



2025 WM RECYCLING REPORT:

CLOSING THE “SAY-DO GAP”

Americans feel good about recycling, and company recycling commitments help guide their purchases — even as everyday barriers can limit recycling follow through

OCTOBER 2025



OVERVIEW

Recycling seems to be embedded into Americans' cultural collective psyche – the phrase “reduce, reuse, recycle” is well known, and many individuals born after the mid-1980s were taught how and what to recycle in school. Yet, most Americans admit they could do more when it comes to recycling.

The 2025 WM Recycling Report reinforces recycling as a shared responsibility – requiring collaboration and action from recycling providers, consumer packaged goods companies (CPGs) with well-known product brands, policymakers, local municipalities and consumer households.

There are gaps across the recycling system in North America – such as unstable domestic markets for recycled materials, confusion on what materials are recyclable and where they go once they are picked up from the curb, and limited access to recycling in certain communities or less frequent recycling collection dates.

To explore these gaps and identify potential solutions, the **2025 WM Recycling Report** investigates consumer recycling behaviors and

perceptions and the emotions, routines and everyday factors that can influence recycling action. WM looked at recycling through two lenses: quantitative data from a new survey of 1,100+ U.S. consumers, paired with behavioral research gleaned from virtual conversations and in-person time spent with individuals from communities around the country in their homes and neighborhoods.

As North America's largest recycler and a leader in advancing the circular economy through state-of-the-art technology and innovative environmental solutions, WM commissioned this report to share insights and opportunities for greater collaboration through enhancing recycling education and actions, as well as increasing accessibility and investment.

[For information on the methodology behind this research, please see page 12.](#)

KEY FINDINGS

The 2025 WM Recycling Report found that Americans today are as committed to recycling as ever, but with so many competing priorities and conflicting information, recycling doesn't always happen. Additionally, it showed that consumers oftentimes prioritize companies with recycling commitments – such as CPG companies that use recycled content in products or businesses that have recycling available.

There's a significant "say-do gap:" 77% of Americans report they currently recycle, and 7 in 10 say they find recycling easy to do. Yet, other existing data on recycling rates in the U.S. tells another story — the latest [EPA](#) data shows that based on the materials Americans use today, only 32.1% of materials are being recycled. Further, during the week spent with behavioral study participants, recycling action took place far less often than what was reported in survey data.



Knowledge gaps weaken recycling confidence, but interest in learning is high: Many Americans — especially older consumers (Baby Boomers) — lack confidence that plastics placed in bins are actually recycled. Yet, while few know what happens to their recycling after pick-up, nearly 3 in 4 would be interested in learning more: a sentiment that holds strong across all age groups.



77%
say they
recycle



32%
of materials are
being recycled

Recyclable packaging and recycled content can drive product demand: Nearly two-thirds (63%) of Americans say they would be more likely to purchase products from CPGs that use recycled content in their products, with younger (Gen Z and Millennials) and higher-income consumers as the most likely to reward companies that do so. Additionally, more than 4 in 5 (81%) respondents say they would be more likely to recycle if they knew the materials they recycle were ultimately used to create new products.

Sustainability commitments by companies like CPGs can influence consumer behavior: More than 7 in 10 (77%) respondents say they notice when a business has recycling available for its customers and nearly half (48%) say that the impact of a company's sustainability goals is a strong factor in purchasing decisions.

Recycling creates positive emotions: When asked which feelings are associated with recycling, Americans were much more likely to associate recycling with positive emotions like feelings of satisfaction, optimism and accomplishment. Even in the behavioral research, the idea that recycling is a positive thing overall came through clearly in conversations.



STATE OF RECYCLING BEHAVIORS

Consumer-reported recycling is on the rise.

The number of Americans who say they recycle increased **11 percentage points year-over-year** – up from 66% reported in the [2024 WM recycling survey data](#). Data showed more than three-quarters of Americans (77%) say they recycle — with participation strongest among older (Baby Boomers and Gen X), middle- and higher-income (\$150K+ annual HHI) and non-rural groups.

Consumers are paying attention to CPG actions on recycling.

Consumers are keenly interested in supporting companies that use recycled materials in their products, with 63% reporting that they are more likely to purchase products from those that do so. Additionally, more than 7 in 10 (77%) respondents say they notice when a business has recycling available for its customers. **Nearly half of respondents (48%) said that the impact of a company's sustainability goals is a strong factor in purchasing decisions.**

Americans want to make a difference through recycling and care about the role companies play in driving sustainability.

Among Americans who do recycle, nearly half (48%) stated they started recycling because they wanted to make a difference. Others were influenced by knowledge of available recycling services (31%), by family/friends/peers (28%) or community requirements. **Of those who have incorporated recycling behaviors into their lives on a regular basis, individuals report they continue doing it because it's the right thing to do (59%).**

Many are interested in recycling and find it easy to do.

Americans today report not only a strong interest in recycling — with about half (49%) of people saying they are interested in recycling more — but also a marked aptitude in recycling knowledge. For example, **7 in 10 Americans say they find recycling easy — a sentiment that seems to increase with age as Boomers (72%) and Gen X (71%) report greater ease than Millennials (67%) and Gen Z (67%).**

Environmental well-being and shared responsibility are primary drivers for recycling.

Most respondents (88%) stated they believe recycling is important in protecting the future of our environment. When asked where responsibility should lie for recycling, nearly half (49%) of respondents said it should be a shared effort versus a solely personal (24%) or community (20%) obligation. Interestingly, younger generations like Gen Z are more likely to feel the significance of their personal behaviors and actions (31%) than their Baby Boomer counterparts (19%).

Note: All figures are based on the 2025 WM Recycling Report survey data conducted by HarrisX. More information can be found in the survey methodology on page 12.

66%

2024

77%

2025

59%

Believe it's
the right
thing to do

48%

Want to make
a difference

31%

Recycling is
available

28%

Influenced by
community

72% Boomers

71% Gen X

67% Millennials

67% Gen Z

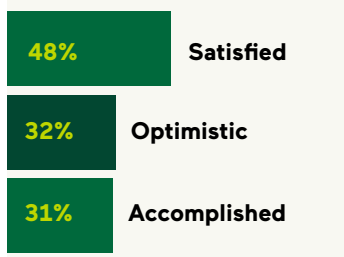
88%



WHEN THERE'S A WILL, BUT NOT A WAY:

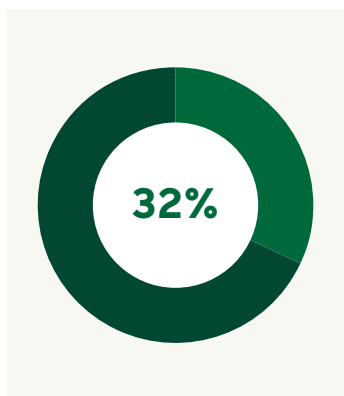
"We've tried to sort cans and plastic at home to take to the bins when we can, but sometimes they pile up, and if we're tight on gas money, they end up in the trash because we can't afford an extra trip across town. It feels like you want to do the right thing, but life gets in the way."

- Steven, Fort Walton Beach



Recycling leads to positive emotional ties.

When asked how recycling makes individuals feel, the vast majority reported positive thoughts. **The top ranked emotions included feeling satisfied (48%), optimistic (32%) and accomplished (31%)** – followed by a neutral sentiment (27%). Americans were much less likely to report negative emotions associated with recycling such as feelings of frustration (6%), hopelessness (5%) and confusion (5%).

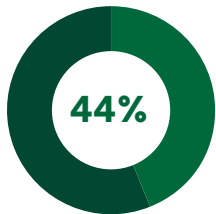


Ultimately, recycling rates tell a different story.

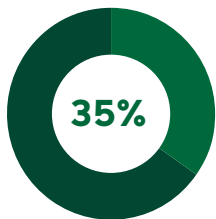
This data paints an interesting narrative — one in which Americans believe in the importance of recycling, say it's easy and want to purchase products made with recycled materials. Yet, actual recycling rates reveal a gap in action – the latest EPA data shows that based on the materials Americans use today, only 32% of materials are being recycled. Exploring this “say-do gap” – or the difference between what Americans say they do and their actions – is important to understanding how to strengthen the recycling system through increased consumer engagement and CPG use of recycled content, among other solutions across the recycling system.

BARRIERS BEHIND THE “SAY-DO GAP”

The reasons consumer recycling may fall by the wayside are practical and existential



Looking at the nearly one quarter (24%) of Americans who say recycling is difficult, access, frequency and knowledge gaps rise to the top. **Driving to a different location to recycle ranks as the highest barrier on the list, representing 44% of Americans who say recycling is difficult.** Limited frequency of curbside pickup (30%), a lack of understanding of what can and cannot be recycled (29%), bins that fill up too quickly (18%) and limited access to bins in the house (17%) create additional challenges.



There is another portion of Americans who remain interested in recycling but experience barriers to following through. **Of those who do not recycle, 35% note they don't have access to recycling services in their area,** while another quarter (23%) are interested but find it too hard or inconvenient to do so.

Barriers behind the “say-do gap” are more complex than meets the eye. Through in-person interviews and house visits, further variables were introduced. As noted by Steven in Fort Walton Beach, Florida, “I try to rinse out cans and bottles if there’s time, but sometimes, if we’re busy or tired, it doesn’t happen perfectly.” Beyond traditional barriers like access and pickup frequency, behavioral studies revealed that recycling itself is competing against other life obligations and factors.

For stay-at-home mother Jackie, who has two children under the age of four, the number one priority is convenience. Recycling remains difficult for Jackie because it doesn’t fit into her time-strapped day. Other study participants stressed that they believe packaging could be better designed or reduced to keep recycling habits in mind. Eric in



COMPETING FOR MENTAL SPACE:

“I don’t worry too much about the waste I produce, although I don’t know much about my recycling system, and I’ve given into the acceptance that feeling physically stable as it is, in some sense, is more important than beating myself up with ethical idealism.”

- Charles, San Antonio

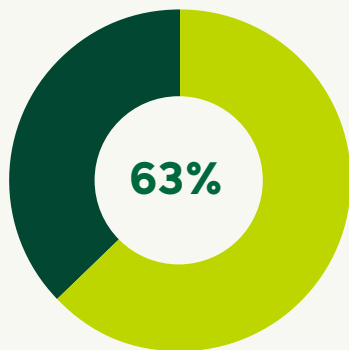
Denver discussed how his meal delivery program creates further complications: “I don’t need them to be individually placed in a box. I have to take all of those boxes downstairs to the trash room, which I don’t want to do. I want to make as few trips to that room as possible.”

On a broader societal level, participants stressed that a general sense of being overwhelmed impacted their daily decisions — noting “there is less time in people’s days to dole out” and “attention-grabbing headlines, news and life events keep everyone busy.” The bottom line is that recycling behaviors are competing with so many other aspects of life and decisions individuals make. Even with the best intentions, when mindshare and time are limited, good recycling habits can fall by the wayside.

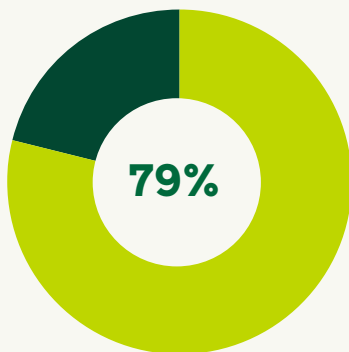
POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS TO RECYCLING BARRIERS

CPG commitments to recycling can drive consumer loyalty

More corporate involvement seems to be a winning factor for Americans who prioritize recycling. Six-in-10 (63%) stated they are more likely to buy from companies that include recycled content in their products and 79% said if they knew some of the everyday products they buy were made from recycled materials, they would be more motivated to recycle. These are important because CPG's use of domestic recycled materials in their products — such as boxes, plastic bottles, aluminum cans, clothing and backpacks made from recycled fibers and more — are essential to building a strong recycling system and help fuel demand for recycling and maintain domestic end markets.



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Consumers are supporting recycling through smarter shopping and reduced consumption

For those respondents who indicated wanting to expand their recycling practices, increasing the overall volume of recycling (51%) and recycling new types of materials (47%) ranked as the priority ways to participate, but Americans are also thinking differently about how their actions can impact the overall recycling system. Individuals are also looking at how their shopping decisions can ultimately feed into increased recycling. Notably, they say they look to buy products made from recyclable materials (44%) and contain recycled materials (42%) or are exploring ways to limit their overall consumption of goods (34%).



WONDERING WHERE IT ALL GOES:

"What's unclear to me is how it is all sorted or where it goes or the impact that I am making. I really wish I understood what happens to all the effort I put into it."

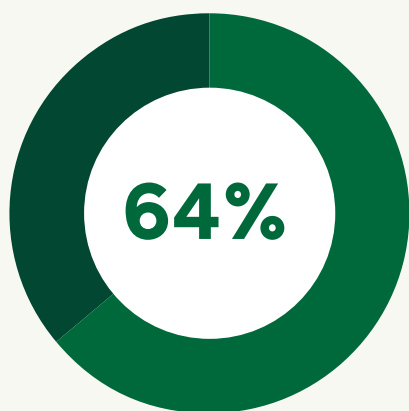
- Keagan, Denver



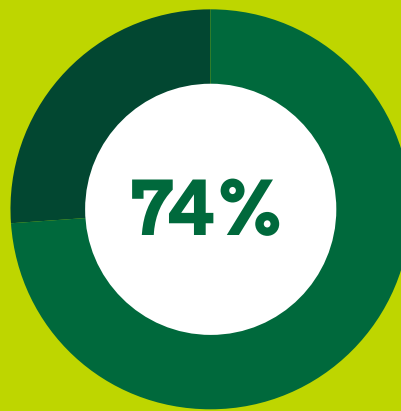
There are more opportunities to enhance recycling education

There is opportunity for more education to inspire good recycling behaviors and increased participation. **Nearly two thirds of individuals (64%) stated they would be interested in recycling more if they knew more about what to and not to recycle**, underscoring

the importance of increased information on recycling. Providing further insight into what happens to materials that enter the system presents another major opportunity for education. While only 23% of Americans say they have a strong understanding of how recycled materials are turned into new items, **nearly three quarters (74%) said they are interested in learning more about how recycled materials are turned into new items.**



of respondents stated they would be interested in recycling more if they knew more about what to and not to recycle



of respondents said they are interested in learning more about how recycled materials are turned into new items



Beyond these concrete opportunities, behavioral research participants shared other factors that would motivate further recycling action. Themes included:

- **Recycling needs a rallying cry:** Brent in Nashville noted that the city doesn't have a collective environmental rallying point. In contrast, when he lived in Bellingham, Washington, not recycling was an "affront to the Puget Sound." Annie in Denver echoed this general sentiment, saying recycling is a "feel good measure and a point of pride" which creates solidarity with her rural community. Communities can create their own "recycling rallying cries" by focusing on recycling's ability to preserve resources and natural beauty in the environment, how recycled materials can be used to create beloved city elements, or even how sports teams and venues support and model good recycling behaviors.
- **Generations can inspire generations:** Keagan, who is a graduate student in Denver living with his family, spoke of how to care about their recycling and consumption habits. "I'm the one in the house who leads the charge. My household would probably not even think about recycling if it wasn't for me. I'm the one who actually bought the recycling container." Oftentimes with recycling, younger generations can be a critical advocate for increased recycling and even educating their families on good recycling behaviors.
- **Companies can impact their communities:** Brent in Nashville also touched on his expectations for companies to lead the way. He stated, "unless corporations do their part, consumer level recycling will always be inadequate." Leaning into a keen interest from individuals to buy from and support companies who prioritize recycling and recycled content, companies should ensure that they effectively communicate how they are using recycled materials and how their own products can be recycled.

KEEPING RECYCLING SIMPLE WITH FOUR TENETS FOR BEHAVIOR CHANGE

Through a deeper understanding of not only recycling behaviors and perceptions, but also the emotions, rituals and everyday factors behind them, we can help inspire action to drive higher recycling rates. This report reveals a number of barriers, but also opportunities for enhanced engagement. Our recommendations for creating behavior change around recycling include:

- **Recycling is a shared responsibility across businesses, policymakers, local municipalities and consumer households:** When all pieces move together, it can help expand recycling education, access and action. Recycling as a collective effort can also empower consumers to feel part of a meaningful movement with real impact. As recycling relies on demand for recycled content, consumers can familiarize themselves with which CPGs are using recycled materials in their products. CPGs can strengthen domestic end markets by using more U.S. recycled materials, cities can expand recycling access and recycling providers can show the power of individual actions by sharing accurate data on waste diverted from landfills.
- **Recycling should be easy:** Recycling messages are competing for the mindshare of Americans who are constantly bombarded with news and other content. To ensure greatest success, recycling education messages should be uncomplicated and simple. For example, CPGs can include easy-to-read labels on packaging if it is widely recyclable or made with recycled materials. Municipalities and recycling providers like WM can share recycling guidelines with constituents as they update or invite community members to come and learn more about the process through facility tours, if possible.



- **Recycling should be convenient:** Recycling must be seamlessly woven into Americans' daily lives, not an additional hassle that can quickly fall off a growing to-do list. Prioritizing the easiest and fastest ways to recycle items — like communities offering curbside recycling and businesses offering recycling in stores and offices — will allow individuals to incorporate recycling habits, routines and rituals into their lives.
- **Recycling should be a feel-good moment:** The data reveals recycling creates positive emotions. Recycling can be a simple way an individual can create an instant sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Communities, CPGs, sporting venues and recycling providers can find ways to model and reward this good recycling behavior that not only can have a direct impact on their community but also can help drive broader environmental progress.



As North America's largest recycler, WM is working to advance the circular economy by investing in state-of-the-art technology and innovative solutions to strengthen its recycling infrastructure and increase recycling access to certain communities. WM is executing on plans to invest more than \$1.4 billion in building new and upgrading existing recycling facilities from 2022 through 2026, leveraging automation and artificial intelligence in an effort to capture more material and increase efficiency.

Additionally, WM understands that recycling works best when we all work together, which is why the company is committed to collaborating with municipalities, customers, communities and other organizations to help support recycling education.

Looking ahead, WM will continue to invest in efforts to strengthen recycling infrastructure, provide education and inspiration to communities and collaborate with committed partners and producers to help grow recycling practices.



A COMMITMENT TODAY, FOR THE FUTURE:

"The 2025 WM Recycling Report shows us that to truly close the gap between intention and action, recycling providers, consumer packaged goods companies and municipalities need to meet people where they are and understand what influences them to recycle. At WM, we are investing in technology, infrastructure and education to help turn good recycling intentions into real, lasting impact — all while working with companies to help them maintain their recycled content commitments and with municipalities to increase recycling access in communities."

- Tara Hemmer, Chief Sustainability Officer, WM

Disclaimer: The findings and generalizations presented in this report are based on qualitative and quantitative responses collected from a specific sample population. While efforts were made to ensure the survey was representative, the results may not fully reflect the beliefs and behaviors of all individuals or groups. Interpretations of recycling attitudes and practices should be viewed as indicative rather than definitive, and may be influenced by factors such as sample size, demographic composition and response bias.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Study Methodology

This report synthesizes insights gathered from in-person interviews and online responses; it includes direct quotes and photos from participants including over 30 individuals from diverse geographic locations, including Dallas, Texas; Denver, Colo.; Fort Walton, Fla.; and Nashville, Tenn. Over three days, Further&Further – a third-party research team focused on human-centric and authentic behavioral studies – engaged these participants in online discussions to understand their perspectives on recycling and their daily lives. From this group, six individuals were selected for an in-person, week-long immersion to gain a deeper understanding of their stories, priorities and approaches to waste and recycling.

Quantitative Study Methodology

The quantitative survey was conducted online within the United States, from September 3-4, 2025, among 1,107 U.S. consumers 18+ via the HarrisX Overnight Poll. Respondents for the Poll are recruited through opt-in, web-panel recruitment sampling. Recruitment occurs through a broad variety of professional, validated respondent panels to expand the sampling frame as widely as possible and minimize the impact of any given panel on recruiting methods.

The results are intended to reflect a nationally representative sample of Americans ages 18+. Results were weighted for age, gender, region, race/ethnicity, income, political party, education, ideology and area type where necessary to align them with their actual proportions in the population at the time the survey was conducted. The margin of error for the total sample is +/- 3.0 percentage points.

ABOUT WM



WM ([WM.com](https://www.wm.com)) is North America's leading provider of comprehensive environmental solutions. Previously known as Waste Management and based in Houston, Texas, WM is driven by commitments to put people first and achieve success with integrity. The company, through its subsidiaries, provides collection, recycling and disposal services to millions of residential, commercial, industrial, medical and municipal customers throughout the U.S. and Canada. With innovative infrastructure and capabilities in recycling, organics and renewable energy, WM provides environmental solutions to and collaborates with its customers in helping them pursue their sustainability goals. In North America, WM has the largest disposal network and collection

fleet, is the largest recycler and is a leader in beneficial use of landfill gas, with a growing network of renewable natural gas plants and the most landfill gas-to-electricity plants, as well as the largest heavy-duty natural gas truck fleet in the industry. WM Healthcare Solutions provides collection and disposal services of regulated medical waste and secure information destruction services in the U.S., Canada and Western Europe. To learn more about WM and the company's sustainability progress and solutions, visit sustainability.wm.com.