



A recycling can overflows with waste in Chicago, Illinois.

Trash in America

Moving from destructive consumption towards a zero-waste system

America produces a staggering amount of trash, the majority of which is sent to landfills and incinerators or discarded as litter, harming our environment and our health. It's time to move towards a future of zero waste.

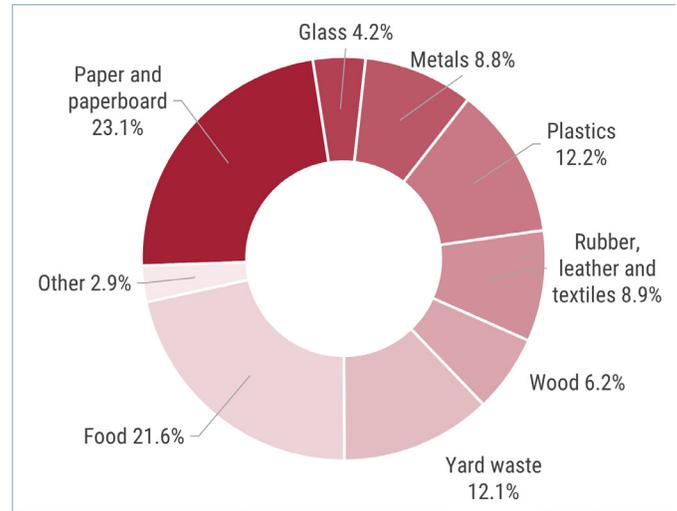
America generates a tremendous amounts of waste

In 2018, the United States produced 292.4 million tons of trash, 24 million tons more than the year before. The average American throws out 4.9 pounds of trash every day.

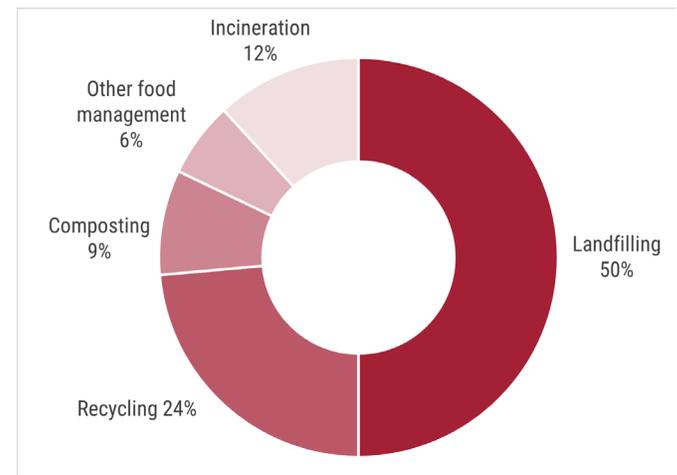
- Plastic trash increased by 14% from 2010 to 2018, mostly from durable goods and packaging.
- Less than 9% of all plastic is recycled.

Disposing of trash degrades the environment and can hurt human health

- Landfills take up large amounts of space and can contaminate groundwater.
- Incinerating trash for electricity emits greenhouse gases, heavy metals and carcinogens into the air.
- Trucking and shipping waste to landfills and incinerators uses millions of gallons of fuel each year.



U.S. garbage composition by material, 2018



U.S. garbage by destination, 2018

I Policy recommendations

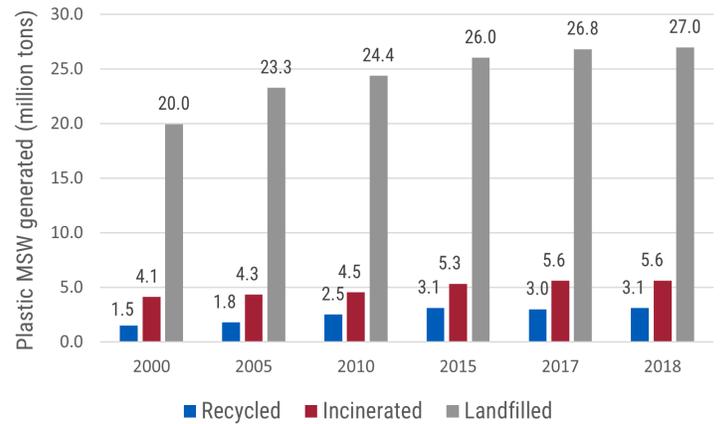
America can shift towards a circular material economy that is better for public health and the environment. To start, policy-makers should:

- Set state and local goals to achieve zero waste.
- Make recycling and composting mandatory, universally accessible and less expensive than garbage disposal.
- Ban the sale of single-use items that are not easily recyclable or compostable, including packaging, plastic bags and food service ware.
- Encourage goods to be built to last and be easy to repair, recycle and/or compost.
- Oppose the construction, expansion and subsidization of landfills, incinerators and “waste-to-plastic” facilities.

I Producer responsibility holds promise for reducing waste

Producer responsibility programs hold product manufacturers responsible for collecting and recycling their products after they’ve been used. These programs exist in many states for batteries, paint, and bottles (bottle bills).

- In Germany, producer responsibility programs for household goods have led to a 97% recycling rate for packaging.
- In 2021, Maine and Oregon passed the nation’s first producer responsibility laws for packaging.



As plastic generation increases, plastic recycling has stalled

Plastic waste on the rise: Reducing consumption is key

- Plastics are difficult to recycle. Unlike glass or aluminum, plastic molecules break down and lose value the first time they’re recycled, making it harder for governments to justify the expense of recycling programs. Landfilling and incinerating plastics is on the rise, creating massive environmental problems.
- Plastic adds to air pollution when incinerated and releases greenhouse gases as it degrades in landfills.
- Over 16 million tons of plastic washed into the world’s oceans in 2016, entangling marine life and entering the food chain.

Reducing the use of plastics – or replacing single-use plastic items such as bags and food containers with reusable or compostable options – is preferable to expanding recycling.