



2019 Pizza Box Recycling Access Study

Executive Summary

In 2019, WestRock commissioned Resource Recycling Systems (RSS) to conduct a study of the availability of recycling programs in the U.S. for pizza boxes. The study examined the prevalence of recycling programs that accept pizza boxes as well as the type of instructions provided to residents on how to recycle pizza boxes.

The researchers reviewed details on recycling program guidelines for a group of 1,900 programs representing over 50 percent of the population of each U.S. state and over 60 percent of the U.S. as a whole. Using data sets from the U.S. Census Bureau identifying the local governments in each state, the project team defined two groups of sample communities. The first group consisted of a comprehensive, non-random census of over 1,500 programs consisting of the largest communities in each state, in total representing at least 50% of each state's population. The second group consisted of a stratified random sample of approximately 400 smaller communities nationally, with representation from each state. The results from the random sample of smaller communities were extrapolated in the findings to represent the portion of the U.S. population residing in communities of this size.

For each community in the sample, researchers independently reviewed public-facing recycling program guidelines and evaluated them for the acceptance of pizza boxes. The research team evaluated guidance on pizza box recycling in both the general guidelines and material-specific search tools/waste wizards, where available, to capture any differences between the sets of guidelines.

Instructions were coded based on how explicitly pizza boxes were included or excluded from the program's descriptive guidelines. A rating system was used to capture some of the variation in how recyclables are described by public programs and to encourage consistent interpretation by researchers.

The data collection was done over a three-week period in September 2019, and thus the study findings are representative of that time period, while recognizing that programs and service availability in a given program are subject to change at any time.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- 73% of the US population are estimated to have recycling programs available for pizza boxes.
- More specifically, 27% of the population is served by programs with explicit acceptance of pizza boxes and 46% of the population has access to programs that implicitly accept pizza boxes.
- The largest single group of the population is served by programs that implicitly accept pizza boxes. The vast majority of these programs have instructions that list corrugated cardboard as an accepted item while not prohibiting pizza boxes.
- Of programs that provide explicit guidance on pizza boxes, acceptance predominates; 27% of the population is served by programs explicitly accepting these containers while 11% of the population is served by programs explicitly prohibiting them.