

Does Your Recycling Really Get Recycled?



Topic	Details	Key Statistics
Overview of Recycling	While most recyclables are processed, challenges like contamination, limited infrastructure, and unclear recycling guidelines complicate the process. The belief that recycling often leads to landfills is partially true but depends on proper sorting and handling.	Only 32% of material generated in the U.S. is recycled, despite 77% of Americans claiming to recycle regularly.
Materials and Their Recycling Rates	Materials like cardboard, aluminum, glass, and steel have higher recovery rates due to developed recycling markets. Plastics, however, remain the most difficult to recycle effectively.	Cardboard recovery rate is 53.5%. Aluminum achieves 74.5% reuse globally, with 94% carbon emission and 93% energy savings compared to new production. Plastic has a global recycling rate of only 9%.
The Contamination Problem	Contamination, caused by placing non-recyclables in bins, undermines the recycling process. Items like greasy containers, plastic bags, and certain types of paper affect entire loads, reducing efficiency and increasing costs.	U.S. contamination rate is about 25%, going above 40% in some regions. Over 1,000 recycling plants in California alone closed between 2018 and 2025 due to contamination issues.
Improving Recycling Habits	Proper recycling involves rinsing containers, flattening boxes, and checking local guidelines. Certain materials, like glass, aluminum, and steel, should always be clean before placing in the bin, and plastic bags should be kept out entirely.	Adopting clean and correctly sorted recycling habits improves recovery rates and supports the system's functionality.