**Headline:** 54 Million People in the U.S. May Go Hungry During Pandemic—Can Urban Farms Help?

**Teaser:** In the COVID era, growing food locally has become more essential than ever.

By Melissa Kravitz Hoeffner

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**[Article Body:]**

When I call Chef Q. Ibraheem to discuss urban farming in her own cooking career, she’s in the middle of placing an order for microgreens from a small farm in Lake Forest, a ritzy suburb just north of downtown Chicago. Now’s a great time for her to chat, actually, because the Chicago-based chef is immersed in what she loves, sourcing ingredients as locally as possible.

“It’s really important we know where our food is coming from,” she says. “I know my farmers by name. I can go to the farms, see how they are growing everything, see it in the soil. It’s always nice to have something within reach and know your produce.” Chef Q runs supper clubs and chef camps throughout Chicagoland, sustaining the local economy by purchasing ingredients from urban gardens and farms within miles of her pop-up experiences.

“As a chef, you realize you have a responsibility to your guests,” she says, and for her, that responsibility means being transparent about ingredients, and even educating diners about what’s on their plates. Growing up spending summers on a farm in Georgia, Chef Q has an innate curiosity about where and how her food is grown, and she recognizes the importance of farms in both urban and rural areas.

Commercial urban agriculture is [on the rise](https://bedfordandbowery.com/2020/07/as-the-pandemic-continues-urban-gardening-is-growing-on-new-yorkers/), with small-scale farms in [New York City](https://ny.curbed.com/maps/new-york-urban-gardening-city-farmers-brooklyn) like [Gotham Greens](https://www.gothamgreens.com/), which reduces the amount of energy, land use and food waste in tight, underutilized spaces to produce herbs and roughage for the masses. In Austin, Texas, [backyard farms and urban gardens](https://austinot.com/urban-farms-austin) sell ingredients to restaurants and markets throughout the region, as do [similar projects in Los Angeles](https://www.latimes.com/lifestyle/story/2019-10-10/avenue33-urban-farm-grows-in-los-angeles). In fact, innovations allowing farmers to [grow without soil or natural light](https://theconversation.com/how-urban-farmers-are-learning-to-grow-food-without-soil-or-natural-light-88720) expand the potential for food sourcing in urban areas. Urban farming has increased by over [30 percent in the past 30 years](https://www.ecowatch.com/urban-agriculture-food-security-2628852711.html), with no indication of slowing down. Urban land could grow fruit and vegetables for 15 percent of the population, [research shows](https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2020-03/uos-ulc031720.php).

While the [COVID-19 lockdowns have inspired a burst of urban farming](https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/grow-your-own-urban-farming-flourishes-in-coronavirus-lockdowns/) as people have been starting to grow their own fruits and vegetables at home, a renewed interest in culinary arts, plus a nostalgia for simpler times in many fast-paced big cities—just look at all the mid-century era diners [popping up](https://www.timeout.com/newyork/news/why-so-many-restaurants-opened-as-modern-diners-in-2019) in Manhattan right before the pandemic—may be accountable for the steady rise in urban farms. More consciousness about the environment, too, may lead small growers to want to reduce transportation emissions and take charge of the use of pesticides and fertilizers in their foods, but there’s another great reason for urban farms to continue growing: Feeding the masses. And with 68 percent of the world’s population [expected to live in urban areas by 2050](https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html), it’s time to take urban farming seriously as a viable, primary food source.

Despite being the wealthiest nation in the world, the United States had more than [37 million people](https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america) struggling with hunger in 2018. Since the pandemic, that number is expected to rise to up to [54 million people](https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Brief_Impact%20of%20Covid%20on%20Food%20Insecurity%204.22%20%28002%29.pdf). And while systemic changes may one day be able to greatly reduce this number, a planting cycle is quicker than an election cycle. Bureaucracy may not immediately solve fair wages, but vegetable seeds may help communities when times are tough.

**Urban Farming as a Social Practice**

In her work, Chef Q has helped turn empty lots and abandoned buildings into urban farms, which allows neighbors to “take ownership in their communities” and also become educated consumers. In neighborhoods where the fancy grocery store is referred to as “[Whole Paycheck](https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2019/04/01/whole-foods-prices-amazon-announces-cuts-and-more-prime-benefits/3335214002/),” Chef Q has seen seed exchanges help folks start growing new produce, and regain agency over their food budgets and eating habits. Programs like the [Chicago Food Policy Summit](https://www.eventbrite.com/e/15th-annual-chicago-food-policy-summit-registration-89317576275), a free annual event on Chicago’s South Side, help popularize urban farming and education and help provide Chicagoans with grants to start growing their own food. Though [gentrification may bring relief](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/30/dining/urban-farming-kids-healthy-food-new-york-city.html) to previously dubbed [food deserts](https://truthout.org/articles/how-do-people-living-in-a-food-desert-feed-themselves-amid-a-pandemic/)—neighborhoods without a nearby source of fresh food—the slew of problems attached to gentrification, including higher costs of living, can easily make these new, more nutritious food options completely unaffordable to residents of the neighborhood.

As seen in smaller cities, urban farming may be the key for cities to be less reliant on rural areas, and also help [achieve food security](https://theconversation.com/how-urban-agriculture-can-improve-food-security-in-us-cities-106435). As Dr. Miguel Altieri, professor of agroecology at the University of California, Berkeley, has shown, diversified gardens in urban areas can yield a large range of produce and efficiently feed nearby residents.

Of course, land in cities is often at a premium, with many people living in little space. Shifting public land use to incorporate food growth and getting creative with rooftops, basements and unused buildings can seriously change the way cities consume fresh ingredients.

In fact, renewed efforts by the conservation organization [World Wildlife Fund](https://www.worldwildlife.org/) to [boost indoor farming](https://www.fastcompany.com/90505222/why-the-world-wildlife-fund-is-trying-to-spark-an-indoor-farming-revolution) may revolutionize some sources of produce, particularly in cities. Repurposing unused indoor space, such as warehouses, can create direct sources of ingredients for restaurants or community supported agriculture for neighbors. Indoor farming, while potentially more expensive, also allows urbanites from all walks of life to connect to the food system, repurpose food waste into compost and expand knowledge on growing food. [Greenhouses like Gotham Greens](https://www.gothamgreens.com/)’ rooftop spaces can supplement indoor and outdoor spaces, adding even more potential healthy food to local ecosystems.

**Urban Gardening With Neighbors in Mind**

When she’s not hosting pop-up dinners with culinarily curious Chicagoans, Chef Q volunteers with [Foster Street Urban Agriculture](https://www.facebook.com/fosterstreetgarden/), a nonprofit garden that aims to help end food insecurity in Evanston, the Chicago suburb home to Northwestern University. In the garden, Chef Q teaches kids how to water, plant, weed and grow produce. She’ll notice a multigenerational interest: “Once kids taste zucchini, it’s over,” she jokes, of little ones bringing in parents and grandparents to learn to cook with more fresh produce. “They’ll start [the program] eating hot Cheetos, and they’re eating something green and leafy and won’t go back.”

Kids also just love being able to eat something that comes out of the ground and will take their passion back home, growing tomatoes in their windowsills or trying other small gardening projects in spaces available to them near home. Harvests from Foster Street are donated to food pantries and also sold at a local farmers market, where kids learn community-based entrepreneurial skills.

“Everyone eats, it’s a common denominator,” she says. “When food is on the table, people will have conversations.”

Now, in the wake of COVID-19, urban farms have become more essential than ever. Chef Q has partnered with farms that would otherwise throw away produce without their major restaurant and hotel clients, to redistribute food to Chicagoans in need. She’s noticed a spike in the price of fresh food, thanks in part to the expensive early May crops—peas, leeks and spinach. “It’s been imperative,” she says, of feeding the community with a local bounty of eggplant, microgreens, cheese and more farm-to-fork provisions.

Chef Q emphasizes that urban gardens still have to grow food to feed communities. Across the nation, we’ve seen victory gardens pop up in yards of homebound upper-middle-class Americans, planted with hope, thriftiness and a creative outlet in mind. But for those who don’t have yards or ample space, shared urban gardens can still serve a local population. When people don’t have money, growing food is a solution to provide nutrition, and perhaps even income. And it starts with advocacy, volunteers and outreach. “Plant something in the windowsill,” Chef Q suggests, as an entryway into small-scale gardening. “It’s essential. We can’t stop.”