

# What New York's Trash Reveals About Life Under Lockdown

New Yorkers seem to be drinking more at home. But they're also being productive, decluttering and gardening during the pandemic.

**By Anne Barnard, Azi Paybarah and Jacob Meschke**

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More than two months into a coronavirus lockdown, evidence of how home confinement has changed New York City's behavior is coming out in the trash.

New Yorkers are drinking more, opening more cans of tomato sauce and using more plastic containers. They also seem to be ordering more boxed deliveries and clearing out old junk.

So say a mix of city data and the people who get an unvarnished look at what goes in the garbage: building superintendents and porters.

Residents across the city are recycling more glass, metal and plastic than before the pandemic. With people doing most of their eating and drinking at home, the volume of those items increased 27 percent citywide over the April average from 2015 to 2019.

The sharpest rise has been in the amount of glass in recycling bins, especially clear glass, which hit a record high in May, according to data from Sims Municipal Recycling, the company that sorts the items.

"Wine, vodka, whiskey," said Claudio Garcia, a building superintendent in Midtown Manhattan who says he carries out at least triple the number of bottles as he did before the lockdown. "That's what I see more often."



Pablo Gomez, left, and Felix Rosario taking out the trash at a building in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. OK McCausland for The New York Times

As stay-at-home orders are eventually lifted, scholars of consumption habits hope to gather data on how shutdowns affect people's use of resources and impact on the environment.

"The lifestyle shifts taking place by force, these accidental experiments happening across the world, we can study them and see the effects and the lessons," said Aniruddha Dasgupta, global director of the World Resource Institute's Ross Center for Sustainable Cities.

"Sociologists are just sharpening their pencils right now to do this study," Mr. Dasgupta added.

New York City Department of Sanitation officials, tasked with collecting the city's residential trash, say more analysis of waste is needed over a longer period before drawing conclusions on how it compares with the garbage of previous years. But analysis of April's garbage data offers some initial clues.





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Some of the shifts are counterintuitive. Even though more people are staying home all day, the total residential garbage collected has dropped in all boroughs except Staten Island. One reason is that, as cellphone data shows, some residents — especially in wealthy, dense neighborhoods — fled the city for country homes. Garbage plummeted 22 percent in Manhattan; in affluent Greenwich Village, volume was down 35 percent.

The largest increases took place in some of New York's poorest areas, where people are more likely to hold essential jobs and less likely to have the means to leave. For instance, Morrisania in the South Bronx saw a 5.6 percent increase in trash.

Some higher-income neighborhoods with single-family homes — where people have yards and gardens to escape to and basements to tidy — also saw increases, like Tottenville in Staten Island, where trash volume was up 5.8 percent.

Regardless of volume, there is new strain on the nation's largest city sanitation department and its essential workers.



Scott O'Shea, a New York City Department of Sanitation employee, completing his route through Manhattan's West Village on a recent Thursday. OK McCausland for The New York Times

Of the city's 10,000 sanitation employees, 628 have tested positive for the coronavirus, a spokeswoman for the agency said. Seven have died from confirmed cases of Covid-19, the disease caused by the virus, and another six from presumed cases.

"There's no way to pick up garbage from home," the sanitation commissioner, Kathryn Garcia, said. "How critical D.S.N.Y. uniformed services are becomes very clear at moments like this."

The department has been juggling shifts, cleaning trucks and streamlining procedures at dispatch centers to reduce employees' exposure to one another and the public.

Some New Yorkers have left notes thanking their trash collectors.





A building in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, offering thank yous to sanitation and delivery workers. OK McCausland for The New York Times

But there have been sporadic pickup delays, which could worsen as the pandemic continues to strain the department's budget.

"When garbage cans are overflowing on every corner in a few months, suddenly everyone will care," said Justin Brannan, a City Council member in Brooklyn.

Mr. Brannan added that he had received "lamenting emails" from constituents since the elimination in early May of curbside pickup of organic waste like food scraps and garden refuse.

The recycling of organic waste was already dropping before the program ended. Citywide, three-quarters of community districts with compost pickup recycled less organic waste this past April compared with April 2019. A third of those 26 districts saw declines of over 25 percent.

In Mott Haven, a neighborhood in the Bronx that is one of the poorest districts, the difference was staggering. Trash collected in April across the two years declined by only 3.6 percent, but organic waste collected declined by 63 percent.



Ismet Jakupovic, a handyman, handling the trash at a residence on Manhattan's Upper East Side. OK McCausland for The New York Times

The numbers also suggest that neighborhoods where fewer people have fled the city are relying more on cardboard-box deliveries.

Recycling of cardboard and paper has dropped in many wealthier areas and increased in many poorer ones. But in some areas where regular trash has increased — suggesting people are still at home — paper-product recycling has increased by even more.

For instance, in Morrisania, where trash is up 5.6 percent, paper and cardboard volume is up 19 percent. (The district also leads the city with a 48 percent increase in metal, glass and plastic.)

At Parker Towers, a large apartment complex in Forest Hills, Queens, Anthony Davis, a concierge, said that in normal times, 40 to 60 packages were delivered each day. Now, more than 200 packages come in, he said, and going out is “a very, very large amount of cardboard,” similar to what he sees around Christmas.

“Every day is a holiday,” Mr. Davis said.





An old stove was among the large items dragged to the curb on a recent Wednesday in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. OK McCausland for The New York Times

Data aside, garbage handlers are drawing their own conclusions about what New Yorkers are up to behind closed doors.

Some appear to be spring cleaning, said Harry Nespoli, president of the union representing city sanitation workers.

“Home equipment stuff, a bench they have downstairs,” Mr. Nespoli said. “The old TVs with the wood around them. They had these things in the basement for 100 years, and they’re putting them out.”

He said his analysis came from conversations with sanitation workers, as well as personal experience: He and his wife recently decluttered their home.

Mr. Nespoli also said it appeared that more people were gardening, because “all of a sudden, there’s dirt in the bottom of the garbage.”

“If you’re turning the dirt, you’re going to find some rocks,” he said. “You’re not going to keep the rocks. You’re going to throw them in the pail and at the end of the day, you put them in the garbage.”



But in many places, the clanking in the bins is not from rocks.

“What I see different is all the empty bottles of alcohol,” said Mr. Garcia, the Manhattan superintendent.

He said he used to put out three to four large bags of wine and spirits bottles at each of the four small buildings he works in. Now he estimates his buildings, and others around them, generate about 10 bags each.



Lamont Mays of Action Carting, a private company, riding the back of a garbage truck in Manhattan’s Chinatown. Trash collected from office buildings and businesses has plummeted. OK McCausland for The New York Times

On the bright side, Mr. Garcia said, more empty bottles has not meant louder partying.

“They’re just having a very quiet life,” he said. “They don’t bother me.”

As New Yorkers stay home from work, trash from office buildings and businesses, which is collected by private carting companies, has predictably plummeted. City figures show it dropped by 75 percent less than two weeks into the lockdown.

Mr. Davis, the Queens concierge, thinks people are making room for home offices by throwing out bulky items.

“Somebody actually gave me three guitars,” he said. “A lady threw out a piano.”



One resident, he added, got rid of a life-size zebra statue.

“It didn’t look like it fit in the elevator,” he said.

Elaine Chen contributed reporting.