

Community Gardening in Disadvantaged Neighborhoods in Phoenix, Arizona:

Aligning Programs with Perceptions

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Introduction

This study examines a struggling community gardening program in an economically disadvantaged minority area of south-central Phoenix, Arizona. When the gardening program was initiated eight years ago, membership was between 10 and 15 residents per garden. Some gardens have dropped to one member, others totally abandoned. The gardening program exists within a larger resident-driven local food initiative. The goals of the local food initiative are to create a sustainable source of food, income, and social cohesion within the community. The objective of this study is to determine what factors are inhibiting the success of the gardening program.



Study Area

The researchers formed a partnership with a nonprofit to engage with a community in Central South Phoenix, Arizona. The community includes eight neighborhoods within a roughly two-square-mile area. The population of slightly over 10,000 residents is predominantly Hispanic with African American, Chinese, and white minorities (US Census Bureau).



Research team gathering surveys at community fair: March 13th, 2010.

Methods

We used informal and semi-structured interviews and participant observation to design an exploratory survey, which was administered to 149 residents at a community fair in March 2010. Community residents identified three burdens and three benefits of gardening that were most important to them. Twelve possible benefits and thirteen possible burdens were listed, as well as a blank to write in other options. In order to encourage broad participation of all ethnic groups in the community, the survey was available in English, Spanish and Mandarin Chinese.

Result: Benefits and Burdens of Gardening in South Phoenix

Community residents' perceived benefits and burdens are depicted in figures 1 and 2. One-hundred-thirty-one respondents identified their gardening status: 26% gardeners, 35% ex-gardeners, and 39% non-gardeners.

- Residents' cited nutritious food, extra food and exercise as the most important benefits of gardening.
- For ex-gardeners, gardens represent a sense of accomplishment now lost.
- Lack of gardening knowledge is a substantial barrier to non-gardeners as well as the time commitment a garden requires.
- Crop loss is a major hurdle for gardeners.
- 21% of respondents indicated they would like to work in a community garden.
- A statistically significant proportion of the population sampled, within the 99% confidence interval, did not know of the existing community gardening program.

Figure 1: Percent of respondents by gardening status that identified the item as an important benefit of gardening. N = 131.

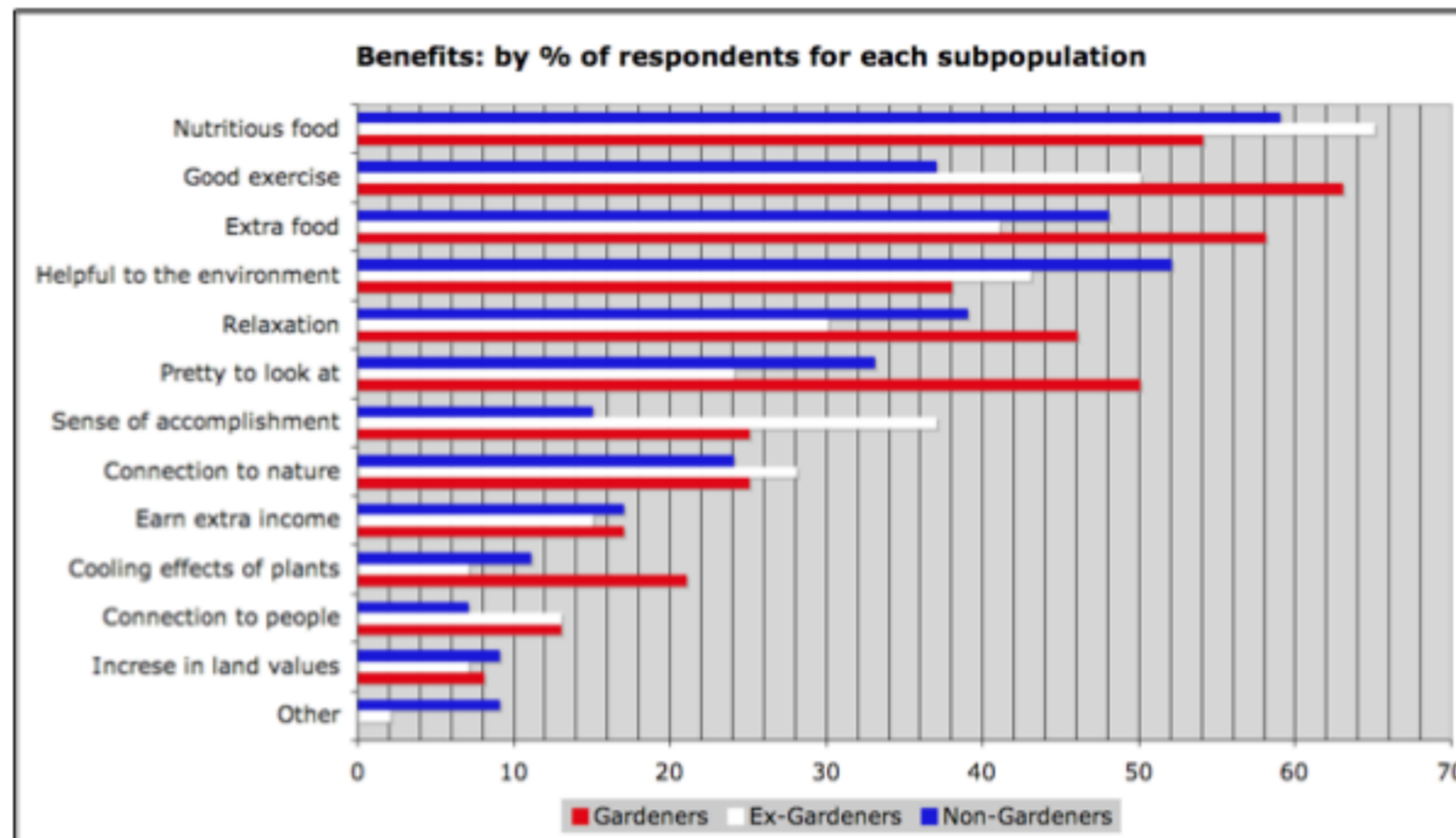
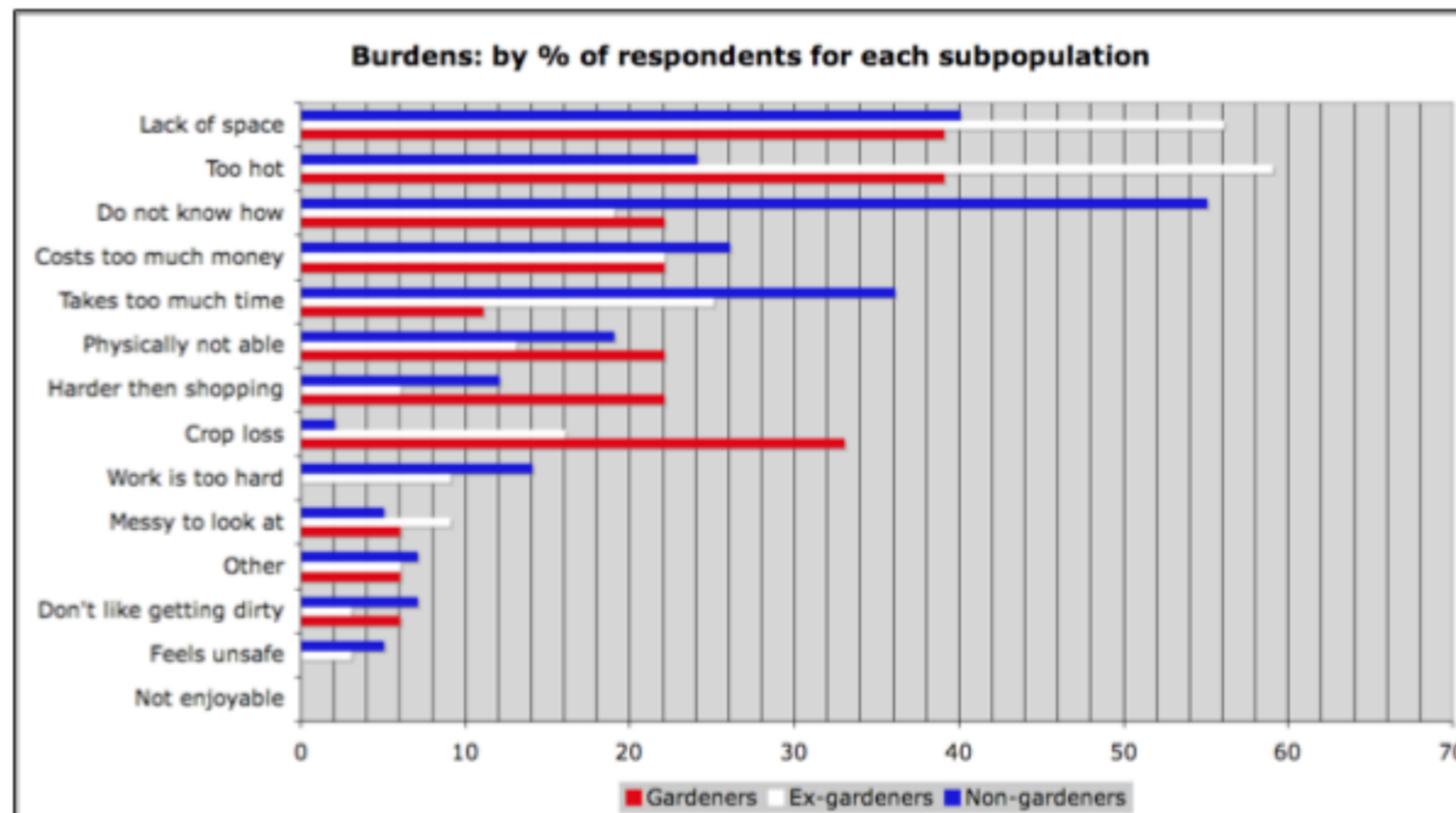


Figure 2: Percent of respondents by gardening status that identified the item as an important burden of gardening. N = 108.



Key Insights: Community Gardens and the Local Environment

- Active gardeners were least interested of the three groups in gardening for environmental reasons, although the gardeners most strongly acknowledged specific environmental benefits, such as the beauty and cooling effects of a garden.
- Lack of space and excessive heat are substantial barriers to gardening in this community, and the greatest burdens to an ex-gardener.
- Non-gardeners most strongly associated gardening with general environmental benefits, but that association was not sufficient to get them into a garden.

A successful community garden within the study area: October 30th, 2009.



Discussion: Strengthening Garden Initiatives

Increasing community garden participation will require employing several new strategies. Using shade sails to cool gardens during the summer will remove a substantial burden for many potential gardeners. Providing education on gardening techniques, particularly relating to increasing crop yields will address neighborhood interest in food gardening, and help reduce crop losses experienced by current gardeners. Existing community garden clubs in the neighborhoods have substantially fewer participants than the number of survey respondents who indicated interest in community gardening. The knowledge gained from our study shows that aligning the community gardening program with residents' perceptions may be a valuable use of time and resources.

References:

U.S. Census 2000 demographic data. Census Block information. Washington (DC): US Census Bureau.

Acknowledgements

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