

THE CITY COLLEGE OF NEW YORK

Recycling, our only hope?

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Plastic, one of the biggest chemical discoveries of the 20th century, awarded the many people behind its creation Nobel Prizes. Used in moderation in the early 1900s, plastic was just another material, nothing crazily impressive. It stayed like that until the First World War when advancements in science led to several new types of plastics; it was eventually mass-produced after World War II. But even then, it posed no problems to anyone and it would surely stay that way, right? Unfortunately for us, our use of plastic did not stay inconsequential as it turned into one of the biggest problems of our modern society. Being the cheapest material out of all common industries and being extremely durable, plastic is at the forefront of almost everything in our society. Plastic is used in construction, making pipes, cables, and more. It is also used in transportation, making it into cars, planes, and trains. But most importantly, plastic is used for packaging. And to the best answer to that problem is undeniably recycling.

In an era defined by industrialization, the United States stands at the top, above the other 195 countries. But behind this face of prosperity, there is an extremely problematic environmental concern, one so big as to question if this achievement should be glorified. It is the explosive rise in plastic waste. Even with the fact that the US is not the biggest plastic producer, with [China](#) producing over 32% of the world's plastic, the United States still manages to be the biggest producer of plastic waste in the world. According to [statistics](#), the United States landfilled approximately 27 million tons of plastic waste, only utilizing about 8.6 million tons in recycling and energy. And out of those 8.6 millions, combustion makes up 5.6 millions tons of it. But while burning plastic to create energy might sound like a good idea at first, the fumes released by such an act are extremely [harmful](#), releasing toxins in the atmosphere, not to mention that such methods require expensive facilities. There is also the [million tons](#) either being illegally

dumped and littered to worry about. And the unethical act of exporting plastic waste to poorer countries, which in most cases, can't even recycle them either, filling their landfills too.

After hearing all of this tragic news, a call to action is necessary. Because asking to stop people from using plastic packages is greatly unreasonable, as our society has become dependent on plastic, the next best solution would be to recycle. In 2021, the U.S. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) created the [National Recycling Strategy](#), intending to increase the United State's recycling to 50 percent by 2023. Their main focus is on enhancing and advancing the nation's recycling system. Currently, the U.S. recycling system is not optimized, with several major flaws protruding it. According to the [EPA](#), some of those flaws include "Confusion about what materials can be recycled, recycling infrastructure that has not kept pace with today's diverse and changing waste stream, reduced markets for recycled materials, and varying methodologies to measure recycling system performance." Our first step should be to fix those already existing problems, improving slowly along the way. The National Recycling Strategy has [5 major objectives](#). They are: to improve the market for recycling commodities, increase the awareness of publicly available recycling and continue research, reduce the contamination of recycled materials, enhance the recycling policies and programs, and standardize data.

The first objective, to improve the market for recycling includes actions like: increasing the manufacturing of recycled materials, increasing demand for recycled materials, and encouraging global recycling trade. The second objective, to increase awareness and continue research includes actions like teaching people more about recycling, continuing to strive for new solutions to the existing recycling problem, and increasing the collection of recycled materials. The third objective, reducing the contamination of recycled materials, includes actions like teach

people on how to properly recycle and to make sure that this knowledge is spread out to as many people as possible. The fourth objective, enhance the recycling policies and programs include actions like: increase federal support for the recycling system, and overhaul increase the information being spread about recycling programs and policies to governmental institutions. And the fifth objective, to standardize data, aims to create concrete definitions and measurements in order to facilitate progression and performance.

Even though my strive for recycling is right, some people might think differently and see recycling in a different light. According to a news article published in the [New York Times](#), one of the arguments against recycling is the price of it. The author states “ it’s still typically more expensive for municipalities to recycle household waste than to send it to a landfill.” This problem was caused by the price of oil and overseas demand for recycled material decreased. Recycling would just be a loss of money, as dumping waste in landfills is more profitable. Another reason advocating for the release of plastic waste in landfills is because recycling also has environmental costs. Trucks carrying recycling material can cause pollution. Recycling facilities can also emit nauseating odors and attract pests like rats.

This argument, while somewhat true, such a thing can easily be fixed. Having the government, or any societal body, reward enterprises and people for recycling can easily solve the problem of recycling not being profitable for the average person or business. As for the other argument, saying that the transportation of recycled material can cause air and smell pollution does not entirely make sense. The air pollution caused by the transportation of recycled material is a price to pay in order to reduce the amount of plastic waste released in the wild and bodies of water. As for the smell pollution, it is but a minor inconvenience for the greater good of a healthier environment.

And all of that is past statistics and data, not only are those numbers unlikely to decrease, they are likely to increase. In 1950, the world produced 2 million tons of plastic; nowadays, that number has transformed into [380 million](#), showing no signs of stopping. Even worse, it shows signs of exponential growth. And out of the approximate [dozen million](#) tons of plastic being dumped in the oceans, the [United States](#) makes for about $\frac{1}{8}$ of it.