

# RECYCLING IN URBAN HOUSEHOLDS

## THE ROLE OF RACE, HISTORY AND SOCIAL STATUS



A study based on three annual general household surveys (2003, 2005, 2006), by BARBARA ANDERSON, JOHN ROMANI, MARIE WENTZEL and HESTON PHILLIPS, turned up some interesting anomalies.

If you're white or Asian, have had a good education and are a bit older than you'd like to be, it's a good bet that you will recycle household materials to bolster the nation's resources, improve the environment by reducing the destruction of trees, and lessening the likelihood of litter.

If you're African, on the other hand, education is only a factor when you reach the household heads with a BA or other university qualification (4%), older age will make you even less likely to recycle, and the best encouragement for you to do so is to have a child at school.

*Recycling for altruistic reasons (not for money) is strongly related to education, and more common among older people.*

The South African Constitution prescribes the protection of the environment, 'for the benefit of present and future generations', by legislating to prevent pollution and ecological degradation. It also advocates using natural resources while promoting economic and

social development.

For non-African households the results of research are similar to those of Europe and the United States, and recycling is more likely when it is easier for households to recycle. Local recycling programmes and the proximity of buy-back organisations or collection points are obvious factors.

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### THE CHILD FACTOR

Among African households recycling is much less common, and increases little with education. But African households with a schoolchild are more likely to recycle, possibly to cooperate with school programmes and be a good role model.

An African scholar recounted growing up in an urban township where many recycled to gain a little money. Now she and her husband, both of whom have Master's degrees, 'do not think about recycling much'. The only time she recycles is when she sends paper with her son for a school paper drive.

She notes that her son is taught in school that behaviour such as wearing a seatbelt and recycling is good.

These reminiscences of an apartheid township may explain the apparent anomaly: older Africans, having lived longer under apartheid, remember recycling as a means of surviving, and apparently want to put that behind them.

Intriguingly, white people with a child at school are less likely to recycle, possibly because they are so busy with the daily rush of getting children to school and extramural activities.

A series of focus group will be conducted in order to gain insight into the sources of African perceptions and behaviours and to examine whether the explanations that have been developed based on statistical analysis of large data sets are borne out or modified through examination of qualitative data.

### LITTERING

For every group, perceiving littering as a problem is likely to increase recycling, but the level is lowest among Africans, somewhat higher among coloureds and even higher in white or Asian households.

But South Africa does have a good record of recycling metal beverage cans, with an estimated level of 80 to 90% in 2004. Much of this is by individual entrepreneurs, rather than household recycling.

In developed countries, recycling is commensurate with social status, but there has been little research on recycling in the developing world.

It may take some time for African households to see recycling as worthwhile for the common welfare. So what could spur a higher level of recycling in African households, as 'wait a generation' is not an option? Better school education on recycling, more collection programmes and more and better located buy-back centres would likely increase recycling among all urban residents, especially Africans.

*Based on a presentation at the HSRC Seminar Series, and is available on [www.hsrc.ac.za](http://www.hsrc.ac.za).*

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