

Understanding Community Recycling Program Acceptance

A Joint Initiative from The Recycling Partnership & GreenBlue

September 2024



**The Recycling
Partnership**



greenblue

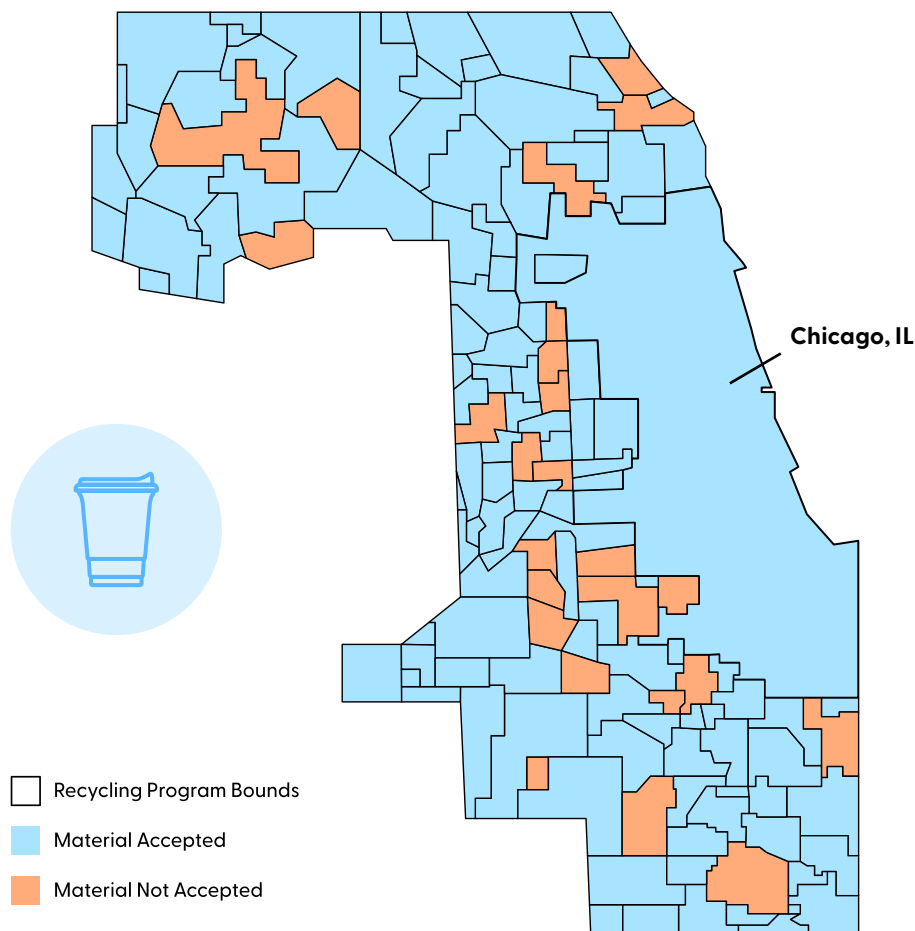
Why Understanding Acceptance Matters

The domestic residential recycling system is a complex network that processes billions of pounds of material each year. However, with **9,000 independent local programs** and **varying guidelines**, the acceptance of recyclables is highly fragmented across communities. This document highlights the importance of understanding **Community Recycling Program Acceptance Data (Acceptance Data)**, which is crucial for improving and expanding the recycling system.

This fragmentation is shown in the graphic below, which illustrates the acceptance of polypropylene cups across **Cook County, Illinois**. While the City of Chicago accepts polypropylene cups, many communities in the surrounding metro area **do not**.

The Recycling Partnership and **GreenBlue** have collaborated to provide more current and precise data on material acceptance, aiding better packaging and infrastructure decisions in this highly varied landscape. For more details on this collaboration, refer to the **Methodology for How2Recycle®'s Integration of the National Recycling Database's Community Recycling Program Acceptance Data**.

The Acceptance of Polypropylene Plastic Cups in Cook County, IL



Defining Acceptance

Increasing the total pounds of materials recycled - and thus, **U.S. recycling rates** - requires identifying and addressing how material is processed at **each stage** of the U.S. residential recycling system.

What is the difference between Access and Acceptance?

Access refers to a household's ability to recycle at home, either through curbside pickup or on-site recycling bins, regardless of the specific types of material accepted. Once a local recycling program establishes access to recycling for its residents, it creates an acceptance list for specific packaging formats. **Acceptance**, then, is defined as whether the community takes the item in their primary recycling program.

93% of Florida households have **ACCESS** to a recycling program in their community



7% of households have no access, preventing them from recycling **8.7 million lbs./year of PP tubs**

64% of Florida households have access to a recycling program that **ACCEPTS** polypropylene tubs



Another 29% of households have access, but no PP tub acceptance, preventing **36.1 million lbs./year** from being recycled



The lack of **access** and **acceptance** leads to an estimated cumulative loss of **44.8 million lbs./year** of PP tubs

Collection infrastructure, individual participation, and materials recovery facility (MRF) capture are well-known factors in increasing recycling, and work is ongoing to address these areas. **Acceptance Data** is another important factor in delivering an effective recycling system by providing insight on the overall design of the residential recycling system and understanding the compatibility of packaging with that system.¹

Acceptance Data is derived from The Recycling Partnership's **National Recycling Database (Database)**, which includes data from all U.S. communities greater than 2,500 households, totaling more than **9,000 local recycling programs** and their listed accepted materials.² For smaller communities and communities that do not run their own programs, the Database defaults to the acceptance of the county. Meticulous consideration is given to the relationships between communities and counties to avoid double counting of acceptance.

Acceptance Data includes both **single-family** and **multifamily** household acceptance, if the community has a documented recycling program available to residents.³

Acceptance Rate

An important application of **Acceptance Data** is the calculation of the percentage of U.S. households that can recycle a specific recycling category according to their community's acceptance list. This measurement is known as the **acceptance rate**. Recycling Categories are items commonly acknowledged in community acceptance lists that include both packaging and products.

Is Acceptance the main factor in an item's recyclability?

Acceptance is one pillar in assessing recyclability, but it is not the sole determinant. A comprehensive assessment of an item's recyclability includes factors that address **Material Health, Acceptance, MRF Compatibility, Reprocessor Compatibility, and Market Demand**. Ideally, acceptance rates should reflect the compatibility of an item with the **downstream recycling system**.

As highlighted in The Recycling Partnership's [State of Residential Recycling Report](#), acceptance rate is one of the chief factors in determining a product's recyclability — an essential pillar of an effective U.S. residential recycling system.

Acceptance rate is often the first key metric examined in a comprehensive recyclability assessment framework such as the [Residential Recyclability Framework](#) or the [How2Recycle Guide to Recyclability](#). Acceptance rates are increasingly integrated into state-level **Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)** policies.

Acceptance Data will provide acceptance rates for materials aggregated at the national and state-wide level for Recycling Categories across **all 50 states**. Of note, the acceptance rate calculation is based upon occupied households.

¹Acceptance Data release draws on data for residential acceptance in communities. It does not include acceptance to commercial, industrial, or institutional recycling.

²The Database is continuously updated, leveraging a robust sourcing and verification methodology. To learn more about the Database, its data standards, and sourcing methodology, visit The Recycling Partnership's [website](#).

³Single-family and multifamily household totals are sourced from the latest American Community Survey (ACS) five-year estimate from the U.S. Census Bureau, and the full census update every 10 years. In Acceptance Data, household populations calculate a "single-family household" as up to four (4) units in the same building, which is aligned with how most communities view residences. Multifamily includes all other housing units.

Acceptance Rate According to Type of Access

The Database acknowledges acceptance when a resident has one or more of the following primary services at their place of residence:

- Curbside recycling is provided **automatically** to their home by public or private service providers.
- Curbside recycling is provided on an **opt-in or subscription basis** to their home by public or private service providers.
- A publicly or privately operated **drop-off recycling location** within the community’s solid waste management program is available.

Acceptance rates for each of the types of recycling access noted above are measured separately.

Explicit and Implicit Acceptance

It is common to classify acceptance or exclusion as **explicit or implicit**.

- **Explicit:** Specific language from the recycling program that references the recycling category.
- **Implicit:** More general language describing broader categories of packaging and printed paper, and the specific recycling category is not referenced.

Acceptance rates of material formats are calculated based on both **explicit and implicit acceptance data** as recorded in the Database. The distinction between explicit and implicit acceptance is important to recognize. MRFs and industry studies may need a **certain level of specificity** in accounting for material recycling rates. In addition, innovative packaging may require explicit acceptance as proof that communities recognize this format.

For example, a county recycling program may include “**mixed paper**” on its list of accepted items but may not specify “**office paper,**” even though it is accepted (implicit acceptance). In this case, the acceptance rate for office paper would include the acceptance gained from mixed paper, **unless called out as an exclusion**.

Implicit acceptance inclusion is generally dependent upon whether the category reaches a **minimum threshold of 10% explicit acceptance**. For Recycling Categories with less than 10% explicit acceptance, there is not enough evidence that community programs intend for these material formats to enter the recycling system, and thus implicit acceptance **is not included** in the package category’s acceptance rate.

A more detailed look at explicit and implicit acceptance is provided in the **National Recycling Database Community Recycling Program Acceptance Data Taxonomy Overview**. To learn more about the consideration that goes into these nuanced packaging determinations, go to How2Recycle’s blog post, “[How the How2Recycle Program Interprets Inconclusive Access to Recycling Data.](#)”

What is Not Included in Acceptance Data

The scope of recycling access and acceptance defined here is not exhaustive.⁴ Importantly, there are two key elements not included in the scope of Acceptance Data for this joint initiative: store drop-off programs and compostable packaging.

Store Drop-Off Programs

Drop-off recycling receptacles serve additional opportunities for collection at workplaces, commercial institutions, public spaces, and on-the-go locations such as convenience stores. While important to the recycling landscape, these programs generally do not provide sufficient accessibility to the public and, therefore, were not intentionally excluded from the Database. Store drop-off receptacles for polyethylene bags, films, pet food bags, expanded polystyrene (EPS) packaging, wraps, and other packaging-specific drop-off programs were not included in the scope of this study. This approach is in line with the Federal Trade Commission's Green Guides.

Compostable Packaging

Compostable packaging, including polylactic acid (PLA) plastic and compostable plastics, is not included because they are beyond the scope of common U.S. residential recycling programs. We recognize that communities are beginning to add residential organics composting programs to their waste management systems, and as food and foodservice composting infrastructure continues to scale, we remain open to the inclusion of compostable packaging in future data releases.

⁴We recognize that data exist outside of this scope, and we encourage relevant data to be proposed to The Recycling Partnership or How2Recycle for consideration for inclusion in the future.