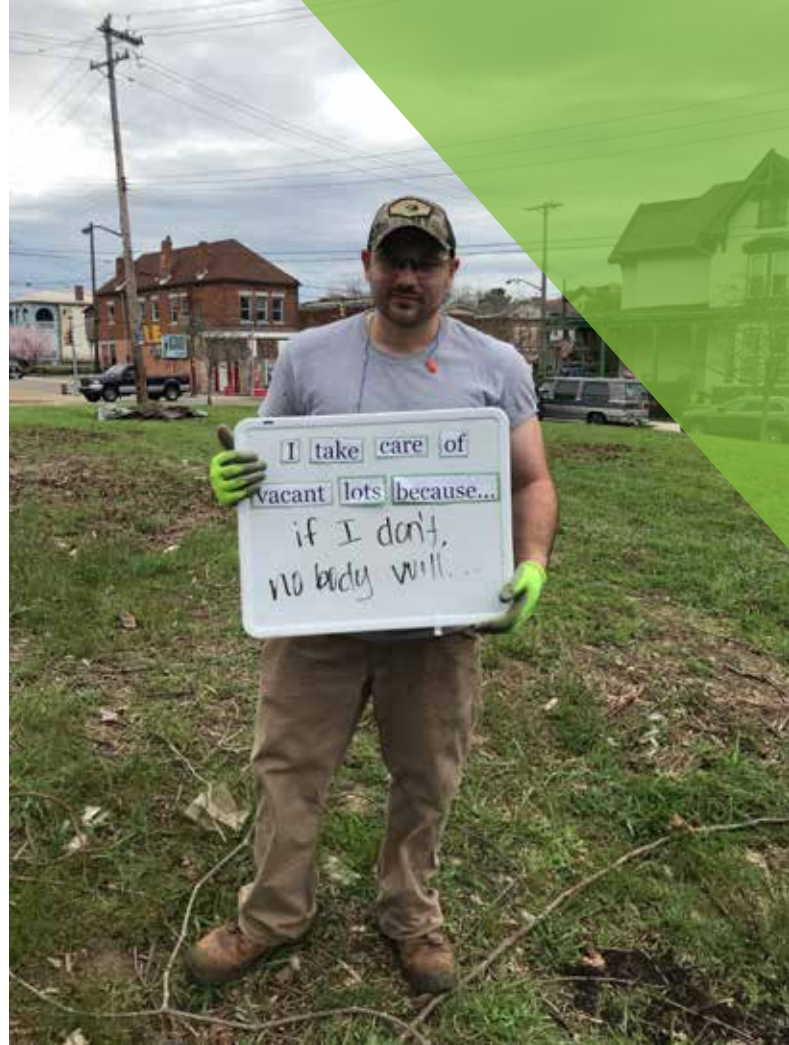
of organizations
involve residents in
maintenance and greening

21%

of organizations
have residents in key
leadership roles

ADDITIONAL FACTS

- › Organizations reported the critical importance of listening to and following the community's vision for vacant lot greening and revitalization.
- › While more than half of organizations involved residents in performing maintenance and greening work, less than a quarter involved residents in key leadership roles on their staff or board.
- › A little more than half of organizations (51%) had engaged youth in their work over the previous fiscal year.
- › Youth were almost exclusively involved in implementing maintenance or greening work; only 5% of organizations involved youth in leadership roles.
- › A lack of dedicated staff time (74%) and funding (60%) were the top two most commonly cited barriers to effective and consistent resident engagement.
- › Organizations wishing to engage youth confront additional barriers, as nearly a third reported limited staff expertise to engage youth.



"We need to identify sustainable sources of funding for full-time (long-term) personnel

we believe the community deserves consistency in the people they are working with to support their communities."

PARTNERSHIPS



Vacant land is a complex, systemic challenge that necessitates a coordinated, collective response. Partnering across sectors (e.g. city departments, law enforcement, faith-based organizations) helps organizations ease demands on their capacity and maximize their, and others', expertise. Broad engagement of stakeholders helps organizations build understanding and public support for the work, leading to them acquire additional funding and advance supportive policies.




"Find a great partner. Find a logical way to divide the work and work shoulder to shoulder. The outcomes will be better."

KEY TAKEAWAYS

» Partnering helped organizations leverage complementary capacity to extend the reach and quality of their work, seek funding, and build public support.

"We complement neighborhood projects with additional funding. They often go after funds for acquisition and demo and we go after funds for reclamation."



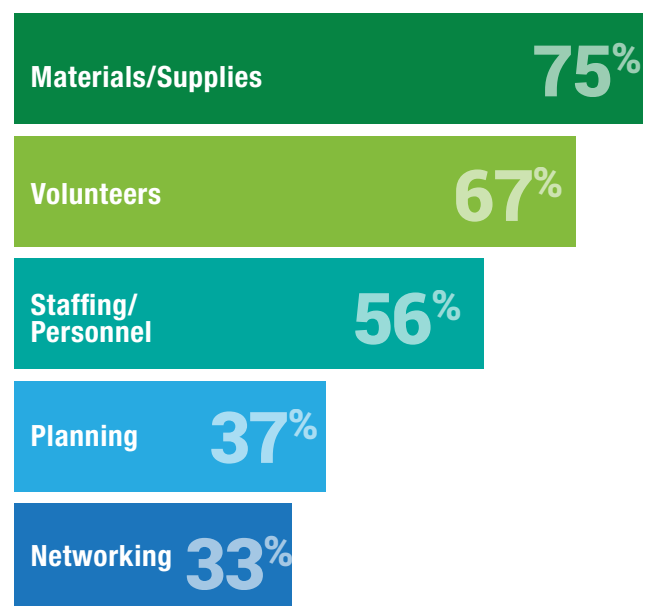
ADDITIONAL FACTS

- It was most common to partner with nonprofits, followed by city government agencies, community organizations (e.g. block clubs), and faith-based organizations.
- The majority of organizations partner to access supplies and human resources, while less than a third partner to obtain technical assistance.
- On average, private organizations partnered with significantly more types of organizations than public organizations, and obtained more resources from partners.
- Effective partnership building requires a dedicated investment. Yet many organizations reported they lacked financial resources and time to invest in building effective partnerships.

Most Common Barriers to Forming Partnerships



Top 5 Resources Received from Partners



CONCLUSION

“Land is a critical asset and must continue to be viewed that way.”

Survey results showed that a diverse set of organizations and communities are leveraging this asset to improve neighborhoods. Respondents made it clear - successful vacant land projects and programming depend on partnerships, engagement, technical expertise, and dedicated resources. Community residents, often serving as volunteers, are the unsung champions of vacant lot maintenance and greening. The projects, programs, and progress of today would not have happened without them.

Vacant lots are a key tool and a significant untapped resource to improving quality of life in thousands of communities. Yet, they continue to be underfunded, under prioritized, and understudied, making it impossible for communities to achieve comprehensive, full-scale vacant land maintenance and greening. This survey was a critical step to expand the knowledge base and study of vacant lots and the results make clear the need to prioritize vacant lot maintenance and greening—in study, in funding, and in opportunity for impact.

To keep abreast of future research, education and training events, and technical assistance opportunities, follow www.communityprogress.net and <http://yvpc.sph.umich.edu>.

“We still need community leadership that understands that vacant land investment and greening is development”.

AMERICA'S

VACANT LOT LANDSCAPE

Insights from the
National Survey
on Greening

CREDITS

photos

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quotes

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