

research snapshot

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Binning is an important source of income for British Columbia's homeless.



What is this research about?

Binning is an informal activity that involves removing recyclable materials from waste bins with the purpose of redeeming those materials for small amounts of money. Binning is practiced by homeless and impoverished individuals around the world. Bidders get a sense of independence from their labour, as they don't have to turn to crime or begging for income. In British Columbia, Canada, social enterprises like the *United We Can* bottle depot in Vancouver and the *Urban Binning Unit* work to help improve the public image of bidders by reducing the social stigma around binning and demonstrating the important role of binning in resource recovery. This research project was designed to learn about this activity, to improve the livelihood of bidders by helping restore their dignity, and to educate society on the important benefits of binning as an environmental service.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers from the Community Based Research Laboratory at the University of Victoria conducted focus groups, a participatory socio-economic census of the bidder population and a community mapping activity with the bidders in Victoria.

What did the researchers find?

Some of the key research findings were:

- Bidders face major work related health

What you need to know:

Binning is an important source of income for the impoverished populations around the world and provides communities with a valuable service of resource recovery of material which would otherwise be discarded on landfills and cause an environmental nuisance. Urgent government, industry and community support is needed to improve the working conditions for bidders, allow them to organize, and help them climb out of poverty and homelessness.

risks. Common risks included skin and viral infection due to broken glass and metal, soreness, and arthritis. Despite these risks, few bidders (20.4%) said they wore protective clothing like boots and gloves while binning.

- Unemployment is a major reason why people turn to binning in Canada. For many homeless individuals, binning is their only source of income.
- Binning is a time consuming activity. Most bidders reported working between 4 and 6 hours a day 5 to 7 days a week.
- Binning was found to be a productive informal economic activity, but most of the people involved (52%) said they earned only \$10-\$30 day from this activity.
- Bidders said the most common items they collected were beverage containers



(51%). Because they get between 5 and 20 cents/bottle, they need an enormous number of bottles (100+) to make any meaningful income.

- Binnners often use shopping carts in order to transport their collected products. There is a strong social stigma attached to the use of shopping carts because of their noise and the police confiscating the carts from binnners on charges of theft.
- A number of community initiatives like the Urban Binning Unit (UBU) help binnners and the community by creating networking opportunities, reducing the social stigma, and raising awareness about the environmental and social benefits of working together with binnners for recovering resources.
- Binnners that have partnerships with businesses and community groups are happy to exchange services for collected bottles. According to the interviews with binnners, services include over-night security and odd jobs.

How can you use this research?

Policymakers and community groups will find this research useful in tackling ways of improving the quality of life for binnners, mainly homeless and impoverished population. Stigmatization has been identified as major hurdle towards a better quality of life of this population. By pointing out the community benefits of binning, this research shows how an investment of resources in binnners will improve waste management and resource recovery in communities. Using the lessons from this research, communities can help to organize binnners into co-operatives, or social enterprises such as *United We Can* in Vancouver, which will help them collaborate with business, industry, and government to continue providing a valuable service. Communities can also use this research to diminish the health risks and to improve the workplace safety for binnners by

ensuring clean and safe access to recyclable materials.

About the Researcher

Jutta Gutberlet is an Associate Professor at the Department of Geography at the University of Victoria. She works on sustainable livelihoods and community-based development with specific attention to poverty reduction in the local and global context. Her recent book: *Recycling Citizenship, Recovering Resources: Urban poverty reduction in Latin America* published by Ashgate is about the social, economic and environmental potential embedded in 'wasting no waste'. *Crystal Tremblay, Emma Taylor, and Nandakumar Divakarannair are the students and Ken Josephson the cartographer at UVic who were involved in this project. This Research Snapshot is from their study: Who are our informal recyclers? An inquiry to uncover crisis and potential in Victoria, Canada. Results were published in 2009 in: Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability, Volume 14 Issue 8, 733-747. For more information, please contact: jutta@uvic.ca or visit <http://cbri.uvic.ca/en/>*

Keywords

Poverty, homelessness, community-based participatory research, urban health, binning, recycling.

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