



# The State of Recycling in Illinois

**Illinois PIRG**  
Education Fund

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## Foreword

*Even though the mantra of “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle” has been around since the 1970s, most people in the United States still don’t live by it.<sup>1</sup> The United States makes up only 4 percent of the global population, yet we generate more than 30 percent of the planet’s waste.<sup>2</sup> This shocking reality stems from an economy that encourages disposable consumption: half of American plastic products are designed for single use.<sup>3</sup> Not only have we failed to reduce, but our attempts to recycle are also lacking -- 65 percent of goods in the U.S. are landfilled or incinerated.<sup>4</sup> We need to work towards bringing that number down to zero. We can improve in all aspects of waste reduction. For items that cannot be reduced or reused, recycling remains a crucial component of how we deal with waste.*

*Waste systems are typically organized and funded at the municipal or county level. It’s important to measure a system’s success to know where energy must be focused. Inefficiencies in waste management can come from anywhere in the process: disposal, collection, sorting, or the after-market. The following report focuses on disposal and collection for six of the most populous cities in Illinois based on their residential recycling rates.*

*The recycling rate is calculated as follows:* 
$$\frac{\text{Waste diverted(via compost,recycling,reuse)}}{\text{Total waste(landfill+diverted)}}$$

## The State of Recycling in Illinois

Recycling rates in Illinois reveal one of the most wasteful states in the nation, headlined by Chicago's dismal 9 percent residential recycling rate (see table below). Even Naperville, which boasts the highest rate among the most populous Illinois cities at 30 percent, falls below the national average of 34.7 percent.<sup>5</sup> Due to a lack of mandated reporting in certain jurisdictions, the state's overall recycling rate is unclear. However, given low rates in cities with available data, evidence from other states suggests that Illinois's statewide rate is much lower than the national average. The table below shows how those cities stack up:

Jurisdiction	Residential Recycling Rate
State of Illinois	No Data
Naperville	30% (2017)
Rockford	28% (2018)
Waukegan	22% (2017)
Champaign	13% (2018)
Springfield	12% (2016)
Chicago	9% (2017)

"Residential recycling rate" does not account for multi-unit buildings with five or more units. Those rates are often aggregated as part of the "commercial" sector.

*See sources for recycling rate data at bottom of report.*

It's time for Illinois to catch up with the rest of the nation in waste reduction. While raising the recycling rate is important for many reasons, Illinois runs the unique risk of running out of landfill space. Illinois already relies heavily on exporting its trash to Indiana, but Indiana has the power to deny exports at any time, which would put Illinois in a difficult position.<sup>6</sup>

Recent changes in international trade have opened a new window of opportunity for recycling and economic development. For decades, cities throughout the United States sent millions of tons of scrap material to China to be recycled. This past year, China effectively stopped accepting our refuse, claiming it was too contaminated and unsellable for recycling.<sup>7</sup> With nowhere to go, recyclables have been piling up in sorting facilities throughout Illinois and many

other states.<sup>8</sup> This disruption has increased service costs, decreased revenue, and in some cases led recycling collectors to stop their services.<sup>9</sup>

## **Success Stories**

As the saying goes, change brings opportunity. As of the most recent study, even Illinois' anemic recycling industry created more than 56,000 jobs with a payroll of \$1.7 billion, and accounted for 1.9% of the gross state product.<sup>10</sup> In the wake of China's policy changes, Illinois has an opportunity to further develop its recycling economy through expanded collection, sorting, and end-market solutions previously provided by China.

To improve recycling rates and reduce waste, Illinois can build off of successful ongoing efforts already taking place across the state. Joliet has pushed out more information than ever before in get their residents to "not just recycle, but recycle right."<sup>11</sup> This means making sure that what's going in the recycling bin is actually recyclable and is clean and useable. Chicago recently took action to improve recycling in commercial and multi-unit residential buildings by updating its recycling ordinance and creating a dedicated Recycling Inspection 311 code to report buildings violating recycling requirements.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the state has organized a task force of industry specialists and government officials to create a campaign to ensure curbside recycling continues.<sup>13</sup>

## **Recommendations**

### **Be S.M.A.R.T. (Save Money And Reduce Trash)**

SMART systems (also called "Pay As You Throw") make a lot of sense. People who request smaller trash bins (thus throwing less away) pay less for trash service. People who waste more, pay more. In turn, trash fees provide revenue for curbside recycling and compost collection. A nationwide study showed that the adoption of the SMART system can bring major savings, reduce waste by 14 percent, and increase recycling by over 32 percent.<sup>14</sup> Waukegan, IL, has adopted a modified SMART system where residents are required to purchase an additional bin if their first bin overflows with trash.<sup>15</sup>

### **Reduce Single-use Plastics**

The best way to reduce excess waste is to remove easily replaceable single-use items from the waste stream. Our society relies heavily on single-use items such as plastic bags and styrofoam containers that can be harmful, difficult to recycle, and easily replaced. Illinois would benefit from ordinances restricting the use of single-use plastic items, or requiring consumer packaging and foodware to be recyclable, compostable, or reusable.

### **Expand Residential Compost**

Around 30 percent of household waste is compostable.<sup>16</sup> This includes food waste, yard waste,

and contaminated paper products such as pizza boxes and paper towels. Like recycling, compost allows waste to become useable again. Compost can also be a nutrient-rich resource for gardens, parks, and agriculture. Introducing municipal compost programs as a public service to Illinois residents could double even the highest recycling rates. Doing so would also support local compost facilities and curb the greenhouse gas impact of landfills.<sup>17</sup> Several cities in Illinois collect yard waste, but no cities contacted for this survey have compost collection for food waste and other organic materials.

### **Expand Recycling Access for Multi-Unit Apartments**

Recycling for multi-unit apartments and businesses is often referred to as “commercial recycling” and handled by private haulers. Thus, it’s often hard for people in multi-unit apartments to access recycling unless their building owner chooses to pay to provide it. Two options to ensure access are to automatically provide public service, or to require apartments to provide service through private contracts, as Chicago does.<sup>18 19</sup> Widespread adoption of such ordinances would likely improve rates.

### **Increase landfill tipping fees**

Waste collectors pay “tipping fees” by the ton when they dump material into landfills. Because tipping fees are so low, it is often cheaper for waste management companies to send bins of recyclable and compostable materials to landfill rather than ensuring they are diverted (this is becoming more common due to market conditions causing recyclables to pile up at sorting operations<sup>20</sup>). In Chicago, private haulers have been accused of mistagging recycling bins as contaminated so they’re sent to the landfill instead of being recycled, in order to save money.<sup>21</sup> Increasing the cost of dumping at landfills, therefore, can encourage trash collectors to ensure these materials are handled properly. Furthermore, the revenue from a tipping fee raise can go towards improving or introducing recycling and compost infrastructure.

### **Foster Municipal Collaboration**

Large projects such as constructing facilities and introducing compost collection have high upfront costs. Neighboring municipalities can pool their resources for such initiatives.

### **Provide State-Level Support for Recycling Programs and Facilities**

In addition to local investment, the state can aid in raising recycling rates with grants and tax incentives. The State of Illinois has the authority to provide grants in order to help local recycling programs, and the state should consider this priority in their budget.<sup>22</sup> The state can also provide subsidies or property tax exemptions for recycling and composting facilities and end-use manufacturers. This could incentivize business development and improve the market for recycled materials.

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