



executive summary

Illegal Dumping White Paper

Illegal dumping of durable waste (like auto parts, household appliances, mattresses, furniture, construction and home renovation waste, and electronics) is different from littering and requires distinct prevention and mitigation strategies.

For purposes of this report, the term “illegal dumping” is limited to durable waste disposed of at a location other than a permitted solid waste disposal facility.

To help policymakers and other stakeholders better understand the significant environmental, economic and societal harms that illegal dumping creates (both where the dumping occurs and in surrounding communities), this report identifies drivers of illegal dumping and explores public policy options to address the problem.

Drivers of Illegal Dumping

Drivers of illegal dumping include barriers to proper disposal (high disposal fees, lack of curbside collection services, inconvenient collection sites, etc.), as well as site-specific characteristics (poorly maintained locations, lack of “community ownership” of spaces, etc.). Also playing a role in illegal dumping are socio-economic factors (dense populations, high mobility rates among residents, etc.) and attitudes about illegal dumping and the environment. Illegal dumping results from some combination of these factors.

Research shows that residents generally agree that illegal dumping is wrong and should be avoided when possible, and that those who have participated in illegal dumping express some guilt or remorse for doing so. Understanding these attitudes is important as remedial strategies are developed and implemented.

Policymakers and other stakeholders need to understand that illegal dumping is based on a series of decisions that follow a path of least resistance — from the point when an item no longer has value to a household, all the way through to the moment the item is illegally dumped. Because of this, there are multiple opportunities to divert residents from the path that leads to illegal dumping and onto a path where the destination is legal disposal through appropriate collection channels.

A Coordinated Approach

This report suggests numerous potential strategies for preventing and deterring illegal dumping, including focusing on prevention versus mitigation, building awareness among residents, fostering community engagement, encouraging collaboration among stakeholders, enacting appropriate policies and legislation, and effectively enforcing illegal dumping measures. Just as illegal dumping is driven by a combination of factors, addressing the problem requires a multifaceted approach.

Given the size and scale of the problem, no single entity can tackle illegal dumping alone. A coordinated approach across multiple stakeholders, jurisdictions and agencies is likely to be most effective, particularly when striving to prevent — rather than react to — illegal dumping, the latter of which is often more costly.

An important step is to measure the scale of the illegal dumping problem, identify hot spots, and track the effectiveness of prevention and mitigation strategies. A central organization should, if possible, be responsible for the regionwide collection of data regarding the instances and frequency of illegal

dumping, the types and quantities of material being illegally dumped and areas where material is being dumped. Comprehensive data collection should not be seen as optional; it is a prerequisite to developing appropriate strategies and measuring whether they are effective in preventing illegal dumping.

At the local level, residents of affected communities need to be consulted to gauge which factors they think are contributing to illegal dumping and to solicit feedback for ideas to help fix the problem.

Improving Access to Proper Disposal Options

The most significant predictor of illegal dumping is a lack of convenient, low- or no-cost disposal options. Therefore, local jurisdictions should make proper durable waste disposal options more available to residents by setting minimum targets for household access and service coverage. Effective strategies include increasing the number of free bulky collections (either curbside or at drop-off sites) and providing access to temporary waste collection points during times when residents are likely to generate more waste.

Raising Awareness

Providing adequate waste collection services must be accompanied by clear, consistent promotional and educational initiatives that build community support for proper disposal of durable waste and explain disposal programs in easily understood terms. Residents need to understand why illegal dumping is a problem. Educational campaigns should clearly explain what items can be disposed of through residential waste programs and outline where and when durable waste should be taken for proper disposal. Campaigns themselves need to be multichannel (digital and print), culturally appropriate and relevant.

Additional Prevention Strategies

Additional strategies to prevent illegal dumping of durable goods include extended producer responsibility (ERP) programs, in which manufacturers of a particular product are responsible for managing that product at the end of its life. In areas used for illegal dumping, physical barriers (such as fencing), safety measures (such as lighting) and surveillance methods (such as CCTV cameras, drones and patrols by police or community members) can be used as part of an overall prevention strategy. Some communities have installed “smart” monitoring technologies that detect illegal dumping.

Strengthening Enforcement

Historically, law enforcement efforts to curtail illegal dumping have been defined poorly, with limited coordination across jurisdictions. One of the first steps to improving enforcement is to train local authorities to fully understand the broader consequences of illegal dumping, including the environmental, economic and societal impacts, as well as the legal consequences. They should review the efficacy of existing laws (if any) and evaluate what changes are needed to make them more effective.

Other strategies allow law enforcement and judges to consider contextual factors when setting a penalty. For example, who is the illegal dumper (an individual or business?) and what did the individual or business dump? What type of harm did the dumping cause? How much will remediation cost? What type and amount of penalty will be most effective in deterring illegal dumping? To adjudicate environmental law violations, some jurisdictions have created specially trained environmental courts and tribunals to decide these cases.

This report concludes that illegal dumping is a complex problem driven by multiple factors. Solutions must be targeted and multilayered. The illegal dumping of durable goods can be addressed most effectively through a comprehensive, collaborative and inclusive approach.