



Social, cultural and structural influences on household waste recycling: A case study

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Abstract

The household-recycling rate in the Borough of Burnley, England in 2001/2002 was only half the national average of 12%. This research employed both quantitative and qualitative surveys in order to ascertain whether householders' attitudes to recycling were contributory factors to the generally poor recycling performance and to investigate other social, cultural and structural influences. The Borough has a large Asian–British population concentrated in two deprived wards where recycling rates are particularly low, so special attention was given to ascertaining their attitudes towards recycling.

The quantitative survey comprised a postal questionnaire sent to a random sample of 360 households drawn from the electoral register. The qualitative survey consisted of group interviews with the Asian–British population at local community centres and focus groups attended by volunteers from the quantitative study.

The findings suggest that householders are very willing to participate in recycling, as shown by the almost 80% claiming to recycle paper, but that local recycling services are too unreliable and inconvenient to allow them to do so comprehensively. Asian–British attitudes to recycling were found to be no different to those of the wider population, with their low participation being linked to the higher priorities imposed upon them by economic deprivation. The findings are broadly in line with those of the literature in that recycling participation tends to be higher among more affluent and older people, but lower among less affluent and younger households, probably due in part to the availability of both storage space and time, with the implication that the Borough's preponderance of terraced

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housing militates against a high recycling rate. Policy recommendations to local authorities include the provision of bespoke recycling services to suit the variety of residential conditions across the UK, and the provision of regular feedback to householders regarding recycling services and performance.

Further research is needed to identify non-recyclers and to explore how householders' underlying psychological, cultural and social attitudes to recycling impinge upon recycling and participation rates.

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1. Introduction

In 2002/2003, England generated 29.3 Mt or 521 kg per capita of municipal solid waste (MSW), a rise of 1.8% over the preceding year; although the proportion disposed via landfill (75%) was lower than previously (DEFRA, 2004). Household waste represented 25.8 Mt (88%) of MSW, of which only 3.7 Mt (14.5%) was recycled or composted (DEFRA, 2004) despite over two-thirds of the contents of the average dustbin being recyclable or compostable (Waste Watch, 2003). Most (66%) recycled materials were collected from civic amenity ('bring') sites, and the remainder from the 67% of households served by kerbside collection ('collect') schemes (DEFRA, 2004). There was wide variation (0–44%) in household-recycling rates among the 394 local authorities (LAs) in England, where the majority (nearly 70%) failed to recycle or compost more than 15% of MSW (DEFRA, 2004). The UK recycling rate for household waste stood at 15% in 2003 (DEFRA, 2003a); this figure has been growing as a result of initiatives by local authorities such as the establishment of practical recycling schemes. However, it is still inadequate in comparison with other European Union (EU) countries and in terms of reaching the national target of 25% by 2005.

Household recycling is justified by four main points (Waste Watch, 2003):

- It reduces demand for virgin raw materials;
- There are fewer environmental impacts from material extraction, processing and transportation;
- Products made from recyclates rather than virgin materials generally consume less energy in manufacturing;
- Lower down the hierarchy, less waste is disposed of by the more environmentally damaging methods.

Local authorities must develop appropriate waste management strategies if they are to reach their statutory targets. Household recycling requires people willing to recycle and the supporting infrastructure for them to do so. Each local authority has to adapt to its own socio-economic conditions, so it is not possible to develop one recycling system that could be adopted by all. Recycling rates vary greatly across the UK and it is difficult to provide clear reasons for any particular scheme's success or failure without a detailed understanding of the scheme and its characteristics (Noehammer and Byer, 1997).

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