

ANNUAL GARDEN REPORT

2025



PennState
College of Medicine



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OVERVIEW



The Community Garden Project, led by PSH in partnership with community organizations,

aims to improve food access through sustainable gardening initiatives.

As part of PSH's Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) and Implementation Plan, the project supports **15 community garden sites** with essential resources and funding, made possible through the generous contributions of private donors, foundations, and Rite Aid Healthy Futures. PSH secures financial support ensuring that community partners receive necessary supplies such as seeds, plants, educational materials, gardening beds, soil, and tools.

Additionally, stipends are available for gardening and nutrition educators to enhance community engagement and education at the garden sites.

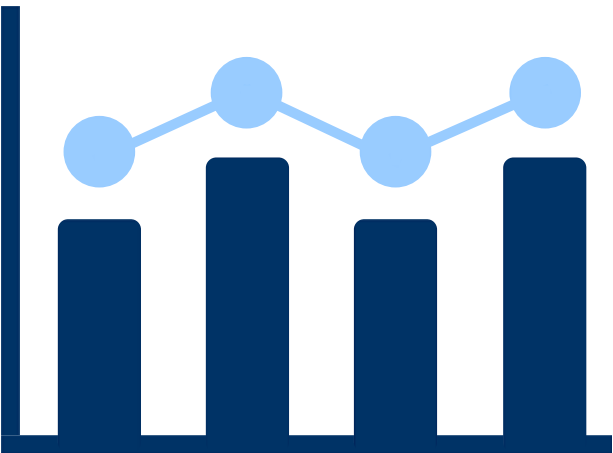
These efforts support a diverse network of community gardens, including:

- Chestnut StreetGarden
- Samara Sensory Garden
- Perry County Kids Garden Club
- Steelton-Highspire School District
- Harrisburg Urban Growers-Berry Hill
- Discerning Eye Community Agriculture
- Salvation Army Capital Region
- Goggleworks
- Millersburg Community Garden at MyoPark
- Northern Dauphin Human Services
- Lykens Library (North Dauphin Library Garden)
- Paloma School
- Steelton Borough Garden (in Mohn St. Park)
- Lebanon County ChristianMinistries
- Edible Classroom garden program

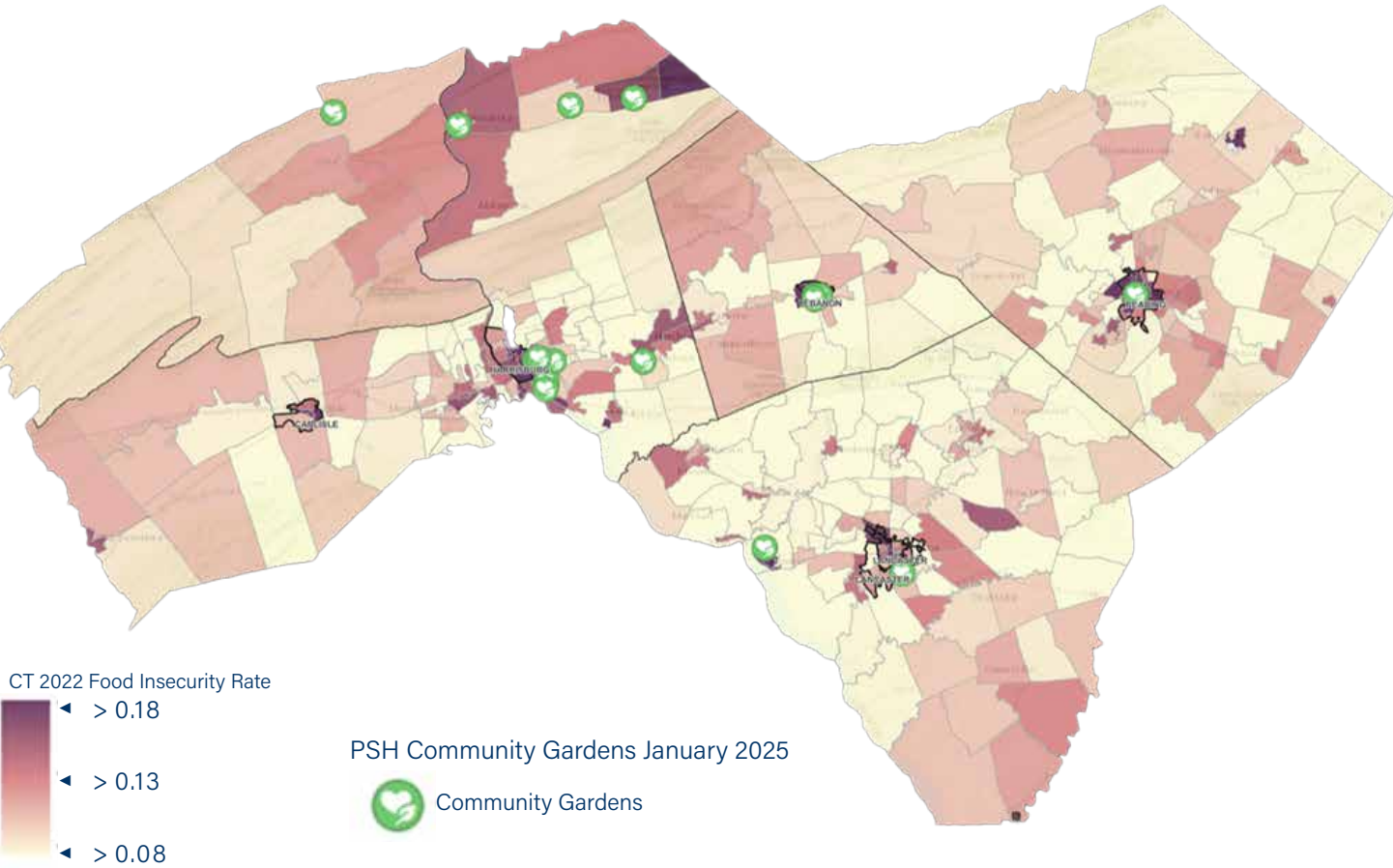
Each garden plays a vital role in fostering food security, promoting healthy eating, strengthening connections within the community.

To track the impact of these gardens, Penn State College of Medicine has been collecting monthly reports since 2023. These reports capture key metrics, including the pounds of produce harvested, distribution of produce, the number of people served, volunteer participation and hours worked, garden events and attendance, as well as participant feedback.

Additionally, a community feedback survey was introduced in 2023 to gather insights from those who visit and benefit from these gardens. Initially, the survey was administered electronically via a QR code; however, due to low participation, the approach was adjusted in 2024 to a paper-based format distributed through trusted garden leaders, with incentives introduced to encourage responses. These data collection was more successful with this model and over 161 surveys were collected in 2024.



COMMUNITY GARDEN AND FOOD INSECURITY RATES BY CENSUS TRACT



GOALS OF IMPACT MODEL

The Community Impact Model by Penn State Health outlines a structured approach to achieving health equity by fostering intentional relationships and community engagement. The model progresses through four key stages:

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Recognizing the influence of socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental factors, as well as historical collaboration and trust dynamics, to identify community needs and priorities.



COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP DYNAMICS

Building collaborations among local organizations, health systems, educational institutions, and government entities to strengthen the capacity for community health initiatives.



COMMUNITY & CLIENT INTERVENTIONS

Implementing direct interventions such as nursing assessments, healthcare navigation, vaccinations, chronic disease education, and access to nutritious food to address Social Determinants of Health (SDOH).



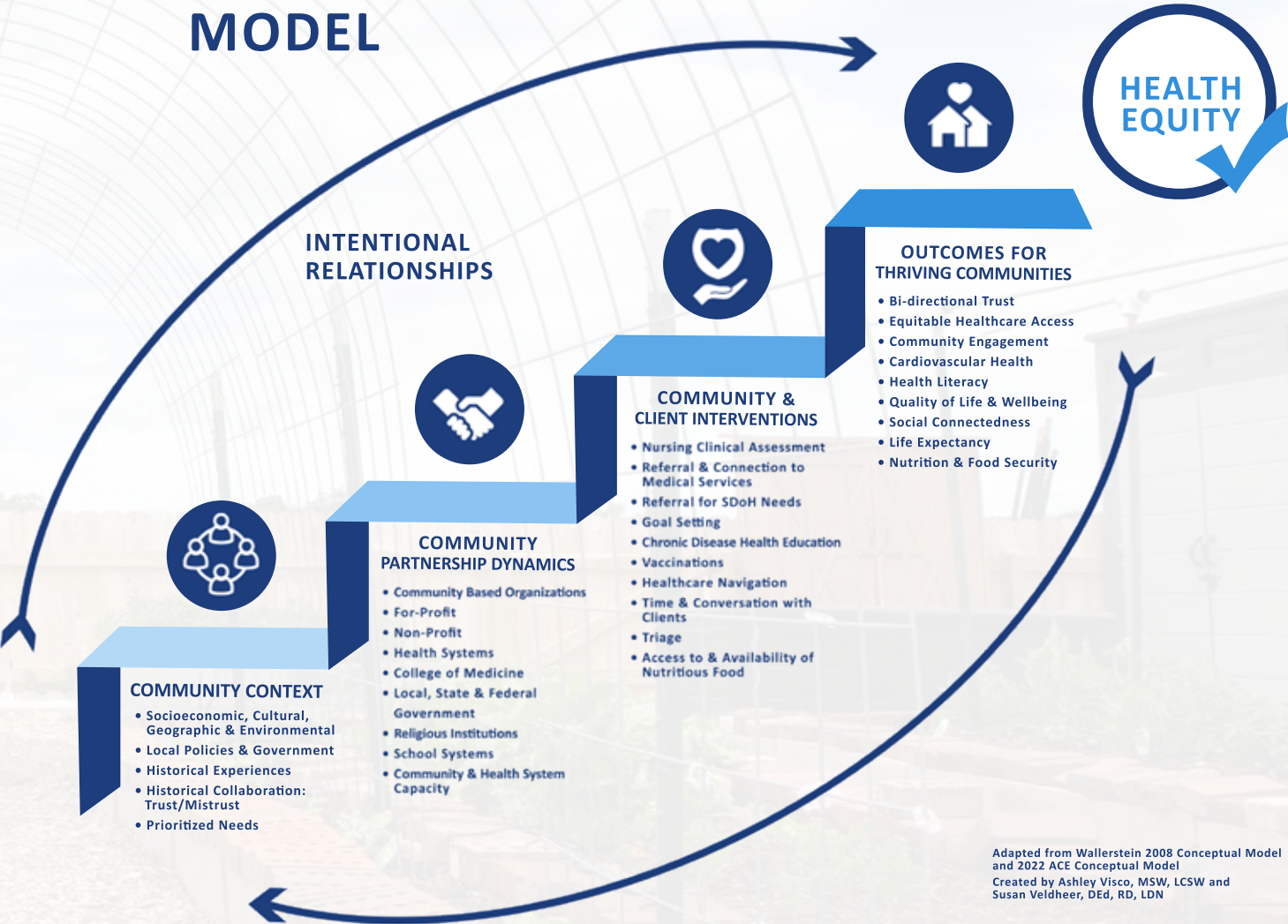
OUTCOMES FOR THRIVING COMMUNITIES

Achieving equitable healthcare access, improved health literacy, social connectedness, better cardiovascular health, increased life expectancy, and overall well-being through sustained community efforts.



By following this stepwise approach, the model aims to create healthier, more connected communities where trust, accessibility, and health equity are at the forefront.

COMMUNITY IMPACT MODEL



COMMUNITY GARDENS & IMPACT MODEL

This project utilizes the Community Impact Model to assess the effectiveness of community gardens in promoting health equity and well-being. The initiative focuses on key action targets, linking them to measurable implementation outcomes that reflect the garden's impact on cardiovascular health, nutrition security, social connectedness, and community engagement.

ACTION TARGETS & IMPLEMENTATION OUTCOMES

CARDIOVASCULAR HEALTH

- Increased availability and consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Encouragement of physical activity through gardening and active transportation(walking/biking).

NUTRITION & FOOD SECURITY

- Distribution of fresh produce and integration into meals.
- Assessment of food insecurity and socioeconomic factors through geospatialanalysis.
- Strengthened community food-sharing networks.

SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS & ISOLATION

- Growth in volunteer participation and engagement.
- Increased community events fostering social interaction.
- Enhanced sense of community and inclusivity within the garden space.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & BI-DIRECTIONAL TRUST

- Expansion of partnerships and sustainable funding for garden programs.
- Strengthened long-term collaborations with community partners.
- Increased participation in local events, fostering stronger relationships.

QUALITY OF LIFE & WELLBEING

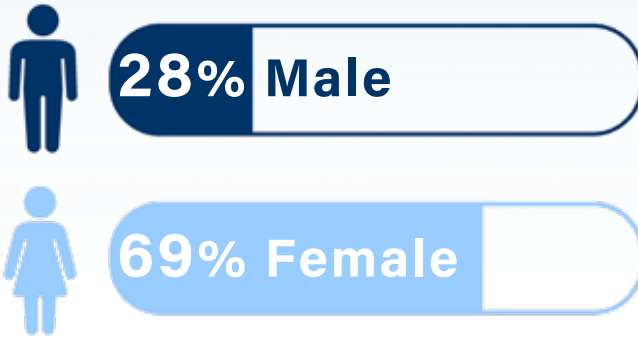
- Positive impact on mental health and reduction of social isolation.
- Improved perception of community support and inclusiveness.

ACTION TARGETS	IMPLEMENTATION OUTCOMES
CARDIOVASCULAR HEALTH	Pounds of fruit & vegetables
	Time spent working in the garden
	Traveling to the garden by walking or biking
NUTRITION & FOOD SECURITY	Pounds of produce distributed
	Type of produce (fruits, vegetables, donations, etc.)
	Used garden produce in meals
	Geospatial analysis for site choices: food insecurity & low income served
	Food insecurity (participant level) & low income served
SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS & ISOLATION	Given produce to someone
	# of volunteers
	# of volunteer hours
	# of people served
	# of people who participated in the events
	# of events held at site
	Garden leader support group
	Reason for visit to garden today (% to visit friends of % event)
	Giving produce to someone else
	Welcoming place/inclusive place questions
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT	Recommend this garden question
	# of events per site (monthly or yearly)
	Social connectedness/isolation
BI-DIRECTIONAL TRUST	Sense of community (matrix question)
	# of years in collaboration with partners (specifically one by one)
QUALITY OF LIFE & WELLBEING	# of partner sites
	Sustainable funding of programs and gardens (\$ and equipment)
	Mental health questions
	Isolation questions

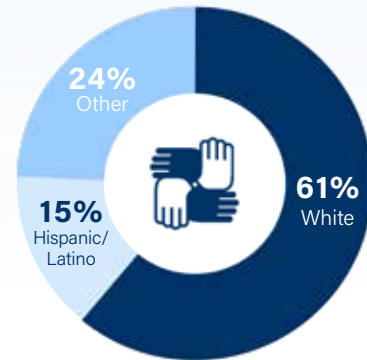
DEMOGRAPHICS

The Community Garden Project serves a diverse group of participants, with a majority identifying as female (69.4%) and 27.5% identifying as male. The program also includes individuals from various ethnic backgrounds, with 14.5% identifying as Hispanic/Latino and 85.5% as Non-Hispanic.

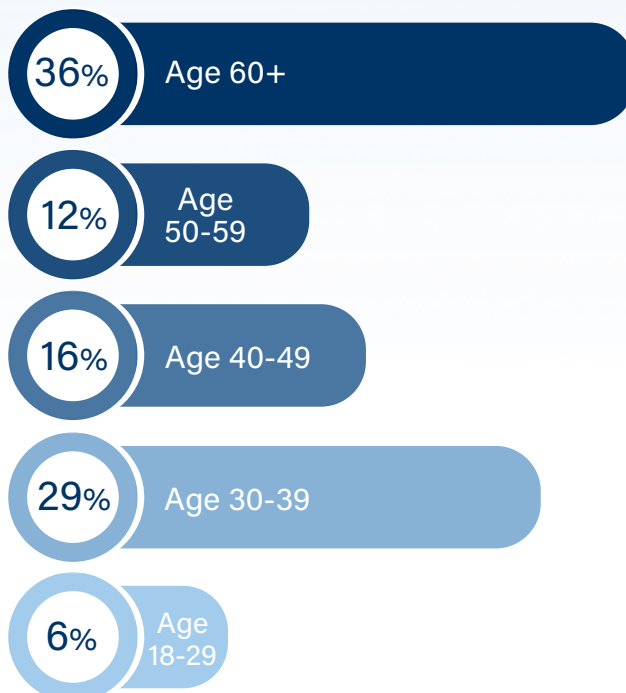
GENDER



RACE/ETHNICITY



Participants represent a wide range of ages, with the largest group being individuals aged 60 and older (34.2%), followed by those in the 30-39 age range (27.1%). Individuals between 40-49 years old make up 15.5% of participants, while 11.6% fall within the 50-59 age group. Younger adults aged 18-29 account for 5.8% of the total participants.



This demographic distribution highlights the program's broad reach, engaging both younger and older generations in community gardening initiatives that promote food access, education, and well-being.



SURVEY PARTICIPANTS



Survey participation in the Community Gardens Project saw a significant increase from 33 participants in 2023 to 161 participants in 2024. The lower response rate in 2023 was attributed to the use of a QR code-based survey, which may have presented accessibility challenges for some participants. To address this limitation, the survey methodology was refined in 2024 by implementing paper-based surveys, which were distributed by trusted garden leaders during events and garden visits which enhanced accessibility and participation. Additionally, gift card incentives were introduced to encourage engagement, further contributing to the substantial rise in responses. This strategic shift not only improved data collection efforts but also ensured a more comprehensive understanding of the community's needs, experiences, and the overall impact of the gardens.



Participant satisfaction with the Community Garden Project remained consistently high across both survey years, reflecting the gardens' positive impact on the community. In 2023, 87.9% of participants stated they would recommend the garden to a friend, with an average rating of 9.51 out of 10. In 2024, this percentage increased to 93.2%, demonstrating a growing appreciation for the gardens, despite a slight decrease in the mean rating to 9.49 out of 10.

This upward trend in recommendations suggests that the enhancements made to the program, including improved accessibility and engagement efforts, have further strengthened community support and satisfaction with the gardens.

PARTICIPANT SATISFACTION

2023 2024

87.9% 93.2%

OF PARTICIPANTS WOULD
RECOMMEND GARDEN TO A FRIEND

9.5/10 9.5/10

AVERAGE
PARTICIPANT RATING



COMMUNITY GARDENS DATA

The pie chart illustrates the distribution of community garden sites based on their qualification category. These categories reflect the primary factors that justify the site's inclusion in the Community Garden Project and their impact on food access.

LOCATION (45.8%)

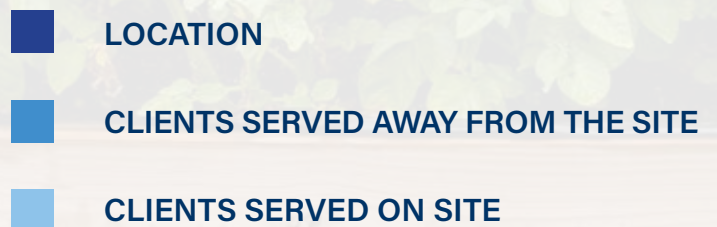
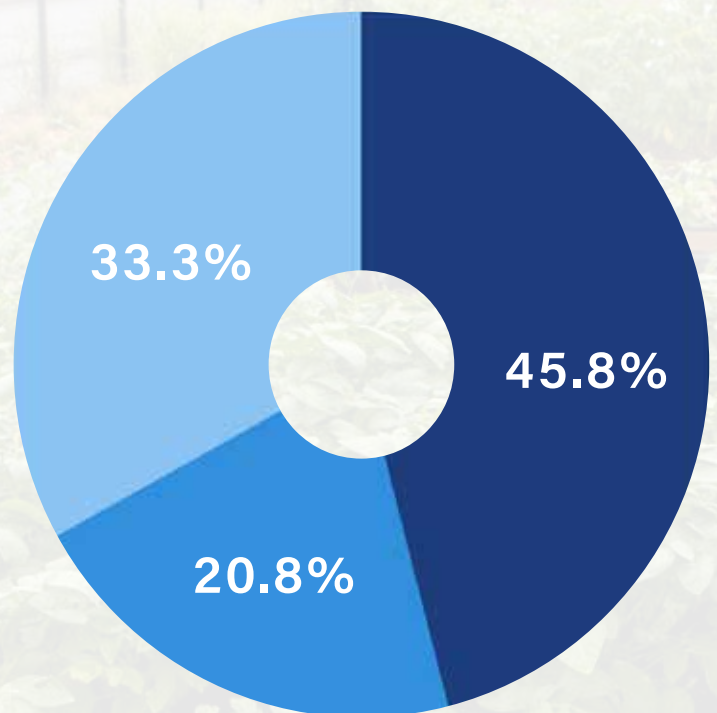
Nearly half of the garden sites qualify based on their geographic location. This suggests that these gardens are situated in areas where access to fresh food is limited, making them critical for addressing food insecurity.

CLIENTS SERVED AWAY FROM THE SITE (20.8%)

Some gardens qualify because they provide fresh produce or services to individuals who do not visit the garden directly but benefit from its produce and programs elsewhere. This category highlights the project's broader reach beyond the physical garden space.

CLIENTS SERVED ON SITE (33.3%)

These gardens qualify based on the population they directly serve at the garden site. Specifically, they cater to low-income or low-access individuals who rely on the garden for fresh food, education, or engagement in gardening activities.



This distribution underscores the diverse ways in which community gardens contribute to improving food access, whether by their physical placement, serving off-site populations, or directly supporting Individuals at the garden location.

The table represents the variety of services available at the community garden sites based on a select all-that-apply question. Since respondents could choose multiple services, the total percentage does not sum to 100%, and the n value reflects the total number of responses selected rather than the total number of participants.

SERVICES AVAILABLE AT SITE	n(%)
Public transportation access	4 (26.7)
Soup kitchen/community meals	4 (26.7)
Federal food assistance registration	3 (20.0)
Skills training (job training, parenting, finances)	2 (13.3)
Mental health services	1 (6.7)
Homeless shelter	2 (13.3)
Spiritual support/church	3 (20.0)
Senior programming	2 (13.3)
Youth programming	10 (66.7)
Bilingual services	4 (26.7)
Community fridge	2 (13.3)
Structured recreational services	1 (6.7)
Outdoor recreational facilities	3 (20.0)
Addiction services	1 (6.7)
Support groups	3 (20.0)
School	4 (26.7)
Nutrition classes	8 (53.3)
Garden education classes	8 (53.3)
Health services	2 (13.3)
Other	0 (0)

- The most frequently reported services at the garden sites include youth programming (66.7%), as well as nutrition classes (53.3%), and garden education classes (53.3%), emphasizing the gardens' role in providing educational opportunities and engagement for children and the broader community.
- Several sites offer access to public transportation(26.7%), bilingual services (26.7%), soup kitchens or community meals (26.7%), and schools (26.7%), reflecting the integration of gardens within community service hubs. Other notable offerings include federal food assistance registration (20.0%), outdoor recreational facilities (20.0%), support groups (20.0%), and spiritual support/church services (20.0%).

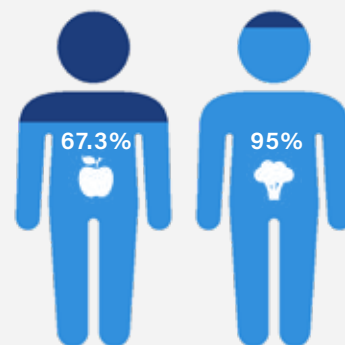
The data highlights the community gardens' role as multi-purpose spaces that provide not only fresh produce but also educational, social, and food assistance programs.

PRODUCE FOR THE COMMUNITY



Ensuring adequate consumption of fruits and vegetables is vital for public health, as diets rich in these foods are associated with a lower risk of chronic diseases. However, many Americans do not meet the recommended intake levels.

Between 2015 and 2018, more than two thirds of adults aged 20 and over consumed fruit (67.3%), while approximately 95% consumed vegetables on a given day. Notably, women were more likely to consume fruit across nearly all categories, except for 100% fruit juice, and similarly, a higher percentage of women consumed dark green and starchy vegetables compared with men.



Currently fewer than 10% of US adults consume 5 servings of fruits and vegetables per day as recommended by the US Dietary Guidelines.



In response to these dietary trends and aligned with Healthy People 2030 objectives, the [Community Gardens Project](#) has made a significant impact by providing the recommended servings of fruits and vegetables, thereby promoting access to nutritious foods and supporting efforts to reduce the risk of chronic diseases while enhancing overall public health.

Initiatives like community gardens play a crucial role in enhancing access to nutritious foods, thereby supporting public health goals and reducing the risk of chronic diseases.



FOOD INSECURITY

The Community Garden Project has played a vital role in enhancing food access by contributing to the delivery of 14,000 meals enriched with fresh fruits and vegetables, providing essential nutrition to individuals and families facing food insecurity. This achievement demonstrates the impact of community-driven initiatives in addressing hunger and improving dietary health. However, despite this progress, 38% of garden participants still report experiencing food insecurity, emphasizing the ongoing need for sustainable, long-term solutions that ensure reliable access to fresh, nutritious food.

By integrating locally grown produce into meal distribution programs, the project not only provides immediate relief but also fosters healthier eating habits and greater awareness of the benefits of fresh food consumption. This milestone is a testament to the dedication and collaborative efforts of volunteers, community partners, and educators, who work tirelessly to ensure that nutritious food reaches those who need it most. Their continued commitment reinforces the importance of expanding these gardens, strengthening food systems, and investing in educational and resource-driven initiatives that empower communities to combat food insecurity in a meaningful and lasting way.



**38% OF
PARTICIPANTS
ARE FOOD
INSECURE**

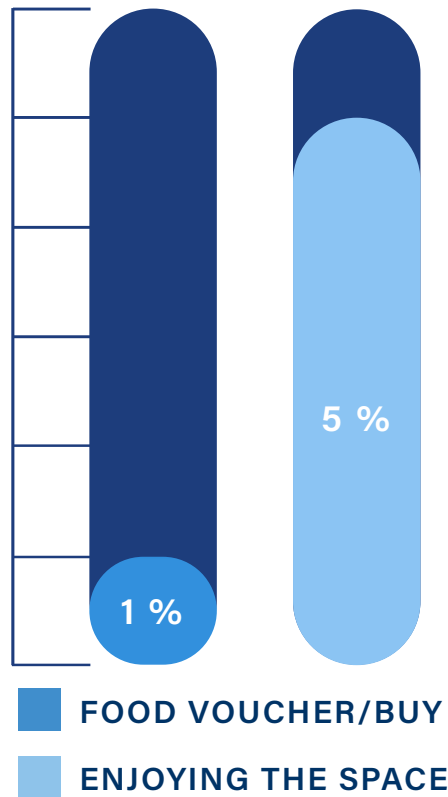


VISITING THE GARDEN

Beyond food access, the Community Garden Project serves as a valuable space for well-being and community engagement. While 1% of participants reported visiting the garden for food vouchers or purchasing produce, 5% visited to enjoy the space, citing reasons such as seeking fresh air, observing nature, and learning opportunities. This highlights the gardens' role in promoting mental and emotional wellness, offering a peaceful environment for relaxation, education, and connection with nature.

Additionally, almost 25% of participants arrived at the garden by walking or riding their bikes, reinforcing the gardens' accessibility and their contribution to encouraging active transportation and healthy lifestyle choices within the community.

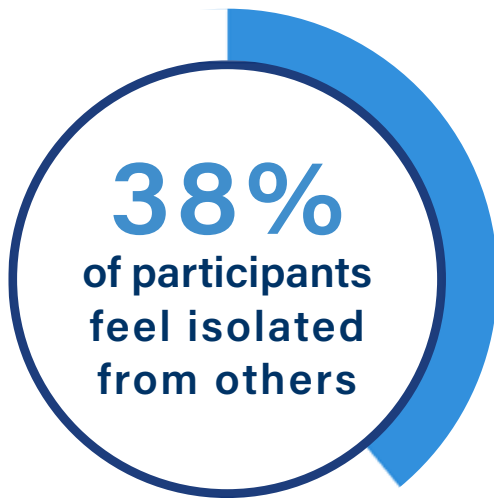
OTHER REASONS FOR VISITING THE GARDEN



Almost
1 in 4
participants
walked or rode
their bike to
the garden.



MENTAL HEALTH



Survey responses highlight the mental health challenges faced by a significant portion of garden participants. 39% of respondents reported feeling isolated from others, emphasizing the need for inclusive, community-oriented spaces that foster social connections. Additionally, when asked about their mental well-being, 55% of participants reported having no bad mental health days in the past 30 days, while 45% experienced at least one day of poor mental health.

These findings underscore the importance of initiatives like the Community Garden Project, which not only provide access to fresh food but also create opportunities for social interaction, outdoor activity, and mental well-being support. By serving as a welcoming space for engagement and connection, the gardens play a vital role in reducing isolation and promoting overall community health.

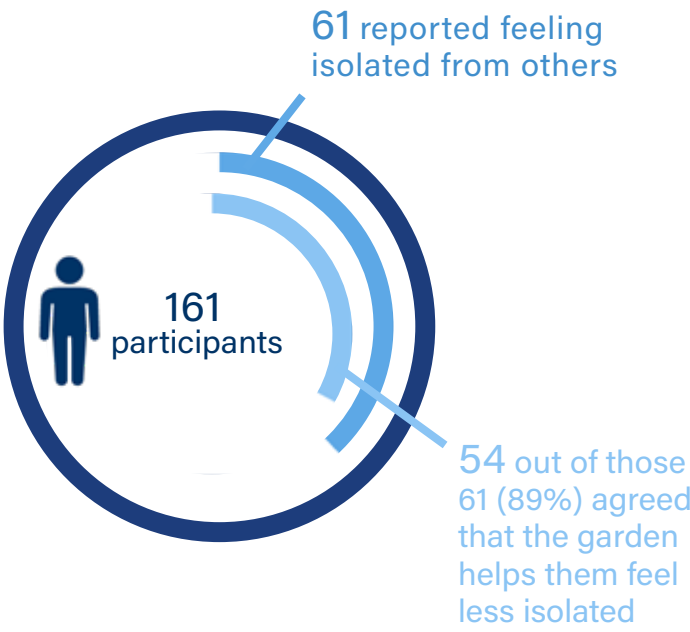
Thinking about your mental health, how many days during the last 30 days your mental health was not good?
Including stress, depression, and problems with emotions.

0 days:
55%

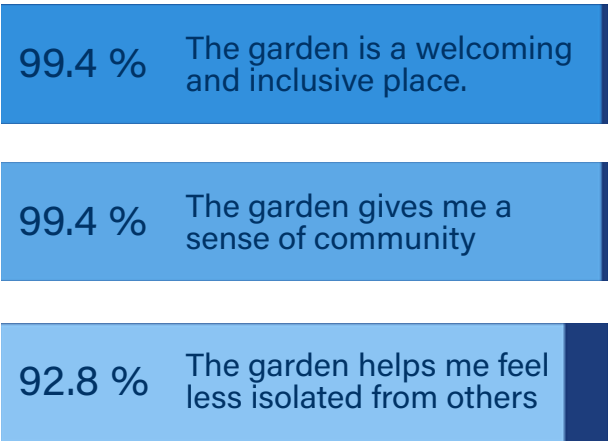
1 or more days:
45%

Despite a notable percentage of participants reporting feelings of isolation, the Community Garden Project has proven to be a valuable resource in fostering connection and inclusivity. Out of the 161 participants, 61 individuals reported feeling isolated from others, highlighting a significant concern regarding social connection within the community.

However, among those 61 participants who experienced isolation, 54 (89%) agreed that the garden helps them feel less isolated, demonstrating the garden’s role in fostering a sense of belonging and support.



Furthermore, an overwhelming 99.4% of participants stated that the garden is a welcoming and inclusive space, while an equal 99.4% expressed that the garden provides them with a sense of community. Overall, 92.8% of participants reported that the garden helps them feel less isolated, reinforcing its role as a supportive and engaging environment that enhances social well-being. These findings highlight the gardens’ broader impact beyond food access, demonstrating their significance in strengthening social ties, promoting belonging, and improving overall quality of life within the community.



CONCLUSION

The Community Garden Project, established as part of PSH's Community Health's Food Access Program, was designed to address food access challenges through community gardening initiatives. By partnering with 15 garden sites, the project has provided essential resources to support food production, nutrition education, and community engagement. These gardens serve as multi-functional spaces where fresh produce is cultivated, educational programs are delivered, and community members gather to share knowledge and strengthen connections.

Despite these efforts, 38% of participants reported experiencing food insecurity, reinforcing the ongoing need for accessible, nutritious food sources. In response, the gardens contributed to the delivery of 14,000 meals enriched with fresh fruits and vegetables, demonstrating their tangible impact on food access. Additionally, survey participation grew significantly from 33 respondents in 2023 to 161 in 2024, following key adjustments such as transitioning to paper surveys and introducing incentives to encourage engagement.

Beyond food security, the gardens play a critical role in fostering social connections and enhancing well-being. While 39% of participants reported feeling isolated, 92.8% stated that the garden helps them feel less isolated, and an overwhelming 99.4% agreed that the garden provides a welcoming and inclusive space that fosters a sense of community. The gardens also encourage active lifestyles, with 25% of participants walking or biking to the sites, and provide a space for relaxation, education, and personal growth, with participants citing the gardens as a place to enjoy fresh air, observe nature, and learn new skills.

These findings highlight the multifaceted value of the Community Garden Project—not only as a food access initiative but also as a catalyst for social engagement, education, and mental well-being. As participation and impact continue to grow, sustained investment and expansion will be essential to further enhance the gardens' role in strengthening community resilience, improving public health, and fostering long-term food security.



NEXT STEPS



Lessons Learned from surveying the garden:

- The gardens are all different sizes and with varying visits by community members, so we need to adjust the number of surveys based on size and participation.
- Some gardens are not as accessible to the public, so surveys need to be distributed at events.
- The incentives were helpful in securing the surveys and gathering all of the data.
- At the pantry gardens, it can be challenging to capture garden users because it is randomized visits and the staff is not always in garden. For the pantry, it may be easier to coordinate an event or capture the data as they visit the pantry.
- Gardens are more successful in community engagement, volunteer recruitment and fundraising when there is a paid garden leader.
- Engagement with monthly meetings, offers the chance to share ideas, discuss success and challenges, share resources and connect similar gardens and programs.
- Ongoing funding through our program has helped to maintain consistent growing practices, volunteer engagement and time to seek additional funding and partnerships.
- Having a dedicated staff person with Penn State Health, has allowed for sustainable funding, enhanced partnership with the College of Medicine, guidance for garden leaders, and trust among the partners and the health system.

As the Community Garden Project continues to evolve, our commitment to fostering food security, social connection, and community well-being remains steadfast. Moving forward, we will:

- Continue surveying the population who visits the gardens to gather valuable insights into their needs, experiences, and the overall impact of the Community Garden Project.
- Enhance the survey with more questions about desired programming, where to hold programming, how it can be delivered, and what type of programs.

This ongoing data collection will allow us to assess food access, social connectivity, and community well-being, ensuring that the gardens remain responsive to the needs of those they serve.

Additionally, we will focus on:

- Strengthening partnerships and expanding garden sites to reach new areas where access to fresh food and community spaces is most needed.

By broadening our impact, we aim to further enhance food security, promote health and wellness, and create more inclusive, supportive environments across the community. As the gardens continue to grow, so does their ability to nourish not only bodies but also connections, resilience, and hope for a healthier, more connected future.



CONTRIBUTORS



Amber Coleman, MA, MBA,
Director of Community Health
Penn State Health



Susan Veldheer, DEd, RD, LDN,
Family & Community Medicine
& Public Health Sciences
Penn State College of Medicine



**Terrah Keck-Kester, MD,
FAAP, FABOIM**
Assistant Professor in Pediatrics
Penn State College of Medicine



Laurie Crawford, MPM
Program Manager for Food Access
& Community Gardens
Penn State Health



Darilyn Rivera- Collazo
Data Analyst
Penn State College of Medicine



Kayla Rutt
Research Project Manager
Penn State College of Medicine



ZACH ZOOK
Senior Manager of Policy and Research
Central Pennsylvania Food Bank





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