

Why Do MSW Recycling Rates Vary Between New Jersey's Counties?

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“Only 58% of Americans said they recycle on a regular basis, according to a recent survey by GfK Custom Research North America for SC Johnson. This impression is lessened by a 2007 Harris Poll that found 30% of those aged 18 to 30 don't recycle at all” (Smith 1). These unsettling numbers suggest that something is wrong with recycling in America. New Jersey has experienced a slow, gradual increase in recycling as an average, but the rate of the total waste generated being recycled changes from county to county. The amount of municipal solid waste being recycled has fluctuated for each of New Jersey's twenty one counties throughout the years 1995-2011 (NJDEP Division of Solid and Hazardous Waste). As recycling becomes more prevalent a practice, closer attention is paid to the overall recycling rate per county. Seemingly unpredictable, wavering recycling numbers have spurred interest in many as to why they differ each year. I have pondered for a time, possible factors that may be related to, or contribute directly to the unsteady rates. Highlighting correlations between a changing recycling rate and the contributing factor is crucial information used to determine where a county should focus its efforts in order to increase the total percentage of MSW recycled.

Factors that may affect a County's recycling rate are many. They include, but are not limited to, the execution of municipal plans, population, seasonal residents, the number of recyclable materials accepted, curbside collection and monetary incentives. Important also to consider are individual household's income, level of education, age, and level of homeownership. Among these factors, some affect the recycling rate more drastically than others. For example, the amount of materials any one county accepts to be recycled plays a big part in their MSW recycling rates. The more types of materials that are accepted, the higher the recycling rate. A step further, counties may promote recycling by making it an official town policy to do so. Curbside trash and recycling programs help encourage recycling by making it more convenient for the homeowner, however when only curbside trash pick-up is offered, it is likely to cause the recycling rate to be substantially lower than if both trash and recycling are picked up.

Counties with a larger population or more densely populated towns also generally recycle at higher rates. This is clear when comparing county populations and their recycling rates. It is no surprise that Middlesex, Essex, and Bergen counties are among the leaders in both categories (JDavis NJDEP Division of Solid and Hazardous Waste). In addition to a high population, the higher the level of education that people have completed also coincides with higher rates of recycling. A greater understanding of the practice of recycling, as well as its importance, are reasons that the counties with a higher average of people who are educated also have higher rates of MSW being recycled.

“Above all else, the factor most crucial to the MSW recycling rate is the competence and diligence of the town’s recycling coordinator.”(Gary Sondermeyer via personal communication). The coordinator works as a cheerleader to not only promote recycling, but to record the amounts recycled, accurately and often. Without a recycling coordinator, recycling reports are easily skewed by untrustworthy numbers, as reports from the business/Industry sector are often overlooked. After being collected and compiled by the town’s recycling coordinator, each municipality reports their respective tonnage report to the county recycling coordinator, who then finalizes the data into an average displaying the county’s recycling.

Recycling larger portions of the total amount of waste generated is an increasing concern of those conscious to the environmental impacts of landfills and other waste disposal methods. Apart from actually producing less waste, recycling is the most effective way to lessen our impact on the Earth. Recycling is not only important for the environment, it is vital to the way of life we have become accustomed to. Without it, waste would build up, overflowing landfills and requiring new ones to be dug regularly. As obvious to some as it is, we must increase the rate of waste that we recycle in order to save energy, money, and the Earth. The most effective way to increase the amount of waste we recycle is education. Simply knowing about the problem, and learning about the process of recycling is the first step to solving the waste accumulation problem. With a more educated public, tackling the problems faced by those seeking to increase recycling will be an easier task. Another way to effectively increase recycling is to enforce stricter laws regarding what waste should be recycled, with harsher penalties when the requirements are not met. With these known factors in mind, working towards a future in which we recycle more is obtainable, and certainly necessary.

Works Cited

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