

2021

Wisconsin Recycling Trends and Behaviors Executive Summary



2021 Household Recycling Survey Executive Summary

Wisconsin Department of
Natural Resources

PUB-WA-2020 2022

Key Takeaways

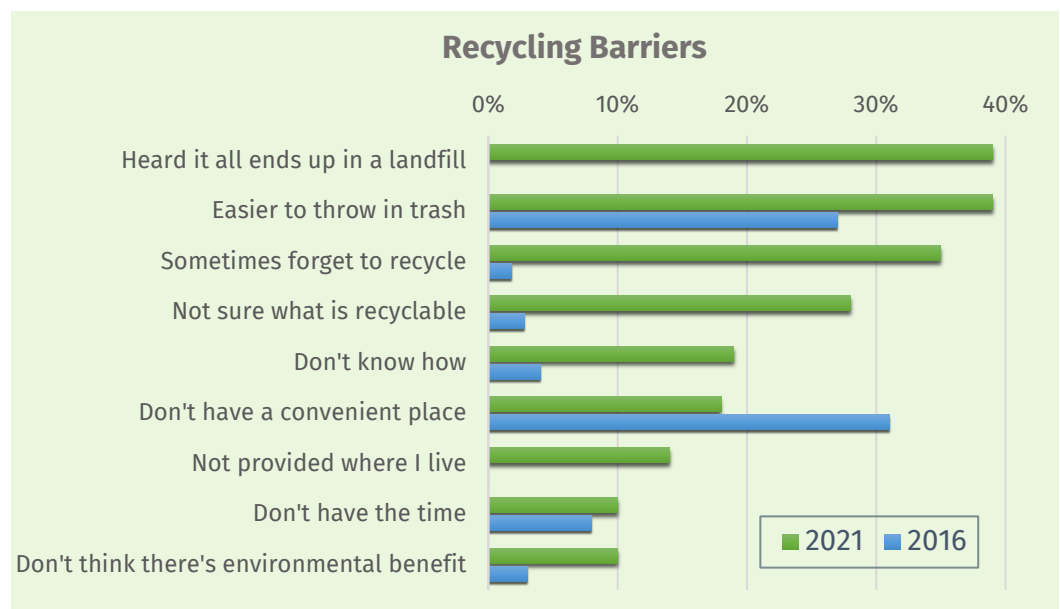
- Commitment to recycling remains high
- Environmental responsibilities are seen as the most important reasons to recycle
- Perceived barriers to recycling have significantly increased since 2016
- Knowledge of recycling laws has declined since 2011
- Respondents continue to prefer recycling information via mail
- Over 75% of respondents are at least somewhat willing to separate food waste
- Most respondents do not know or are not confident how to dispose of most household materials

Wisconsin's solid waste reduction, recovery, and recycling law (Ch. 287, Wis. Stats.) was enacted in 1990. Recycling aims to protect public health, preserve the natural environment and conserve resources. Since 2006, the Department of Natural Resources' Waste and Materials Management Program has conducted a Household Recycling Survey approximately every five years to assess awareness of and participation in Wisconsin's recycling program. Monitoring program performance over time is a valuable and informative tool.

Questions on the 2021 survey asked about recycling behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge regarding recyclables. Additionally, the survey asked about backyard burning, food waste, household item disposal, and electronics. Analysis of responses related to electronics recycling is covered in a separate report ([Trends in Wisconsin households' ownership and disposal of electronics: Results from the DNR's 2021 statewide household survey](#)).

Disposal Accessibility, Behavior, and Motivations

Despite strong recycling accessibility, commitment and reasons to do so, an increasing number of respondents report barriers that largely stem from unclear or mixed messaging. Notably, the 2016 top reason for not recycling, "don't have a convenient place" dropped by half.



Knowledge and Communications

Outreach is not only required as a key component for recycling programs by law, but it is also understood to be one of the best methods to increase program effectiveness. Awareness of the landfill ban on recyclables and requirement for community recycling programs have dropped nearly 30% over the last decade. About 71% of respondents reported they received recycling information in the last year. Of those, the top three sources were local government, a news story, and waste haulers. Respondents' top way to receive recycling information has been via mail since at least 2011. Only 32% of respondents that rented reported receiving recycling information from their landlord in the past year, despite the law requiring owners to distribute information.

Backyard Burning, Food Waste and Household Item Disposal

The WMM Program also provides resources for proper disposal of materials that cannot be recycled curbside. These items may pose a health risk when improperly disposed of or have potential as a resource. Respondents were divided on how much of a concern burning trash is to their health, evenly split from “extremely concerned” to “not at all concerned.” 7.3% and 3.3% of respondents admitted to burning recyclables and trash in the last year, respectively.

For the first time, respondents were asked how they handle most food waste, defined as edible food or scraps. Nearly 40% utilize in-sink disposal or a form of composting. Over 75% of respondents were at least somewhat willing to separate food waste from trash if provided alternative method, such as compost pick-up.

2021 data on household hazardous waste disposal was remarkably consistent with 2016 data across all materials and disposal methods. The first and third most common materials to be disposed of were also the most likely to be thrown in the trash -- household batteries (62%) and fluorescent bulbs (49%). Compared to 2011, drop-off disposal of pharmaceuticals is grew 20%.

Over half of respondents were confident they knew how to manage pharmaceuticals. Batteries were disposed of by 85% of respondents in the last year, yet only 32% of respondents knew how to properly dispose of them. Conversely, only 34% of respondents disposed of a tire in the last year, and 56% of respondents knew how to properly dispose of them.



Proposed Actions

The 2021 Household Survey guides future recycling initiatives at the state and local levels. The Waste and Materials Management Program may consider the following actions:

- Target audiences and encourage local outreach via mail
- Increase transparency of the recycling process and end-markets
- Create one-stop guidance for household item disposal
- Continue to monitor food waste management attitudes and behaviors
- Seek public input and feedback

The DNR is committed to sharing its data with the public as a valuable and informative tool. For more information on recycling and DNR studies, visit

<https://dnr.wi.gov/topic/recycling/studies.html>



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