

# Study defines social motivations of urban farms

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Two thirds of urban farmers have a social mission that goes beyond food production and profits, finds new research led by NYU Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.

The study, published in the *British Food Journal*, shows that three of the four top reasons farmers grow in urban areas - [food security](#), education, community building, and producing [food](#) for the market - have social motivations.

As urban populations grow in the United States, farming in cities is becoming more common. While food entrepreneurs seek to make money through urban farming, many urban farms are concerned with factors beyond food production, and have incorporated social goals into their missions. These missions align with a larger social movement in food - the "good food movement" - that focuses on where food comes from, who grows it, and how it's grown.

"Given the limited ability of urban farms in terms of food production, the social mission of urban farms arises as a possible explanation for the recent growth," said study author Carolyn Dimitri, associate professor of food studies at NYU Steinhardt.

In their study, Dimitri and her colleagues identified and analyzed the social missions of urban farms in the United States, and explored differences and similarities among farms with varying missions.

They analyzed data collected from a national survey of 370 urban farmers. Thirty-five questions, covering the 2012 farm year, addressed food production and marketing practices, risks and challenges, information and technical assistance needs, farm size and location, age of primary farmer, and farm characteristics.

The researchers found that food production is an essential part of the mission for all urban farms, but approximately two thirds of farmers surveyed also expressed a social mission. These social missions are primarily related to food security, education, and community building.

"The mission statements also indicate a blurring of the profit motive and social goals, suggesting many farms are a form of social entrepreneurship," said Dimitri. "For urban agriculture business, food is the vehicle used to attain the social goals of improving life for communities, residents, and consumers."

The survey showed that all urban farms, regardless of their mission, are relatively small and face similar challenges in terms of providing the primary farmer with a living. The bulk of the farms, regardless of their mission, have sales below \$10,000 per year, and annual sales are not necessarily aligned with the farm's profit-drive or socially-motivated mission.

In addition, the survey found that farms with explicit social missions, relative to those with a strict market orientation, donate a higher share of food from their farm and are less likely to own farmland. Urban farms located in lower income areas are more likely to have social goals related to building community or improving security food security.

One third of urban farmers surveyed operate farms as nonprofits, shifting the farmers' financial focus from food sales to finding donations and grants.

"The non-profit model may be an ideal business model for long-term economic stability of socially-minded urban farms," Dimitri said. "Even if they operate at a loss while scaling up production and providing affordable food to local residents, grants may make it possible to cover shortfalls until farms are self-sufficient."

The researchers concluded that the long-term viability of urban farming is related to three factors: whether farmers can earn high enough incomes to maintain urban lifestyles; whether farms can develop business models that produce long-term economic sustainability; and how successful socially-minded urban farms are in meeting their social goals.

Provided by New York University

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