

Center for Sustainable Behavior & Impact

In-Home Insights to Accelerate Behavior Change

Ethnographic Research Identifies Six Impactful Key Findings

Why This Matters

Recycling is a complex reverse supply chain that begins in the household, but there is limited visibility into what actually happens in the home behind closed doors. While we know approximately half of all household recyclables never make it to a material recovery facility, we don't know exactly why. We certainly have ideas of what the challenges might be, but what could we be missing?

To confirm our recycling education efforts are focused in the right places, we knew we needed more than surveys and focus groups. We had to observe actual home recycling behaviors firsthand through an ethnographic approach and dig deep to understand the emotions and mindsets that drive these behaviors. To do this, the Center for Sustainable Behavior & Impact (The Center) partnered with Point Forward ethnographers to gather insights on the everyday dynamics of household recycling with the goal of helping our industry develop more effective messaging, tools, and solutions to help people recycle better.

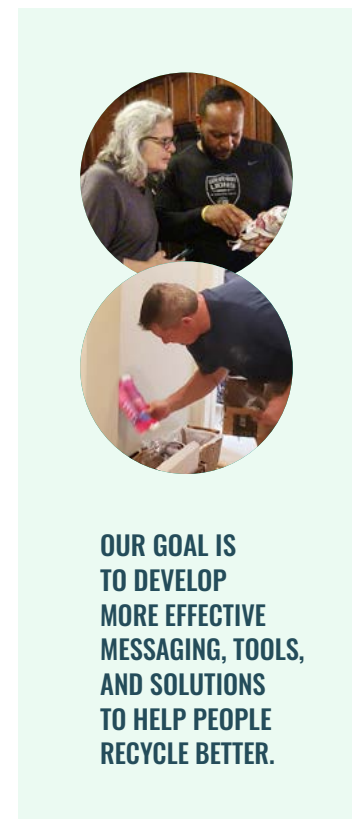
What we learned is there is a lot of individuality and variability in recycling practices and because human behavior is nuanced, recycling messaging and tools need to be nuanced as well. To be more effective, we must move beyond the “one-size-fits-all” approach and embrace this with modular solutions that can scale rapidly.

The high-level behavior patterns and trends that emerged from the study will serve as a guide to help tailor support to different types of recycling households. They help us meet people where they are, celebrate what is working well for them now, and introduce them to ways to improve upon their existing systems.

Research Methodology

Teams of two ethnographers and a staff member from The Center spent two hours with 23 individuals across 16 homes to see how their recycling systems work in the context of daily life. The home sessions were videotaped and photographed and included direct home observations, activities to uncover values and beliefs, and interviews conducted without judgement or instruction. We documented the mechanics of how recyclables flow through the home and also uncovered the feelings, mindsets, and sense of identity that drive or inhibit recycling behavior.

Participating households were located in San Diego, California and Columbus, Ohio. The research team recruited a mix of participants that included both single-family and multifamily households as well as a range of ages (26-62), self-rated abilities (average to very good recyclers), and people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.



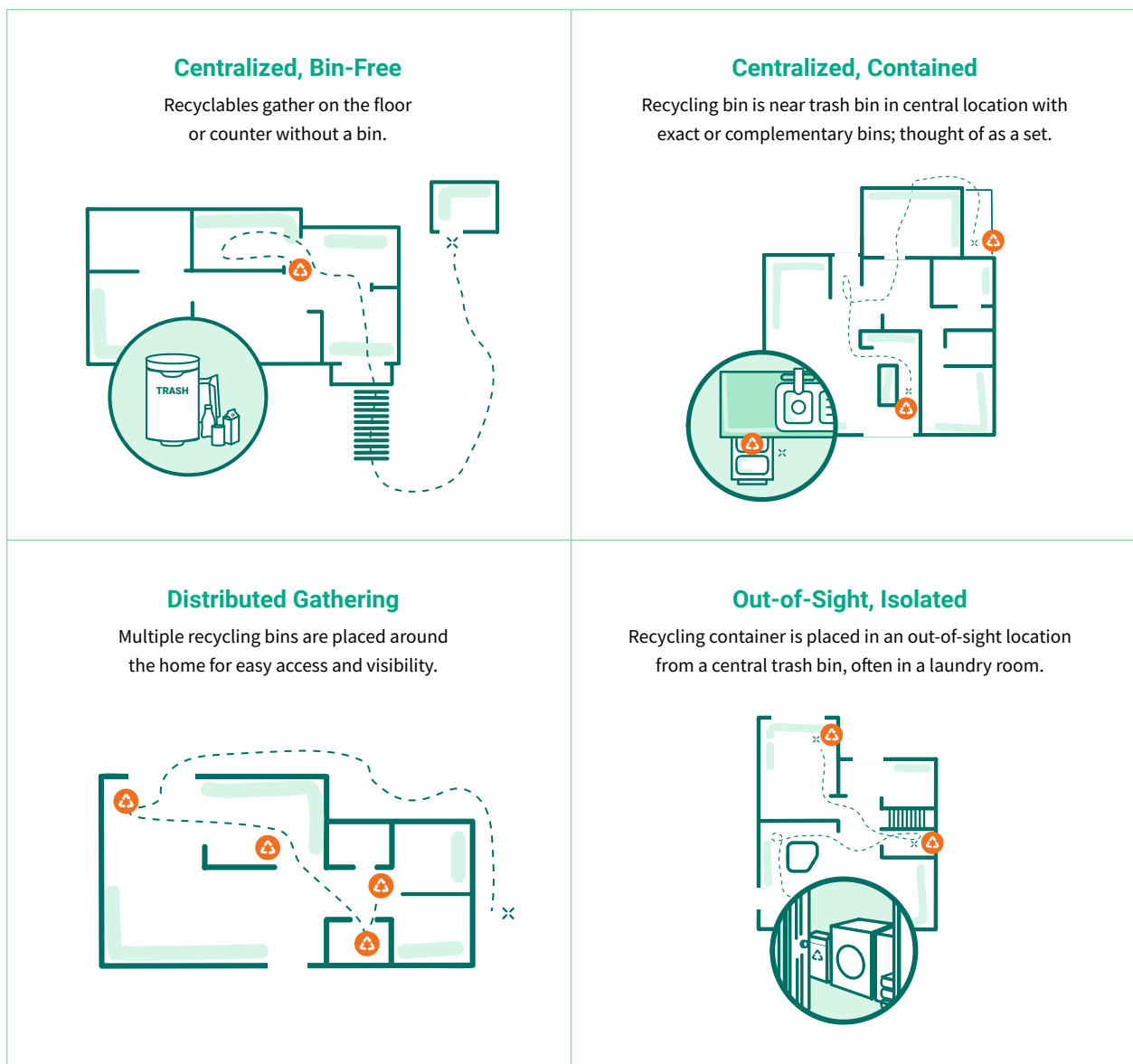
Key Findings

Finding 1

Households use home-grown indoor recycling systems that don't necessarily mirror their trash system.

These systems revolve around people's unique recycling routines, including where they typically gather recyclables and how they configure bins. People are generally open to adjustments but are often attached to the existing system they've created to fit their lifestyle.

Four types of recycling systems emerged from the research:



How well recyclables “flow” from inside the home to the outside collection container can affect whether items are recycled properly—both in terms of capture and quality.

Flow is a practice of moving recyclable materials out of the home quickly and efficiently to minimize build-up, “log jams”, and disarray. Many reported that moving recyclables out of the home quickly and efficiently minimizes disorder and creates a feeling of calm. When flow is disrupted, for example by full recycling containers or “log jams” created by large items, recyclables can end up in the trash can. Additionally, large cardboard boxes require a separate staging area and breaking them down adds an extra step that is outside the normal flow of other recyclables.

These qualities contribute to flow:

→ In-Home Access

Gathering spots (these may be recycling bins or simply spaces where recyclables are set aside) for recyclables are conveniently located in multiple places throughout the home, allowing for immediate use anywhere.

→ Unobstructed

Removing recyclables from the home is seamless—easy to monitor (e.g., visible fill levels) and easy to move (e.g., containers have handles, wheels, etc.).

→ Clearly-marked

Each space or container for gathering recyclables cues household laggards and visitors of its purpose.

→ Growth-minded

A strong orientation to improving household practices and reaching domestic excellence.

→ Rewarding

Reducing clutter from the home and clearing recyclables even before containers are full generates strong positive feelings.



Field Note: Overcoming Log Jams in the Home


“I would definitely say if things (recyclables) are starting to pile up in our house, I’ll personally just throw things in the trash. Or if...it doesn’t all fit in the recycling, we’ll throw things in the trash sometimes.” —Tess

“It’s just nice to be out here when it’s not cluttered. You can sit out here and read, or we’ll eat out here when we’re grilling. And...it just feels good.” —Pam

Finding 3

Negative news coverage and social media comments about the recycling system dampen enthusiasm for recycling and trigger frustration with learning how to do it right.

When people see news stories or social media content about recyclables not actually getting recycled or saying that recycling causes more environmental harm than good, doubt and uncertainty start to creep in. People begin to wonder if it even matters whether they recycle at all or if recycling and learning how to do it better are just a waste of time.



**Field Note:
Confusion in the Media**

“It makes me wonder...you watch the documentaries and Vice investigations and stuff. You’re like, is the recycling even getting recycled?” —Darin

“On Nextdoor, they were saying that in the end, it doesn’t make sense to recycle because it goes to the same place. And I was like, ‘Well I don’t know if it’s true or not, but I’m going to keep doing my part.’” —Aly

Finding 4

People’s knowledge about recycling and their motivation to do it vary, even within the same household.

Five recycling personalities emerged in the study. The percentages here indicate our hypothesis for how frequently each personality appears in the larger population, not including non-recyclers.



Long-time Coasters (35%)

Rely on what they learned in childhood about recycling, which is often partial and inaccurate.



Partner Learners (20%)

Maintain domestic harmony by allowing their partners to guide and teach them how to recycle.



Excellence Seekers (20%)

Have learned to feel pride in recycling well and care about doing things the right way.



Moral Helpers (20%)

See recycling as a way to feel like they are helping, which is important to their identity.



Breakthrough Believers (5%)

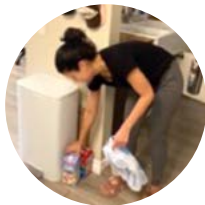
Have experienced a strong realization about the importance of recycling for the planet and now it really matters to them.

Opportunities

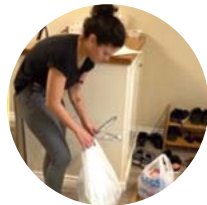
Our ethnographic research points to several significant opportunities to improve household recycling behavior:

1 Develop and introduce strategies that help households improve flow within their existing systems.

This could include increasing collection frequency to reduce overflowing bins and log jams, helping define spaces for recyclables within the home to improve organization, and offering up ways to increase efficiency by reducing the time, repetitive motions, or walking involved in recycling.



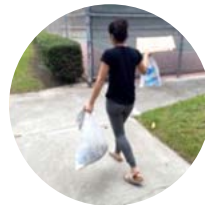
Collecting



Putting on Shoes



Going Downstairs



The Walk



Accessing Containers

2 Find solutions to help people reduce the physically hard work of recycling.

For example, dirty food containers create a lot of uncertainty and guilt that could be alleviated by clarifying how clean they really need to be and suggesting efficient strategies of cleaning them such as wiping out food, soaking or setting them aside to do all at once. With the rise of online shopping and home delivery, storing and breaking down large cardboard boxes has also become a big burden of recycling. Solutions to reduce log jams and overflowing bins include cart compactors, better box designs and storage solutions, or drop-off locations for boxes where people who are moving or storing things can also go to pick up the boxes they need.

Starter Ideas: Solutions to Reduce Log Jams and Overflowing Bins



Collapsed Box “Side Car”

A trash or recycling bin with a slot on the side or back for holding flattened boxes before they go to the cart. The side car keeps them from piling up in entry ways and garages.



“Rip Cord” Box

A box with a zipper to quickly collapse and flatten the box. No utility knife needed. Boxes cause build-up that can disrupt flow. Breakdown and disposing experience is elevated, like out-of-box experience.

3 Activate positive feelings to increase enthusiasm for recycling.

Offer recyclers meaningful incentives, such as profit sharing to reduce utility bills or property taxes, and positive recognition, such as a special bin sticker or golden lid to reward people who are recycling well. Combat negative media stories and increase trust in the recycling system by showcasing how recyclables become new products through success stories and facility tours. Even something as simple as a cart or bin decal reading “Headed off to a new life, not the landfill” that people see while actively recycling can provide encouragement and positive reinforcement.



Starter examples of containers for increasing flow within the home.

4 Provide learning in the right contexts.

People are more ready to learn and be open to changing their behavior when going through a life transition, like moving, or when they are shopping for new items for their home, rather than when they are at home doing routine chores. Use these “moments of change” as opportunities to frame proper recycling practices as part of continuous home organization and lifestyle improvement and help ignite people’s aspirations to create the domestic order and bliss they value and seek.

5 Celebrate and support the different home-grown recycling systems.

Instead of providing just the standard blue recycling bin, local programs can promote tools or create toolkits tailored to each of the four identified recycling systems that will better integrate with a home’s current flow and aesthetics.

6 Tailor support by recycler personality.

Create a range of tools and messaging that will resonate with the different types of recyclers to help them feel seen and heard. For example, use a friendly challenge to spark a Long-time Coaster’s competitive side in a way that inspires a growth mindset around learning new recycling practices or create teaching tools to support those leading Partner Learners at home.

Conclusion

By diving deep into the minds and homes of residential recyclers, The Center gained a much richer sense of why some recyclables make it to the curb and some don’t. We intend to leverage the insights from this ethnographic research to prototype and scientifically test solutions that will strengthen in-home recycling behaviors. This research along with our other consumer insights sets us up to prioritize specific focus areas and partnerships to improve overall recycling outcomes.