

Vacant Lot Greening and Community Safety:

A Summary of Existing Evidence

Greening vacant lots by mowing, landscaping, or repurposing them for community needs (e.g., gardens, parks) can reduce violent crime and improve community safety.

Maintaining and greening vacant lots helps create safer, more connected neighborhoods by improving property conditions and creating positive community spaces. Engaging residents in vacant lot greening activities can support community safety benefits by indicating residents are committed to looking out for their neighborhood and by increasing overall positive neighborhood activity.

Researchers have studied different approaches to maintaining and greening vacant lots and found that they were associated with decreases in violent crime. This fact sheet summarizes key takeaways from recent studies exploring the community safety benefits associated with five common greening strategies.

Land Bank Ownership

Strategy: Land banks are often the primary steward of vacant lots in communities across the United States. Land banks acquire and care for the most distressed, property tax-foreclosed properties in communities and help secure and maintain vacant properties in ways that signal responsive and present ownership. Land banks often demolish unsafe structures and remediate the resulting vacant lots by grading them or planting grass or clover. They may also respond to complaints on vacant lots such as illegal dumping or drug dealing.

Results: In a forthcoming study conducted in Flint, Michigan, Bushman et al. (2022) compared the violent crime density around vacant lots owned by the Genesee County Land Bank and privately owned vacant lots. *They found that land bank ownership was associated with net declines in the densities of all crime and serious violent crimes over time.* In 2015, land bank-owned lots had a higher density of crime compared to privately held vacant lots, but by 2018, land bank-owned lots had lower crime densities than privately owned lots.

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Maintaining and greening vacant lots helps create safer, more connected neighborhoods.

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The research was conducted as part of a five-year research project, on which the Michigan Youth Violence Prevention Center (MIYVPC) and the Center for Community Progress are partners. Vacant Land Stewardship - Recent Research is supported by a cooperative agreement (U01CE002698) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Professional Mowing

Strategy: Consistent mowing during the growing season is a foundational strategy to reduce crime-attracting physical disorder in neighborhoods. In communities with concentrated vacancy, professional contractors are often hired to increase capacity for vacant lot maintenance.

Results: In Youngstown, Ohio, Gong et al. (2022) compared the density of violent crimes on streets near professionally mowed vacant lots and streets near untreated lots. *They found that streets near professionally mowed vacant lots experienced greater declines in violent crime than streets near untreated vacant lots.* They found the same effects for serious violent crime involving youth.

Community-Engaged Mowing

Strategy: Land banks often engage residents in vacant lot greening through community stewardship programs. In Flint, Michigan, the Genesee County Land Bank operates the Clean & Green program, which provides stipends to community groups to mow vacant lots every three weeks during the growing season. Participants have a connection to the neighborhood they maintain and often encourage other nearby residents to participate in neighborhood maintenance.

Results: In an evaluation of the Clean & Green program, Heinze et al. (2018) found that between 2009 and 2013, *streets with vacant lots maintained by Clean & Green had nearly 40 percent fewer assaults and violent crimes than streets with vacant lots that were not maintained.*

In another evaluation of Clean & Green, Sadler et al. (2017) and Pizarro et al. (2020), *found that, over time, consistent community-engaged mowing resulted in less violent crime near those maintained lots.*

Professional Landscaping

Strategy: Communities in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Youngstown, Ohio have used professional landscaping to address deteriorated vacant lots. For this strategy, contractors removed waste and graded lots before installing split-rail fencing and planting grass and trees. These lots were then regularly mowed by professionals throughout the growing season.

Results: In a Philadelphia study, Branas et al. (2018) randomly assigned vacant lots to be professionally landscaped or not. *Residents living near professionally landscaped vacant lots reported lower perceptions of crime and vandalism and decreased safety concerns compared to residents living near untreated lots. In neighborhoods below the poverty line, professionally landscaped vacant lots were also associated with decreases in gun violence, burglary, and nuisances.*

In a study examining the same treatment in Youngstown, Kondo et al. (2016) found *reductions in assaults, robberies, thefts, and burglaries near professionally landscaped vacant lots, relative to untreated lots.*



Streets near professionally mowed vacant lots experienced greater declines in violent crime than streets near untreated vacant lots.

Consistent community-engaged mowing resulted in less violent crime near those maintained lots.

Residents living near professionally landscaped vacant lots reported lower perceptions of crime and vandalism and decreased safety concerns.

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Community-Engaged Vacant Lot Reuse

Strategy: In Youngstown, Ohio, the Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation's Lots of Green program engaged residents in revitalizing and repurposing spaces for community needs. Vacant lot reuses implemented through the program included community gardens, urban farms or orchards, athletic fields, and putting greens.

Results: Gong et al. (2022) compared the effects of three greening conditions—community-engaged vacant lot reuse, professional mowing, and no treatment—on violent crime during the growing season in Youngstown. *Streets near the vacant lots that were repurposed by community groups saw the greatest decline in violent crimes—including violent crimes with youth victims—followed by lots that were professionally mowed.* Meanwhile, violent crime continued to show seasonal spikes on streets near untreated lots.

Kondo et al. (2016) evaluated the Lots of Green program and found that *vacant lots repurposed by community groups were associated with greater declines in violent crime in surrounding neighborhoods than professionally landscaped lots.*

Conclusion

Greening vacant properties can have positive effects across a breadth of communities and outcomes. Professionally led vacant lot greening can improve community safety and help increase neighborhood connectivity. Engaging residents in the greening process may enhance community safety outcomes above and beyond professionally led treatments. When residents work together to improve their neighborhoods, they rebuild protective neighborhood relationships and signal that residents care and are paying attention. Busy, well-maintained streets with engaged residents protect against crime and violence. Land banks also play a key role in reversing patterns of neighborhood decline by keeping vacant lots in good condition and supporting resident engagement in the process.



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