

# Recycling on Long Island has decreased from 29% to 24% from 1998 to 2009

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Recycling on Long Island has seen a marked decrease of some 20 percent over the past decade, according to a study conducted by Stony Brook University's Department of Technology and Society and the Waste Reduction and Management Institute in the School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences at Stony Brook (SoMAS). The study, ["Recycling on Long Island 2009: A report on municipal programs in Nassau and Suffolk Counties"](#) represents a complete accounting of Town-based municipal recycling in both Nassau and Suffolk Counties, and found that from 1998 to 2009 recycling on Long Island decreased from 29 percent to 24 percent. Suffolk's overall rate was 27 percent, while Nassau's was only 20 percent.

"While Long Island [recycling](#) programs grew rapidly in the early 1990s, they subsequently reached a plateau in the 2000s, as measured by recycling percentages," said R. Lawrence Swanson, Director, Waste Reduction and Management Institute at SoMAS and one of the report's authors. "Our study showed a decrease in all curbside recycling programs, which is at least partially the result of more precise accounting of recycling, and changes in materials—for example, the substitution of plastic for heavier materials and lighter packaging in general."

Additionally, programs may not be as effective as they once were, Swanson said, noting that, "Decreased educational programs and public outreach, despite robust web presences, seem to be important elements in potential declines in public participation in available recycling programs."

Krista L. Greene, a graduate student in the Department of Technology and Society at Stony Brook and the report's lead author, echoed these sentiments, adding that, "We have identified a number of reasons why individual programs may show declining rates, such as more precise accounting of recycling activities, decreases in education efforts and a failure to document all recycling efforts, especially composting and commercial recycling activities."

For the study, Greene and her co-authors, who also included David Tonjes, an assistant professor in Stony Brook's Department of Technology and Society, looked at the various recycling program designs that are in place throughout Long Island with particular emphasis on the collection and management of residential wastes, including recycling, e-waste collection, household hazardous waste collection, yard waste composting, and public education and outreach.

Overall, the report found that 59 percent of Long Island's municipal solid waste was incinerated, 17 percent was transported, and 24 percent was recycled during 2009, the base year for the study.

On the municipal level, the documented recycling rates varied widely, ranging from 10 percent in Riverhead to 85 percent in Southampton, with the eastern municipalities generally having higher recycling rates. Some programs on the East End actually showed increases over the time period, at least partly due to managing less waste and counting more compost.

"There are several explanations for the relatively high recycling rates on the East End of Long Island," Tonjes noted. "The municipalities with the highest recycling rates—Shelter Island, Southampton and Southold—all have pay-as-you-throw volume based pricing systems in place, in which municipal solid waste may only be disposed of in special, pre-purchased bags. Paying to dispose of garbage, but getting free recycling tends to

increase the amount of recyclables collected. Additionally, the presence of drop-off waste management programs, robust composting programs, and possibly some accounting issues may have contributed to the high rates.”

The well-established curbside collection programs that are in place across Nassau County and throughout western Suffolk County have generally similar recovery rates. This suggests that no one program is less effective than any another, but the declining trends for all of these programs signals a need to reconsider current practices.

“It is clear that Long Island municipalities can do more to enhance their programs and ultimately, improve recycling rates,” noted Swanson. “For instance, it appears that better outreach efforts are needed. The Town of Islip and the Town of Oyster Bay are the only Towns with recycling educators.”

“Additionally, some jurisdictions have enforcement programs in place to ensure that recyclables are separated from other wastes,” said Swanson, who explained that positive incentives, such as the Recycle Bank program in Philadelphia, may also be useful. “Other programs that seek universal participation, like tax collection, traffic safety and public health, use a variety of means to refresh interest and maintain awareness of their importance.”

Provided by Stony Brook University

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