

Study: US puts twice as much trash in landfills than thought

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In this Dec. 6, 2012 file photo, trash is compacted at the landfill in Moretown, Vt. Americans are sending more than twice as much trash to landfills than the federal government estimates, according to a new study. It turns out that on average America tosses five pounds of trash per person per day into its landfills, which are not overflowing because they are expanding faster than they are filling, said the same study, which is based on actual landfill measurements instead of government estimates. (AP Photo/Toby Talbot, File)

Americans are sending more than twice as much trash to landfills as the federal government has estimated, according to a new study.

It turns out that on average Americans toss 2.3 kilograms (five pounds) of [trash](#) per person per day into its [landfills](#), according to an analysis of figures from the same study, which is based on actual landfill measurements instead of government estimates.

For years, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency relied on estimates to determine how much trash was being sent to landfills. But in 2010, the agency required most municipal landfills to measure and report how much trash was heading into the dumps, as part of an effort to lower heat-trapping methane emissions. Researchers at Yale University looked at the records for more than 1,200 landfills and calculated amounts, predominantly based on weights.

They figured it was 263 million metric tons (289 million tons) in 2012, according to a study published Monday in the journal *Nature Climate Change*. For the same year, EPA estimated the figure to be 123 million metric tons (135 million tons).

The Yale team calculated that in 2013, waste sent to landfills rose to 268 million metric tons (294 million tons). With 316 million people, that comes to 849 kilograms (1,871 pounds) per person in that year, the last for which there are figures.

Jon Powell at Yale's Center for Industrial Ecology said the amount is different because of the way his team calculated it: Adding up actual measurements instead of estimates based on what businesses told government indirectly. The EPA partially funded the study.

Three outside experts said they trust the Yale numbers more than the EPA's. However, Thomas Kinnaman, a Bucknell University professor who studies the economics of solid waste and recycling, added the findings don't matter much, because landfills have plenty of room to expand. Powell found that for every year's worth of trash filled on

average in the United States, landfills add 2.7 years' worth of capacity.

If Powell's data is correct, Americans aren't recycling as much as authorities thought. EPA estimated that Americans recycled 34.5 percent of their waste in 2012, but if the amount of trash matches Powell calculation, the recycling rate would be 21.4 percent. But the data may not match up well, Powell cautioned.

Americans don't seem to generate more trash than other cultures, Bucknell's Kinnaman said. And not all of the waste is from homes. Powell said a sampling, which may not be representative nationally, showed that 12.8 percent of the material that flowed into the landfill was construction and demolition debris.

More information: *Nature Climate Change*, [DOI: 10.1038/nclimate2804](https://doi.org/10.1038/nclimate2804)

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