

US Residential gaps

Updated: Report identifies gaps in US residential recycling systems

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Only 21 percent of residential recyclables are being recycled in the U.S., according to a report from The Recycling Partnership (TRP), Washington, titled “State of Recycling: Present and Future of Residential Recycling in the U.S.,” which also identifies the gaps in the residential recycling systems. The report suggests that extended producer responsibility (EPR) policies and proactive industry investment can address these gaps.

The [report](#) compares the current state of residential recycling with [five requirements](#) TRP has determined are necessary for a truly efficient system: designing all packaging to be recyclable, giving all households access to recycling, fully engaging residents, material recovery facilities that can effectively process recyclables and sufficient end markets for recyclables. It is based on multiyear field measurement studies conducted across the U.S. and TRP’s national database using an updated methodology for determining recycling rates that tracks materials throughout the system.

According to the report, every material type is under-recycled: 7 out of 10 cardboard boxes, 3 out of 4 milk jugs, 4 out of 5 steel cans, 3 out of 4 tons of mixed paper and 7 out of 10 glass, aluminum cans and polyethylene terephthalate (PET)*** bottles are lost to trash in homes because not

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enough households have recycling services, while those that do receive insufficient communication about how to recycle.

TRP says 73 percent of all U.S. households have recycling access. While 85 percent of single-family homes have recycling access, only 37 percent of multifamily homes do, meaning nearly 20 million households (63 percent of all multifamily homes) are effectively excluded from recycling.

Only 43 percent of households participate in recycling, according to the report, with nonparticipation arising from a lack of recycling access and insufficient communication about how to recycle locally. Of the 73 percent of households that have recycling access, only 59 percent participate. Among those that participate, only 57 percent of recyclables are placed in their recycling containers, with the report noting that lack of public trust in recycling affects participation.

Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana and Nebraska have residential recycling rates below 10 percent, while California, Connecticut, New York and Oregon have rates of 30 percent or above, according to the report. TRP estimates that EPR policies would increase recycling rates to more than 60 percent for these states, noting that [California](#), [Colorado](#), Maine and Oregon are in the process of implementing EPR, a process that takes three to five years following passage of the legislation.

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Eleven states (California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas and Virginia) lose more than 1 million tons of recyclables annually.

Data-driven, local investment solutions are key to overhauling the U.S. recycling system, according to the report, which suggests targeting those investments in locations where the gains are greatest. Funding is especially needed to support recycling engagement, TRP says, and private industry should share the cost of closing the gaps in household recycling systems.

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“Each link of the recycling system is interconnected, so we need to close all the gaps,” says Cody Marshall, TRP chief system optimization officer. “But we can make the greatest strides by investing in access to recycling services, and communication and outreach so that people can recycle from their homes and fully participate.”

The report identifies key strategies to address recycling system gaps, noting that EPR drives improvement in each of the five requirements of an efficient system. To improve residential recycling, the report offers these suggestions:

- Policymakers at the federal and state level should adopt EPR.
- Companies should invest to design all packaging for recyclability (sources indicate that less than half of plastic packaging is recyclable today); fund improvements in the system where the gaps are greatest, such as access to recycling services and communication about how to recycle locally; leverage the opportunities in regions of greatest material loss.
- State and community recycling leaders should turn the report data into action, especially through communication, education and public engagement in recycling.

The report says acting with a sense of urgency is needed as broadscale system change takes time to implement.

“Every year we trash 79 percent of recyclables, but we don’t need to,” says Keefe Harrison, chief executive officer of The Recycling Partnership.

“Fixing recycling is completely doable—it just takes a clear plan and a true sense of urgency. This report outlines that plan. Our data provides an actionable road map for policymakers, companies, communities and the public to ensure that recycling reaches its full potential to reduce waste and protect natural resources.”

Responding to the report, Matt Seaholm, president and CEO of the [Plastics Industry Association](#), Washington, says, “This report reinforces what our industry has been saying: We need to recycle more, and we need everyone working together to increase recycling rates.”

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He continues, “Higher rates of recycling start with better communication and education regarding the process of recycling, which are goals our [Recycling is Real](#) initiative is committed to achieving. The data from this report will enable industry and policymakers to understand and better engage individuals about the importance of the recycling process, ensuring more valuable recyclable material is captured and reprocessed effectively.”

The association's Vice President of Sustainability Patrick Krieger adds, “A crucial first step to improving our recycling rates is having up-to-date data on recycling in the U.S. Prior to this report, the most recent recycling data we had was from six years ago. The Recycling Partnership’s data enables us to get a snapshot of our challenges and where we have been successful so that we know exactly what needs to get done to ensure more households participate in recycling across our country.”

*** PET

Plastic #1

Even if you don’t know the term “**polyethylene terephthalate**” (**PET** or **PETE**), you’ve probably encountered this type of plastic before. It’s the most frequently recycled one, and it can be found in peanut butter jars, plastic soda and water bottles, microwavable food trays, and salad dressing bottles