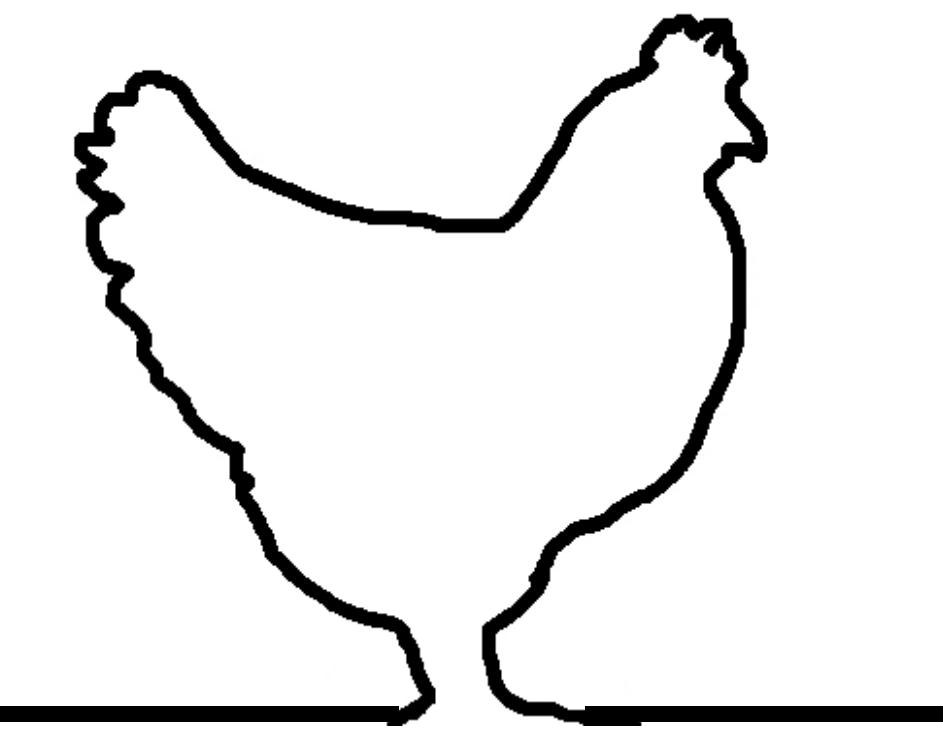


Coop Culture: Urban Chicken Farming as a Method of Reconnecting People to Their Food



Abstract: In the past 3 years, an astounding number of people have begun keeping chickens in urban areas throughout the United States. I wanted to take a deep look into this phenomenon, to see what it might offer in learning about Americans' relationship to their food. To explore this issue, I conducted interviews with chicken keepers in the Twin Cities area and compiled newspaper articles on urban chicken keeping from around the U.S. I argue that the urban chicken keeping movement shows evidence of people wanting to be reconnected to their food. I compare urban chicken keeping to Farmers Markets and CSAs to determine its effectiveness in facilitating this reconnection.

Background: Are we disconnected from our food? The timeline below shows how, over the past 150 years, Americans have become disconnected from the production and preparation of their food.

1800-1880: Traditional food production. Reliance on animals in major cities: pigs cleaned up trash; cows supplied urban milk economies. As cities grow, urban animals are associated with dirtiness and working class, leading to their eradication.

1880-1940: Advances in mobility via trains and boats fuels the distancing of food production. Urban affluence leads to food preparation by domestic servants. Vitamins discovered in 1910 — government and specialists replace traditional knowledge as prescriber of diet.

1940-2000: Suburbanization leads to creation of large supermarkets, further disconnecting people from food production. The creation of new farmers markets in the 70's shows the beginnings of a resistance to disconnected food production. In the late 1980s, a major E. coli outbreak marks the first of several foodborne illness outbreaks to come.

Reconnecting with food: Several pieces of evidence show that Americans have recently been trying to reconnect with their food. From 1994 to 2009, the number of Farmers Markets in the U.S. has more than tripled (fig. 1). Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) operations have also increased in number, with over 3500 throughout the U.S (fig. 2). These activities increase the connection between farmer and consumer.

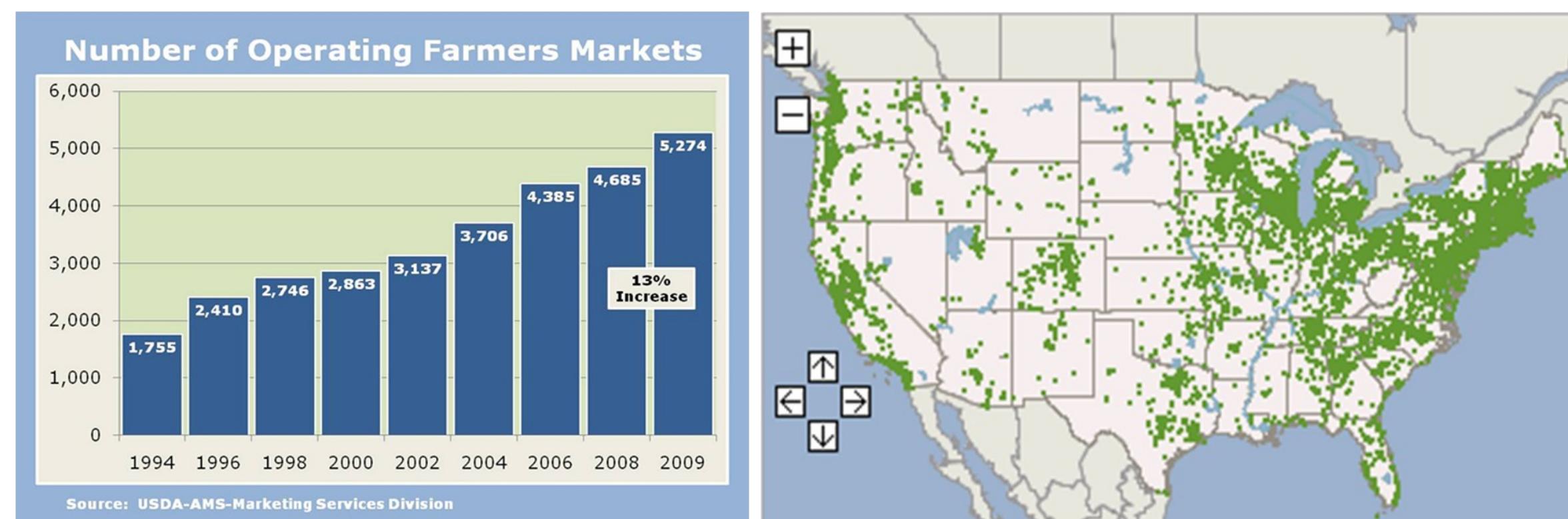


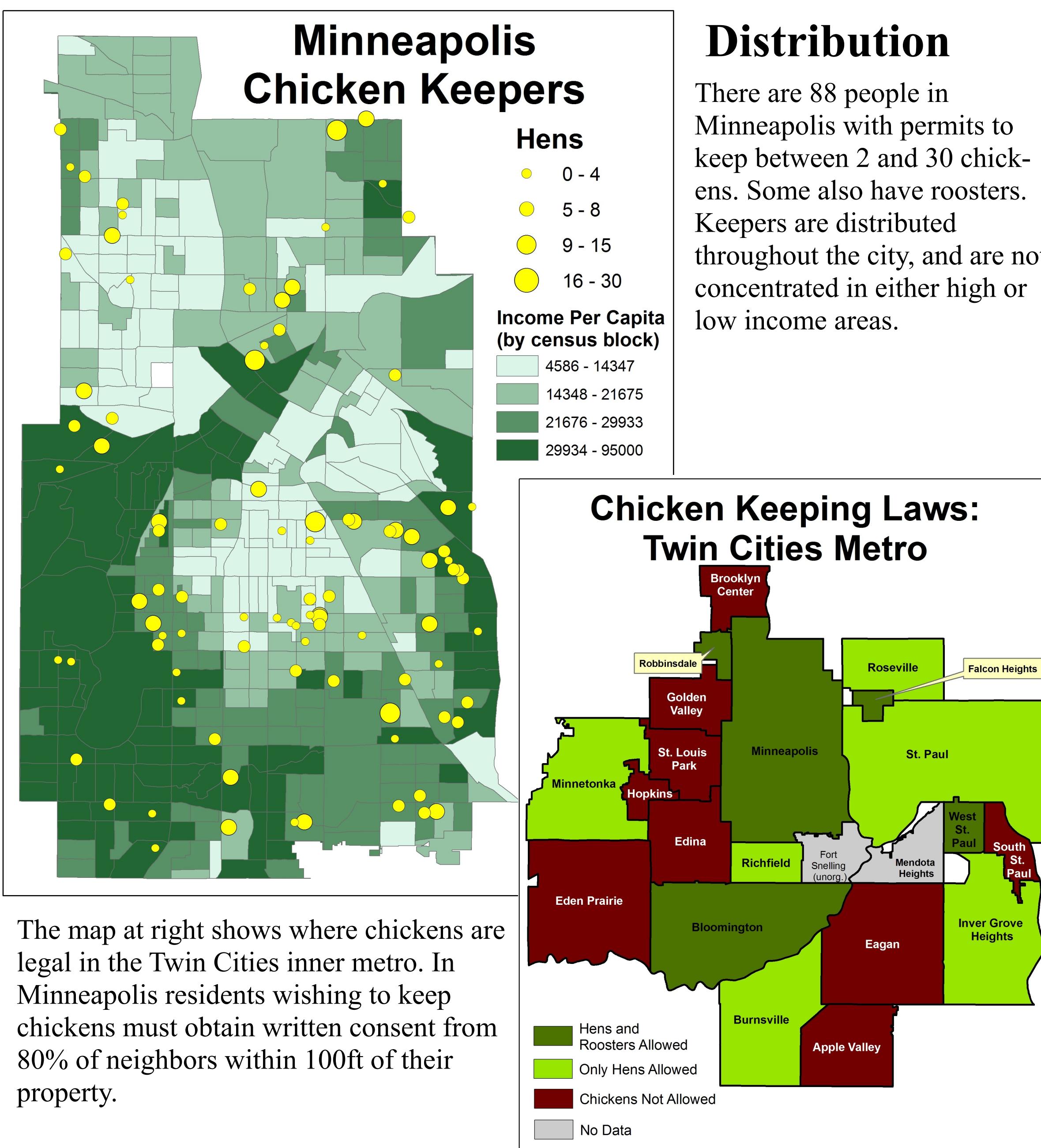
Figure 1: Increase in number of operating Farmers Markets (USDA)



Figure 2: Distribution of CSA operations throughout the U.S. (localharvest.org)

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Methods: I mapped where chicken keeping is legal in the Twin Cities metro and the locations of all households in Minneapolis that have permits to keep chickens. I interviewed chicken keepers in the greater Twin Cities area, and compared the benefits and drawbacks of chicken keeping with those of CSAs and Farmers Markets.



The map at right shows where chickens are legal in the Twin Cities inner metro. In Minneapolis residents wishing to keep chickens must obtain written consent from 80% of neighbors within 100ft of their property.

Interviews: Motives for Keeping Chickens

Initial: Most interviewees decided to get chickens for their egg production, or to learn more about sustainable food production in general. A few were interested in chickens as pets. One respondent recalled her experience in trying another chicken keepers' eggs: "It had to do with the taste...The flavor was so unbelievably different."

After 6 Months: Respondents reported changing their motives after having had chickens for several months. Most keepers developed a bond with their chickens as pets. Several were amazed at their chickens' intelligence and social interactions (chickens actively keep what is called the "pecking order," in which they define a hierarchical rank within the flock). All interviewees were already using chicken manure to fertilize their gardens, or had plans to use it in the future. As one woman stated about manure as fertilizer, "Chicken poop is like gold!"

Benefits

- Food** — chickens provide a daily supply of eggs (about 1 egg/chicken/day).
- Manure** — used to fertilize garden soil.
- Entertainment** — chickens constantly interact within their "pecking order," and are entertaining to observe, both for adults and children.
- Community Relationships** — keepers reported that chickens can facilitate interactions between neighbors.

Drawbacks

- Cost** — high upfront cost for coop and chickens, continued expenses on food and care. A properly designed coop can cost \$500-\$2,000.
- Time** — eggs must be collected daily, and the coop must be cleaned weekly.
- Long-term Outlook** — hens eventually stop laying eggs, keepers must decide whether to keep them, find adoptive homes, or slaughter them. In some cases, chickens are neglected or abandoned.



LEFT: A flock of chickens roams a Minneapolis backyard, foraging for bugs. RIGHT: A chicken coop in South Minneapolis. Fencing protects the chickens from dogs, while netting and a tarp protect them from rain and other predators. In winter, coops are fitted with heated water dispensers and heat lamps. (Rooney)

Conclusion: Urban chicken keeping differs in several ways from Farmers Markets and CSAs. Chicken keeping is individualistic, while Farmers Markets and CSAs require a group effort, either to buy and sell produce (Farmers Markets), or to invest in a growing season and be paid back in food deliveries (CSAs). One benefit of chicken keeping is active involvement in the production and harvesting of one's food — an activity that occurs only occasionally with CSA members and rarely with Farmers Market customers. Urban chicken keeping can change how urban residents view farming and food production. It can also create awareness about the ethics of the industrial food system. As one keeper stated, "Being around them you understand a little bit more how bad the conditions are in some of the egg production places." Overall, urban chicken keeping has the potential to serve as a catalyst for change by drawing attention to food production and the benefits of understanding how and where one's food is produced.