

LITTER IN AMERICA

Results from the nation's largest litter study

KEY FINDINGS: LITTERING BEHAVIOR

Littering Behavior in America*, new research from Keep America Beautiful, reports on three nationwide studies—behavior observations, intercept interviews, and a national telephone survey. These explore how frequently people litter, the individual and contextual variables that contribute to littering, and the effectiveness of various approaches to reduce littering.

In the 2009 national survey, the first since 1969, 15% of individuals self-reported littering in the past month. In 1969, 50% admitted littering. While self-reported littering rates have declined in the past 40 years, individual littering—and litter—persists.

LITTER IS PRIMARILY THE RESULT OF INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIORS.

- **About 85% of littering is the result of individual attitudes.** Changing individual behavior is key to preventing litter.
- Nearly one in five, or **17%**, of all disposals observed in public spaces were littering. The remainder (83%) was properly discarded in a trash or recycling receptacle.
- **Most littering behavior—81%—occurred with notable intent.** This included dropping (54%), flick/fling of the item (20%), and other littering with notable intent (7%).

Table 8. Frequencies of Litter Disposal Strategies for General Litter

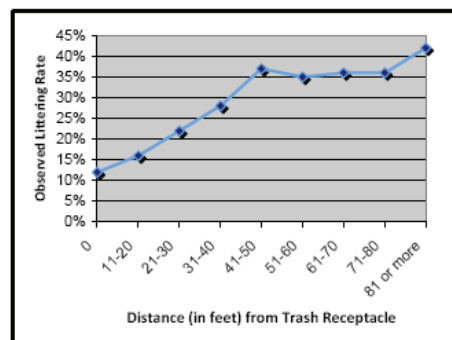
| | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|------------|-------------|
| Drop: Intent † | 183 | 54% |
| Flick/Fling † | 68 | 20% |
| Drop: No Intent | 42 | 12% |
| Shoot & Miss † | 8 | 2% |
| Placed item on table, bench, or ledge † | 21 | 6% |
| Inch Away † | 8 | 2% |
| Wedge † | 4 | 1% |
| Sweep † | 3 | <1% |
| 90%ers † | 2 | <1% |
| Blew away | 3 | <1% |
| TOTAL | 342 | 100% |

Note: † designates littering that occurred with notable "intent."

THE COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENT ALSO INFLUENCES LITTERING BEHAVIOR.

- **A strong contributor to littering is the prevalence of existing litter.** About 15% of littering is affected by the environment, or existing litter.
- **Trash receptacles are widespread, while ash receptacles are less common.** Of the sites observed, 91% had trash receptacles (including dumpsters), but only 47% had ash receptacles. And even fewer had recycling containers (12%).
- **Most littering occurs at a considerable distance from a receptacle.** At the time of improper disposal, the average estimated distance to the nearest receptacles was 29 feet. The observed littering rate when a receptacle was 10 feet or closer was 12%, and the likelihood of littering increased steadily for receptacles at a greater distance.
- **Individuals under 30 are more likely to litter than those who are older.** In fact, age, and not gender, is a significant predictor of littering behavior.

Figure 2: Observed Littering Rate by Distance to Receptacle



MORE ON REVERSE SIDE...

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CIGARETTE BUTT LITTERING

The most frequently littered items are cigarette butts. Tobacco products are roughly 38% of all U.S. roadway litter and comprise nearly 30% at “transition points”. Here are more facts about cigarette butt littering:

- A focused observation of smokers revealed a **65% littering rate**. Both the availability of ash receptacles and the amount of existing litter affected the littering rate.
- **Cigarette butt litter was more strongly influenced by the environment than was general litter**. A full 38% of cigarette butt littering was due to the environment, and 62% to individual behavior.

Table 6. Type and Frequency of Disposed Objects

| | Proper | Improper | % Littered |
|--------------------------|--------------|------------|------------|
| Cigarette Butt | 146 | 194 | 57% |
| Combo/Mixed Trash | 325 | 12 | 4% |
| Paper | 251 | 20 | 7% |
| Beverage Cup | 180 | 5 | 3% |
| Napkin/Tissue | 110 | 9 | 8% |
| Beverage Bottle: Plastic | 100 | 5 | 5% |
| Food Remnants | 65 | 16 | 20% |
| Food Wrapper | 85 | 14 | 14% |
| Beverage Can | 59 | 8 | 12% |
| Food Container | 57 | 1 | 2% |
| Plastic Bag | 38 | 2 | 5% |
| Beverage Bottle: Glass | 11 | 0 | 0% |
| Unknown | 116 | 10 | 8% |
| Other | 77 | 46 | 37% |
| TOTAL | 1,620 | 342 | 17% |

PREVENTING LITTER REQUIRES CHANGING INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR— AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Make proper disposal convenient and accessible. Provide sufficient trash, ash, and recycling receptacles. There is a special need for more ash receptacles.

Ensure consistent and ongoing clean-up efforts. Littered environments attract more litter. Decrease the amount of existing litter.

Use landscaping, improving the built infrastructure, and ongoing maintenance to set a community standard and promote a sense of personal responsibility not to litter. Communities that make an effort to “beautify” result in lower rates of littering behavior.

Make the most of awareness and motivational campaigns. Use messaging that highlights social disapproval for littering and a preference for clean, litter-free communities. Messages that show littering as common undermine littering prevention. And keep the focus on individual responsibility.