



Urban agriculture has potential to provide food security benefits in the UK

The UK suffers from lower food security than other comparable nations. 'Food security' refers to having access to safe, sustainable, affordable and nutritious food at all times. Producing food in urban areas (urban agriculture; UA), has been suggested as an agricultural method that may contribute to food security, yet concerns about the significance of this contribution and the volume of food the UA could produce in the UK may limit implementation of UA as a food security solution. A rapid evidence review was conducted to assess UA's contribution to food security. Existing evidence is limited and mixed, but more positive than negative results were found, suggesting that UA could improve food security by increasing food access and availability. Most evidence comes from developing countries where UA is practiced for subsistence, however the public health implications of improving food security apply to the UK. The UK has ample land availability for urban food production, therefore the potential for such food security benefits for the UK warrants further focus and policy development to support UA initiatives at community and national levels.

Recommendations for policy

- Upscaling UA in the UK represents a holistic, sustainable way to increase access to and availability of healthy food for food insecure households and communities.
- Supporting and promoting UA through home growing and community gardens in the least food secure areas of the UK could be beneficial for household food security. Extended benefits of doing so could include skill-building, social connections and well-being.
- The modest benefits for food security shown in existing studies supports the need for more research on existing applications of UA in the UK to improve current the evidence base and maximise benefits for food security.

The challenge

The UK has lower levels of food security than other high-income European countries. As much of our food is produced overseas, our food security is vulnerable to threats from political, climate and global health challenges. At a population level, the effects of food insecurity include poorer diet, stress and poor health outcomes, which result in further challenges to public health.

Increasing UK-based food production via urban agriculture (UA) may improve food security. Research shows that UA could supply up four times the amount of fresh fruit and vegetables that the UK imports, although how this translates to food security and its underlying dimensions is unclear. This policy brief summarises a rapid evidence synthesis on UA and food security, and considers the implications of the findings for the UK.

The method

A rapid evidence review was conducted to examine relationships between UA and food security. Literature that explicitly assessed UA and food security, available in English, and was published in the last 20 years was eligible for review. Data were extracted via PICO format.

Literature Search: Literature searches were conducted on PubMed, MedLine, Scopus and Google Scholar. Reference lists of included studies and previous reviews were also searched. Searches returned 8458 results, 190 of which were eligible for full-text review. Twenty-eight papers were eligible for inclusion (n=28).

Quality Assessment: Value judgments were carried out to assess if papers contained 1) clear assessment of UA and food security; 2) appropriate measures; 3) evidence of selective reporting.

The results

Seventeen studies reported positive but modest associations between UA and food security. Three reported mixed (positive and negative) associations; five reported inconclusive or no associations between UA and food security. Two studies reported negative associations between UA and food security. Most studies reported on home or community-based UA projects.



Results suggest that UA can contribute to both subjective feelings and objective measures of food security. This appears to be achieved by increasing access to and availability of healthy, fresh food. UA can also provide access to culturally appropriate foods, and have extended benefits for individuals via developing skills, social connections and well-being.

UA may be beneficial for food security at a household or community level, although the strength of this evidence is weak due to poor study quality and inconsistencies in UA and food security assessment. Implications for the UK are that upscaling UA may aid food security in disadvantaged communities, but more empirical research is needed to confirm this.

More information

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