Health & Medicine

# Landscaping to Save Lives

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An abandoned lot in Philadelphia before and after revitalization.

A team of researchers led by Columbia public-health expert Charles C. Branas has discovered a surprisingly simple way to help reduce urban gun violence: clearing and landscaping trash-filled vacant lots, where crimes often occur. In a recent experiment in Philadelphia, Branas and his colleagues tidied up dozens of vacant lots in low-income neighborhoods and found that shooting incidents subsequently declined by 29 percent in their vicinity.

What explains this effect? Interviews with the residents led the researchers to conclude that people who live on streets that are free of blight are more likely to spend time outdoors, which, in turn, dissuades criminals from loitering.

Branas says the strategy could be useful in combating gun-related crime across the United States, where approximately 15 percent of all urban land is deemed vacant and is often filled with trash and overgrown vegetation.

“We have an area the size of Switzerland in our cities that’s been abandoned like this,” he says. “This is a big opportunity.”

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