

Center for Sustainable Behavior & Impact

2021 Recycling Racial Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Survey

Understanding Awareness, Barriers, and Drivers of Recycling Behaviors Among U.S. BIPOC Residents

Why This Matters

BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) populations have been disproportionately impacted by the burden of solid waste. As an industry, this means it is crucial that we understand the unique experiences, barriers, and motivations of these communities so we can amplify their voices and work hand-in-hand with them to co-create recycling resources and tools designed to meet their needs and preferences.

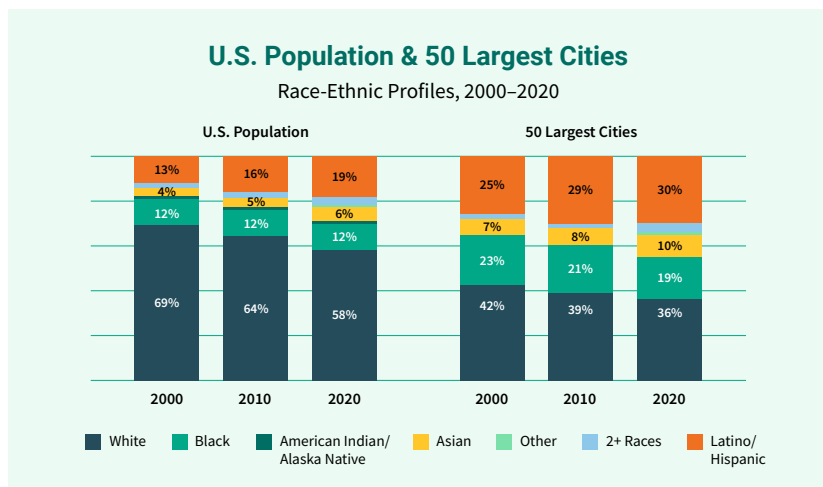
In general, BIPOC populations have been underserved in terms of access to recycling, and through a lens of “demographic representation” are underrepresented in traditional market research, particularly when it comes to recycling attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. This research conducted in partnership with Searchlight aims to begin remedying this. It is a starting point for filling in important insight gaps, making sure BIPOC voices are heard on the topic of recycling in order to advance equity and inclusion in recycling programs and outreach. Understanding what drives recycling behaviors is crucial for supporting all communities in recycling better.

Moreover, today almost 40% of people in the U.S. identify as BIPOC based on data from the 2020 Census. This percentage is expected to exceed 50% by 2045. Now is the time to ensure recycling communications and outreach resonate and feel relevant to BIPOC audiences by laying the foundation through audience research.

Some of our findings echo previous research efforts conducted with nationally representative participant samples (i.e., majority White voices), such as the high importance people place on recycling and the need for practical, visual information on what can and can't be recycled. As you might expect, the reasons why people recycle and what would encourage them to do it better vary across demographics and among different cultural communities. However, our study showed that all have a common desire to see themselves and their culture reflected in the messaging and visuals of campaigns and educational materials.



We learned through this research that most audiences are motivated to recycle by the idea of protecting the Earth and its resources for future generations and, for those not currently recycling, improving access to local collection service would remove one of the most significant barriers.



Research Methodology

Since little BIPOC or multicultural research exists on recycling, we began our work by conducting a [literature review](#) of BIPOC and multicultural involvement in other societal and civic systems, such as healthcare, voting, etc. We then conducted both qualitative and quantitative methods to establish a baseline understanding of several factors related to recycling among adults who identify as Hispanic/Latinx, African-American/Black, Asian-American/Pacific Islander, or Indigenous American. These factors included awareness, barriers, motivators, self-reported behavior, self-efficacy, perceived social value and preferred communications channels. In the initial phase, nine in-depth one-on-one interviews were conducted by a professional moderator of color to gather insights and get input on our draft survey and the advertising messages and visuals we wanted to test.

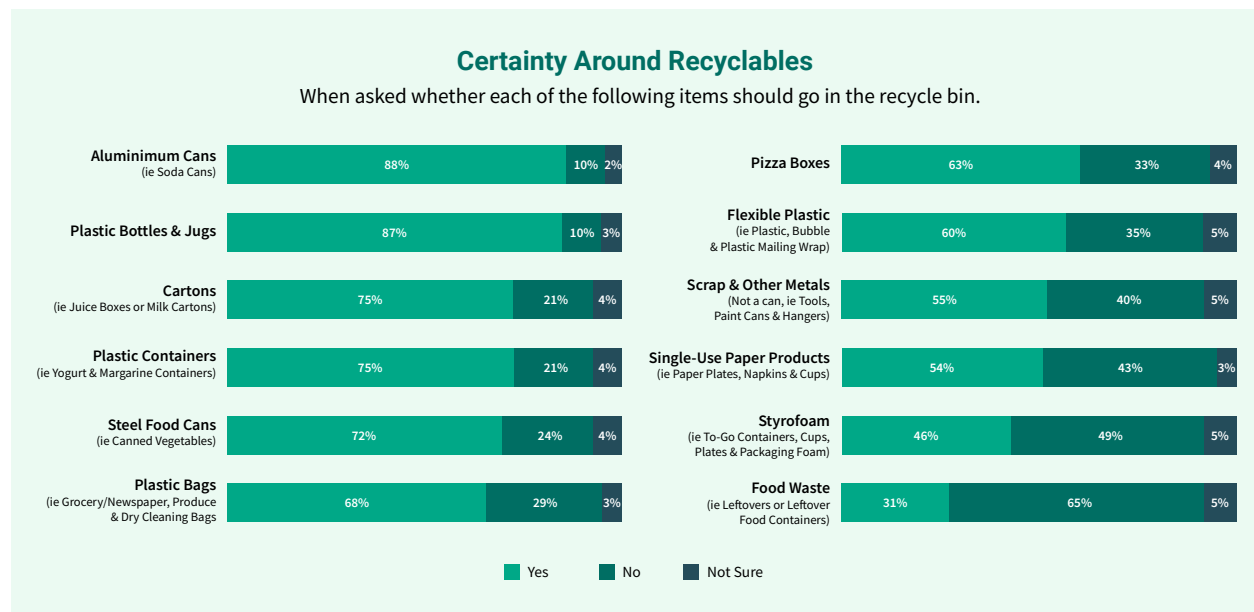
During the quantitative phase, the final online survey was completed by 1,200 adults over the age of 18 living in 18 states within the West, Central South, Mid-Atlantic, and Coastal South regions of the U.S. Target geography was guided by the Census Multicultural map. Additionally, quotas were set for race, ethnicity, age, and gender identity that reflect the distribution within the larger U.S. population. The participant mix included both single-family and multifamily households, but ultimately skewed toward people living in single-family homes or townhomes (approximately 7 out of 10 participants) and homeowners (approximately 6 out of 10 people were owners and not renters).

Key Findings

Finding 1

People believe they know what can and can't be recycled in their household recycling but hold misconceptions that often lead them to make mistakes. Key sources of uncertainty are around plastic, Styrofoam, and food waste.

When asked if different items should go in the recycling bin, 72-88% of people said “yes” for the most common, basic materials, including aluminum cans, plastic bottles and jugs, milk and juice cartons, plastic containers, and steel food cans. There was significantly less certainty around flexible plastic (with 60% answering yes), scrap metal (55%), single use paper (54%), Styrofoam (46%), and food waste (31%). The study did not look at what is actually accepted within their programs, but very few programs accept some of these items in household recycling bins.



Finding 2

People do not feel they are receiving enough information about recycling and would prefer communications with visuals showing what can and can't be recycled.



The qualitative interviews revealed most people do not hear much about recycling at all. The survey showed that 2 out of 3 people want to receive more information about recycling with specifics that encompass why it matters as well as how to do it better. Ideally, people would prefer to receive these communications in the form of a physical paper mailer or an easily accessible, online resource with images and in the language they speak at home.



2 OUT OF 3 PEOPLE WANT TO KNOW WHY RECYCLING MATTERS AND HOW TO DO IT BETTER.

Example of Mailer

People want information with visuals that's clear and direct that tells them exactly what they can and can't recycle.

RECYCLE THANK YOU FOR RECYCLING THESE:

- Paper** (all colors and types)
- Cardboard and Cartons** (empty and dry)
- Aluminum and Steel Cans** (empty and dry)
- Plastic Bottles, Jars and Jugs** (empty and dry)
- Glass Bottles and Jars** (empty and dry)

NO!

- Plastic Bags and Film**
- Food and Liquids** (recyclables must be clean and dry)
- Paper Towels and Napkins**
- Tanglers: Garden Hoses, Wires, etc.**
- Carryout Food Containers**

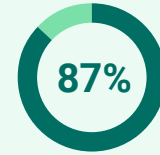
Baltimore City Department of Public Works
Bureau of Solid Waste (410) 396-4511
publicworks.baltimorecity.gov/residential-recycling-carts

Funded in part by THE RECYCLING PARTNERSHIP

Finding 3

The reasons people are motivated to recycle are focused on the future of the planet, from protecting the land, air, and water to protecting wildlife. For most, recycling is about supporting the greater good and the future of their communities.

The vast majority of people (87%) believe recycling is very important and makes a difference and cite protecting the environment as the reason for this belief. However, when it comes to what would make them more likely to recycle, the answers vary somewhat across demographics.



Believe recycling is about the greater good.

Motivations to Recycle	Resonated Most With
Reduces waste and saves resources	All groups surveyed
Leads to cleaner air and water	Hispanic/Latinx community People living in Coastal South and Mid-Atlantic regions
Protects Wildlife	AAPI community Women
Protects the planet for future generations	Women
Reduces the need for landfill space	Older adults

The other reasons tested in the study that rated lower included: reducing carbon emissions, economic reasons, community benefits, and community social pressure.



Empathetic Message



Logical Message



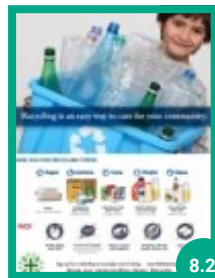
Emotional Message

In community-wide pilots in 2022, this emotional message, as well as an empathetic message, outperformed a message explaining the recycling process.

Across all groups, the communications that resonate the most focused on warnings about the future for local communities, especially where children were featured prominently. However, whenever showing visuals of people, it is essential they reflect the audience we are intending to reach.



8.4



8.2

Responses from the two rated highest:

“The one with the landfill full of trash piled up. It was gross and really got my attention.”

“The images with the children because children are the future.”



8.1



7.9



7.9



7.7



7.4

When asked if there was anything they didn't see in the advertising messaging and visuals that would encourage them to recycle more, most people (69%) said there was nothing. Those who answered, most often mentioned showing environmental impacts or sharing facts and information. Incentives and rewards or bins around the community were mentioned second most often.

The Recycling Partnership is working with communities to increase equitable recycling access, education, and participation while conducting much-needed research to fully understand those gaps, so we can best support BIPOC populations who are historically under-served and under-supported. We are integrating a multicultural lens into all of our workstreams to ensure consideration of diverse perspectives is a core part of our mission. [Visit The Recycling Partnership's website](https://www.recyclingpartnership.org) to access a growing library of resources, including those dedicated towards BIPOC populations.

Finding 5

For those who reported they do not currently recycle, the barrier most frequently cited was simply a lack of access to recycling in their community or that they were not aware they had access. However, other common barriers were also mentioned.

The vast majority of participants (85%) had recycling available where they live and 72% had onsite recycling pickup. More than half (55%) said they recycle at least once per week. The rest recycled less frequently. Only 9% of participants did not recycle at all and of this group 39% said it is because recycling is not available where they live or, if it is, they are not aware they have access to it.

Other key barriers revolved around the inconvenience and difficulty of recycling and a lack of containers. Some also mentioned a need for more information about the collection schedule and what can and can't be recycled. Additionally, it is important to keep in mind when conducting outreach with recent immigrant populations that landfills and solid waste infrastructure don't exist in every country, so helping people understand how trash and recycling are handled within their new home community is key.



HELPING PEOPLE UNDERSTAND HOW TRASH IS HANDLED IS KEY.

Finding 6

There is no one trusted messenger or source people go to for information in general or specifically about recycling. Communication preferences are highly variable across communities and individuals, but most rely on multiple sources and person-to-person networks.

Our literature review pointed to the importance of a trusted messenger, so we wanted to know if there were any common information sources. Our research unfortunately did not uncover any major communications channels for reaching different BIPOC audiences with information about recycling, but a potential connection could be featuring recycling information adjacent to existing content on the topics of food, health, and wellness. When we asked people where they go to find out what should or shouldn't go into the recycling bin, most people said they use the internet or rely on memory or common sense. Several other channels ranked lower, but about equally, including networks of family and friends, mailers, local government websites, bin decals, or schools. People who participated in the research also mentioned several other common tools, including WhatsApp, listservs, and neighborhood gathering places such as community centers, YMCA/YWCA, and even grocery stores.

Conclusions & Opportunities

There is a clear need for more investment in recycling communications tailored to specific communities, especially practical, visual information on what and how to recycle. Our research uncovered that messaging focused on protecting the Earth and its resources for future generations has shown to be most effective at motivating BIPOC audiences to recycle more and to do it better.

We also learned that representation matters when developing recycling communications and outreach strategies. People are more likely to engage with the topic of recycling when they feel the messages, visuals, and the way in which information is presented are for them and their community. Additionally, it's crucial to remember that the term "BIPOC" is inclusive of many different cultures, ethnicities, and identities across the country, and there will be no one-size-fits-all communications approach for all communities.

Finally, our work here is not done. Further investment in qualitative research with individual communities is necessary to dig more deeply into:

Recycling Barriers

What is keeping people from recycling or doing it correctly? Are there collection service barriers? Knowledge barriers? Barriers around access to information in people's preferred language, etc.?

Recycling Motivators

What would help different BIPOC communities recycle more and do it better? How can we efficiently co-create with audiences and support 'trusted advisors'?

The Center will continue to build on the bank of resources available to local recycling programs by releasing an Equitable Outreach Guide, conducting a multifamily residential recycling photoshoot, and developing culturally-relevant educational materials in new languages.

In 2022, The Recycling Partnership launched the Recycling Inclusion Fund, a unique funding stream to address racial disparities and systemic challenges in the U.S. waste and recycling industries. With awareness that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) have historically been underserved and under-supported in their communities, **the Recycling Inclusion Fund is dedicated to delivering an equitable recycling system for all people.** Specifically, the Recycling Inclusion Fund focuses on three key areas: **1) research to identify** the state of recycling access and participation, and the barriers and needs in BIPOC communities across the country, **2) recycling access and education** to reach and empower BIPOC populations with recycling tools and resources designed to meet their needs, and **3) leadership training programs** to build a diverse talent pipeline for the recycling industry.