

# Independent Recyclers in New York City: Sector profile and pathways to inclusion



**SURE WE CAN**  
WHERE EVERYONE COUNTS



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## Executive Summary

This report contains findings from the first-ever survey of independent recyclers (also referred to as canners) across New York City's five boroughs. Over the period April - August 2023, 257 surveys<sup>1</sup> and 12 qualitative interviews were carried out with canners at 38 sites of work across the city (both redemption centers and reverse vending machines). Through a mix of purposive and convenience sampling, the study produced a diverse profile of the English and Spanish-speaking canner population, which points to sector-wide trends in areas such as earnings, working conditions, access to social protections, expenditures and health, among other areas.

The study revealed that independent recycling (also referred to as canning) is a low-barrier livelihood for working-age individuals who have been shut out of the formal labor market and, notably, fills critical gaps in social safety nets for many who are elderly or coping with chronic physical and mental illness. At the same time, the results show personal benefits derived from the work, especially in relation to mental and physical health. Despite the social and environmental benefits of canning, these workers face precarious conditions, earning on average one third of the NY minimum wage under a policy framework which has not been changed to increase the redemption deposit for over forty years.

The results of the study point to a range of policy opportunities to maximize the social and environmental benefits of canning - to both individual workers and the city as a whole - which are summarized at the end of this report. The most urgent of these is to pass robust, comprehensive legislation to stabilize and improve the deposit-return system, such as the Bigger, Better Bottle Bill<sup>2</sup> (A6353/S237) being proposed in the 2024 legislative session. This measure would transform these workers' livelihoods - doubling their earnings and allowing them to redeem a broader range of materials. In turn, the state would benefit from cleaner streets and waterways, higher recycling rates, cost savings for municipalities, increased revenue for the state in unredeemed deposits and an increase in earnings for vulnerable communities - including immigrants, people living with chronic physical and mental illness, and the elderly - who are creating their own jobs in the circular economy against enormous odds. Passing the Expanded Bottle Bill is in line with NY State's role as an environmental and progressive model for the rest of the country.

<sup>1</sup> This number excludes a pilot round of research during which 40 surveys were completed but ultimately not counted in the final analysis due to minor edits to the survey tool following the pilot.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the proposed legislation see: <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2021/A8668>

## Independent recyclers in NYC and global context

Independent recycling, or canning, refers to work collecting, sorting and redeeming cans and bottles under New York State's Returnable Container Act (also known as the "Bottle Bill"), which establishes a five cent redeemable deposit for designated beverage containers. While many individuals may redeem containers under the policy, "canning" refers to the practice of collecting deposit-marked bottles and cans that others have discarded (as opposed to redeeming materials from personal consumption). In New York City, some have used the term "canner"<sup>3</sup> to refer to individuals engaged in this work. Following the lead of the workers themselves - organized through the NYC-based Alliance of Independent Recyclers (AIR) - the term "independent recycler" is used interchangeably with the word "canner" throughout this report to refer to such workers. The terms "independent recycling" and "canning" will also be used interchangeably to refer to the work they are engaged in.

There is no existing data on canners' numbers or characteristics in NYC, apart from a 2019 report on the impact of the Bottle Bill that estimated 4000 - 8000 canners are active in the city (Eunomia, 2019). However, data from redemption centers shows the significant contributions canners make to the solid waste management system: at one mid-sized redemption center (Sure We Can), canners redeemed over 12 million containers in 2023. At these volumes, canners are playing an important role in decreasing the accumulation of recyclable materials in area landfills (which in turn impacts on greenhouse gas emission reduction) (WIEGO, 2019). Canning also reduces strain on municipal recycling systems, which ultimately results in cost savings for the city.

As this report will show, canners are a diverse group, and include individuals who are economically dependent on canning to different degrees - from livelihood canners to those who use canning to complement existing sources of income. Canning typically involves three main activities - collecting (from sidewalks and other public spaces, residential and commercial areas), sorting (by material and/or by distributor - depending on any given redemption center's requirements) and redeeming (exchanging containers for cash at reverse vending machines, mobile buyers or redemption centers).

Canning is a form of informal recycling or "waste picking," which is a source of livelihood and labor identity for informal workers across the global south. Although global estimates of waste pickers do not exist, data show that in many cities, these workers provide the only source of recycling services (Harvey, 2023). While waste pickers in the global south have been the subject of extensive research, less work has been done to document the working conditions of waste pickers in the global north. However, waste picking is a sector with deep historical roots in northern cities, including New York, dating back to the 1800's (Fernandez, 2020; Zimring 2005).

For decades, waste pickers from across the global north and south have been organizing at local, national, regional and international levels. A milestone in waste picker movement building was achieved in 2023 with the formation of the first-ever global alliance of waste pickers, the International Alliance of Waste Pickers<sup>4</sup>, of which NYC-based AIR is a member.

Despite significant organizing and policy gains, waste pickers remain economically and socially vulnerable - even in comparison to other groups of workers within the informal economy - due to low earnings, high health risks, and enduring social stigma (WIEGO, 2023). Waste pickers are also negatively impacted by technological and policy changes, including containerization, incineration, and privatization of waste collection services, which favor large private actors in solid waste management over independent workers or small-scale cooperatives, for example.

In NYC in 2023 alone, new threats for independent recyclers have come in the form of a new rule that would require commercial businesses to store all trash and recyclables in containers rather than sidewalk bags, potentially complicating access for canners. At the same time, beverage distributors are implementing unnecessarily complex new rules for redemption that make the time-intensive work of sorting even more taxing. Despite their contributions, without recognition as stakeholders in the recycling system, canners frequently face these kinds of threats without the ability to influence policy-making that more powerful stakeholders enjoy.

3 Spanish terms include *reciclador/a* or *latero/a*

4 For more on the International Alliance of Waste Pickers see: <https://globalrec.org/>

## The New York State Bottle Bill

Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) is a policy framework that requires producers to assume financial responsibility for the entire life cycle of manufactured products, with potential mandates for packaging redesign and reduction, and responsibility for recycling and disposal. EPR is one of many approaches that promotes a circular economy model - where disposal of waste is reduced through reuse, repair and recycling (Cass Talbott, 2022). New York State's "Bottle Bill" is an example of an EPR policy, and is highly effective as an environmental measure - it is estimated that the Bottle Bill reduces roadside container litter by 70% (NYPIRG, 2022). In 2022, New York's redemption rate was 69.9%, and 80% of unredeemed bottle deposits generated revenue for the state (CRI, 2023). However, states with higher deposits (Michigan and Oregon have 10 cent deposits) consistently achieve even higher redemption rates than New York. (CRI, 2023)

In addition to the five cent deposit, the Bottle Bill establishes a three and a half cent handling fee, which has resulted in job creation through the formation of redemption centers, the majority of which are small businesses.

The Bottle Bill was groundbreaking when it was first introduced in 1982. But over 40 years later the bill has undergone few modifications and environmental justice groups and allies have called attention to the ways in which it is falling short of its potential to create more jobs, drive recycling rates higher, and help alleviate pressure on struggling municipal recycling programs. For example, without any increases to the handling fee, redemption centers across the state are struggling to stay in business. Fifty percent of redemption centers have closed since 2008 (NYPIRG, 2023). Closures accelerated in 2022-23 due to rising inflation and rents (De La Fuente, 2023). The sentiment among many redemption center owners is that without urgent changes, the system will start to collapse as centers close en masse (NYPIRG, 2023).

In part in response to these pressures, the Better Bottle Bill (A6353/S237) was introduced by Assembly member Deborah Glick and Senator Rachel May in 2022. The bill expands the types of containers that can be redeemed, raises the deposit amount to ten cents for independent recyclers, and the handling fee to six cents for redemption centers. The proposed legislation was not approved in the 22-23 legislative session. Advocates hope that Governor Hochul will include the bill in her executive budget in 2024 (NYPIRG, 2023).

## Sampling frame and methods

Despite calls by independent recyclers and activists for a city-led census of canners in NYC, as of 2023 there was no existing data on these workers in the city. Data collection is an essential step towards making informal work visible and for producing a knowledge base from which to develop responsive and supportive policy. Government-sponsored waste picker censuses are a globally recognized good practice, and notably have been used in Colombia to integrate waste pickers into solid waste management systems on supportive terms (Parra and Vanek, 2023).

In the absence of official statistics, Sure We Can<sup>5</sup> mobilized to address the data gap, as part of the existing tradition of citizen-driven data collection and waste picker "mapping" that has been used by groups across regions to visibilize informal work and create an evidence base to inform policy. To do so, Sure We Can raised funds from the Hispanic Federation to contract an independent researcher from WIEGO<sup>6</sup> (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing) to organize the study in collaboration with academics from Western Connecticut State University, SUNY Old Westbury, and canner representatives from the newly formed Association of Independent Recyclers. Field work was carried out by teams of students from local universities and canner surveyors. This study adopted an action research framework - involving canners themselves in the identification of study aims, data collection and analysis. An action research approach was

5 Sure we can is a recycling center, community space and sustainability hub that exists to support canners and the local community through economic empowerment, social inclusion and environmental awareness. For more on Sure We Can see: <https://www.surewecan.org/>.

6 WIEGO is a global action-research-policy network with over twenty years of experience supporting informal workers at local, regional and international levels through organizational support, networking, policy advocacy and research. For more on WIEGO see: <https://www.wiego.org/>

chosen for both ethical and practical reasons - as action researchers argue, non-extractive approaches that engage communities in research about issues affecting them results in data that is often more robust for being grounded in context and expertise from lived experience (Greenwood and Levin, 2007).

The lack of an established total population of canners in NYC meant that it was not possible to design a study with a fully randomized sample. Given this limitation, the study was designed with the aim of creating as representative a sample as possible within existing constraints. Three key parameters were used to define the sampling frame:

- **Ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity:** Because many canners work and redeem within ethnic enclaves, specific measures were taken to ensure ethnic heterogeneity of the sample, including using census tract data to choose sites of work in areas with different ethnic majorities.
- **Geographic diversity:** Rather than focus on a higher number of surveys at a lower number of sites per borough, the opposite approach was taken - spreading out to conduct surveys at as many sites of work as possible within each borough to achieve a broad geographic spread.
- **Proportionality to NYC population:** With no existing statistics on the population of canners in the city, the next closest parameter for choosing within-borough sample size was to match the sample size to that borough's share of the overall NYC population (see table below).

### Share of study sample by borough relative to share of NYC population

Borough	Share of sample	Share of NYC population (from 2022 census)
Bronx	19%	17%
Manhattan	17%	19%
Queens	24%	27%
Brooklyn	37%	31%
Staten Island	3%	6%

The survey was conducted from the period April - August (the busiest time of the year for canning because of the warm weather) at 38 sites of work across all five boroughs. Quantitative surveys were complemented by long-form qualitative interviews with 12 canners representing diverse experiences based on "worker profiles" that had been identified through the survey process.

The survey and interviews were conducted in English and Spanish only, meaning that the survey results are not representative of the sizable Chinese-speaking independent recycler community. Surveys with Chinese-speaking canners were not possible in large part due to the linguistic diversity within this group, where many individuals speak regional dialects. Outside of Chinese-speaking canners, field researchers documented that language barriers prevented participation from a very small group of Haitian and West African canners, and at least one South Asian.

In order to be eligible to participate in the study, respondents needed to be both at least 18 years old and involved in the collection of materials outside of their own household. The latter requirement was meant to exclude individuals who were only redeeming their own personal materials (see definition of canning above).

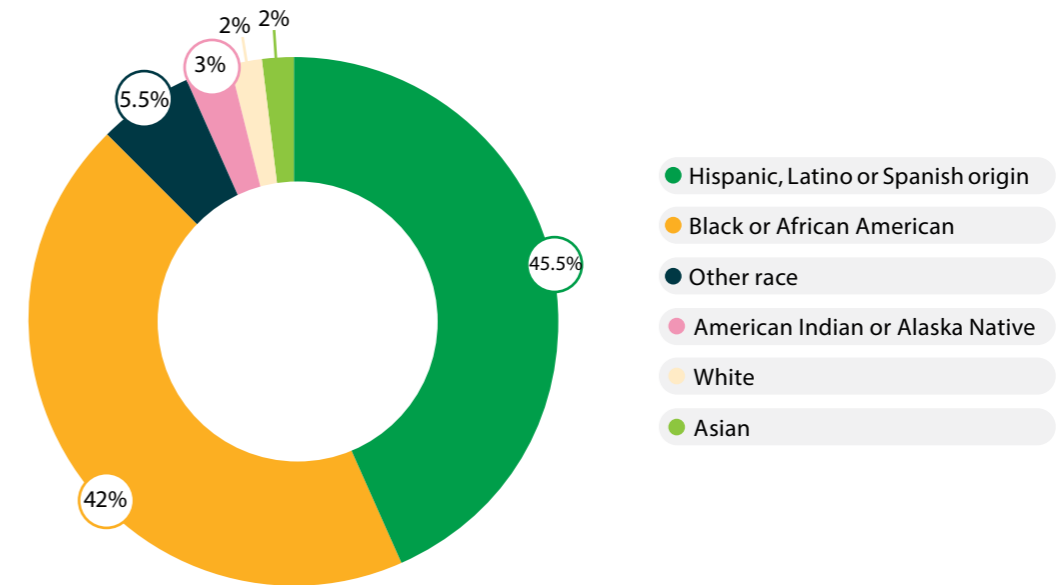


## Demographic profile

### Race and ethnicity

Racial and ethnic minorities are disproportionately reflected in the study sample - this is consistent with global data that waste pickers often come from historically marginalized communities. Most canners identified as either Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin (45.5 percent<sup>7</sup>) or Black or African American (42 percent). In NYC at large, these groups only represent 29 percent and 23 percent of the population, respectively (2022 census).

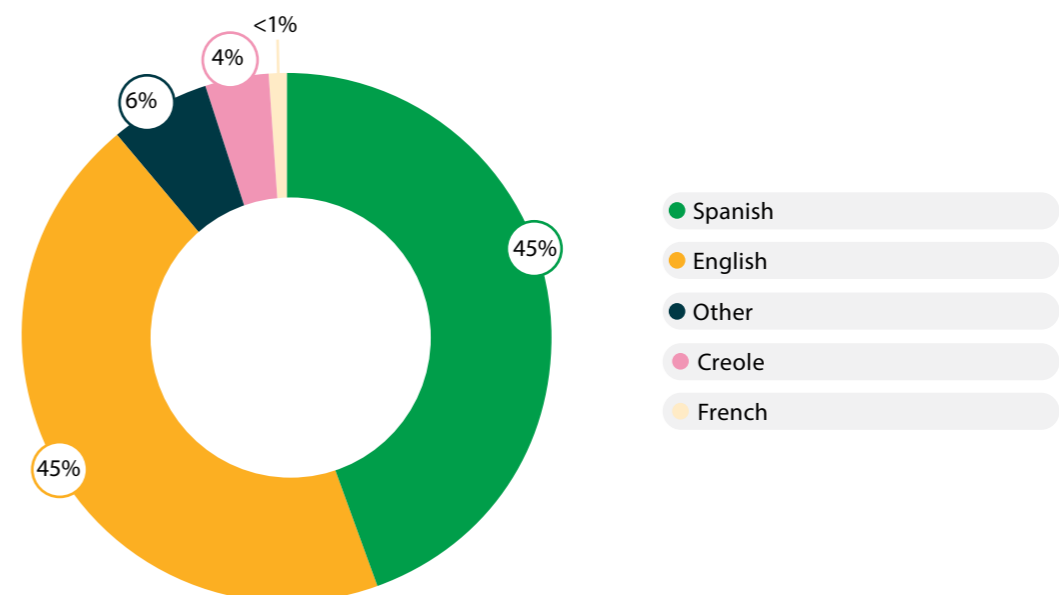
### Race and ethnicity of respondents



### Language

Canners were equally English and Spanish speakers (both accounting for 45 percent of respondents). Six percent of canners were native speakers of other languages, primarily indigenous languages of the Americas (such as Nahuatl, Siksiká, Mixteco and Quechua).

### Native language of respondents

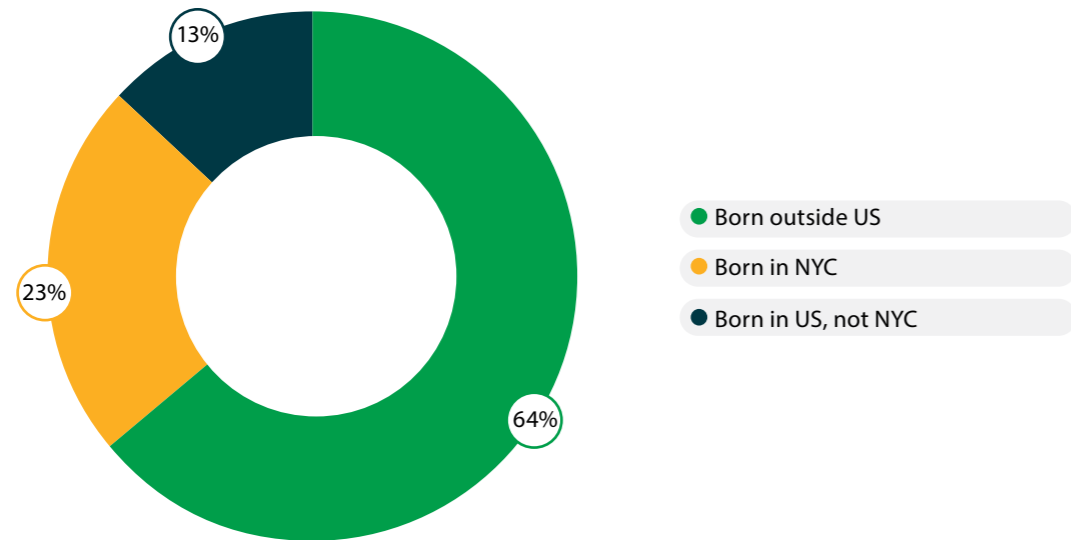


<sup>7</sup> Throughout report decimals were rounded up to the closest half percent.

## Place of origin

Also reflecting global trends among waste pickers, the sample is made up of a majority of migrants - 64 percent of canners surveyed were born in another country, compared to 36 percent of the NYC foreign-born population (2022 census).

### Birthplace of respondents

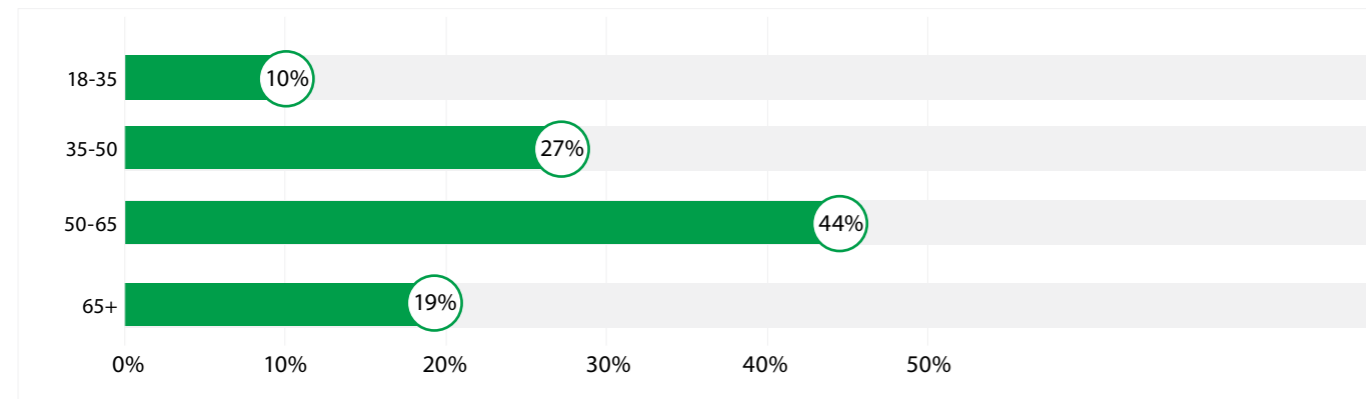


## Gender and age

The results show a gender balance within the sector - 52.5 percent of respondents were men and 47.5 percent were women.

Canners are majority older (50+) adults - almost half of canners were between 50 and 65 years old, and almost a fifth of canners were older than 65. The average age of respondents was 54 years old.

### Distribution of respondents by age group



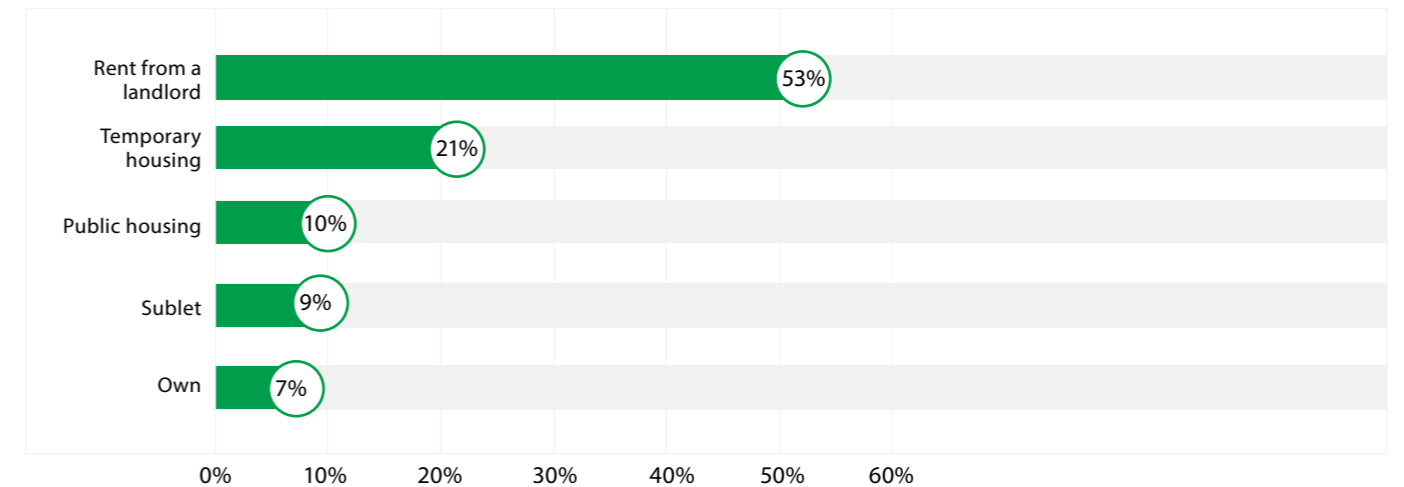
In the context of the demographic profile of NYC, canners are disproportionately people of color, immigrants, and elderly, creating overlapping sources of discrimination and disadvantage, on top of the existing stigma associated with canning. Women canners experience unique vulnerabilities and additional risks as a result of their gender identity, including the threat of violence in public space, and constraints on work due to disproportionate care responsibilities, among others. As the rest of the report will show, structural injustices drive many canners to canning in the first place - for example, older adults facing age discrimination in the labor market, or immigrant mothers without access to child care, requiring an additional, flexible source of income to support their families.

## Socio-economic profile

### Housing

Canners are often characterized as being largely unhoused or reliant on public housing, however the results of this study paint a different picture - the majority of canners were housed (86 percent) and most of these were renters.

### Type of housing arrangement

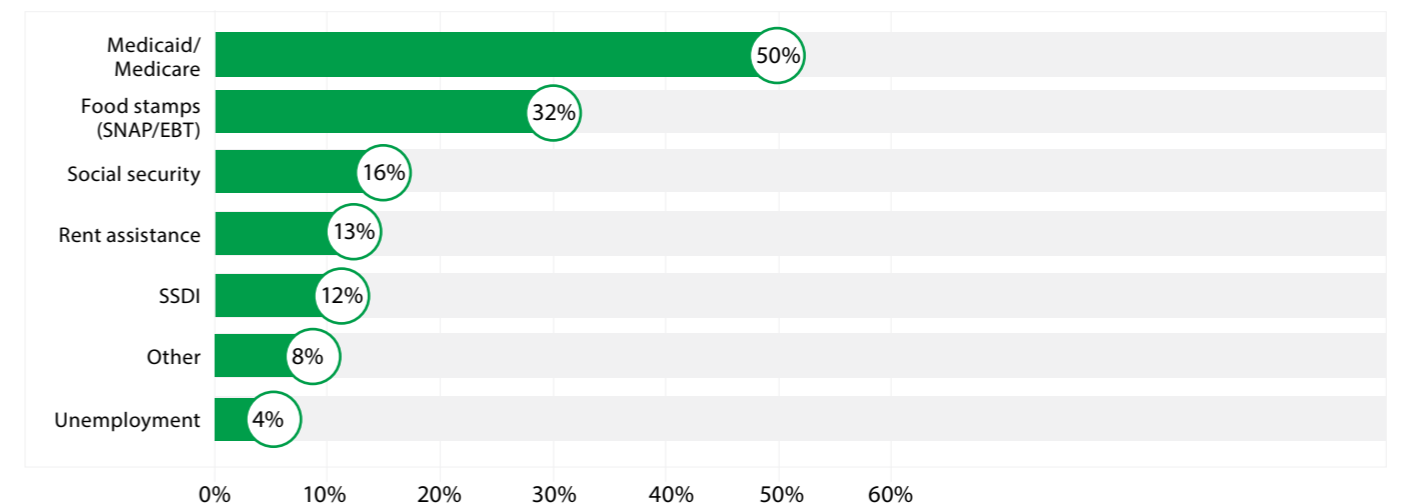


However the results also reflect the precarity of the housing situation for canners - not only for the 53 percent who are renting in the midst of a skyrocketing rent crisis - but for the third of respondents subletting or in temporary housing arrangements (including room rentals, and staying with family and friends). Many canners described living on the edge of displacement - struggling to make rent, or having to move around between different housing arrangements in order to keep a roof over their heads.

### Social protection

As a low-income and disproportionately older community of workers, it would be reasonable to assume that far more canners would be accessing social protections than the NYC average. However, only 32 percent of canners reported using food stamps (compared to 20 percent in NYC overall). Medicare/medicaid was the most commonly used social benefit. It is possible that access to benefits among the canning population is limited for many because of migration status.

### Access to social protections<sup>8</sup>



<sup>8</sup> Respondents could choose more than one option

For many retired or elderly canners who are dependent on social assistance, canning plays an important role in supplementing this.

For example, Lucia<sup>9</sup> was a home health aid for 28 years, and received no pension when she retired. While she lives in public housing and has access to social security and medicaid, she needs an additional source of earnings to buy the extra food she needs. She suffers from multiple chronic health issues including diabetes, hypertension and kidney problems that require a specialized diet. Lucia recycles as a way to generate these earnings, but also as a way to get out of the house, move and occupy her mind. Canning is part of her routine - she receives cans and bottles from her neighbors, and has a dedicated redemption center close to her grocery store where she goes to redeem her materials.

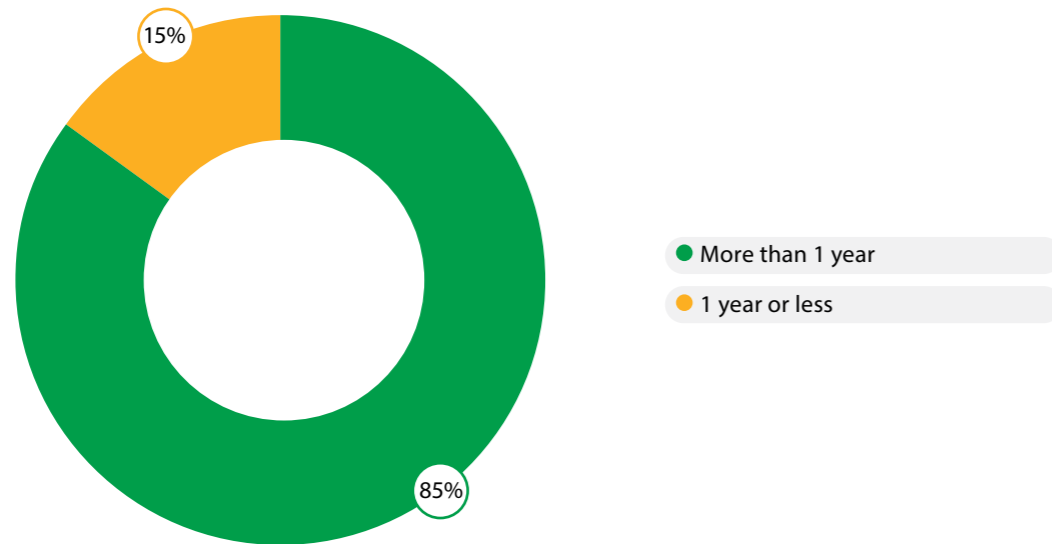
Canning also plays an important buffer role for individuals who may have lost their jobs, but are unable to make ends meet on unemployment or other benefits alone in a city that has one of the highest costs of living (and highest rates of income inequality) in the world. As one canner explained,

*“For instance you had a job and you lost your job. How would you supplement your check? Canning is a way. You know you’ll get your unemployment check, you know that. But now instead of worrying about spending all your unemployment money on bills like gas, got to put gas in the car... you got to pay your rent but you ain’t got none... you add canning to it, you could do all that now.”*

## Work experience

Although canners spoke of increasing competition and rising numbers of new entrants to the sector, the majority of canners surveyed have been doing the work for over a year, and the average number of years worked as a canner was eleven.

## Length of time canning



For some, canning was a lifelong source of earnings - nine percent of all respondents who reported canning for more than one year had been canning for thirty years or more.

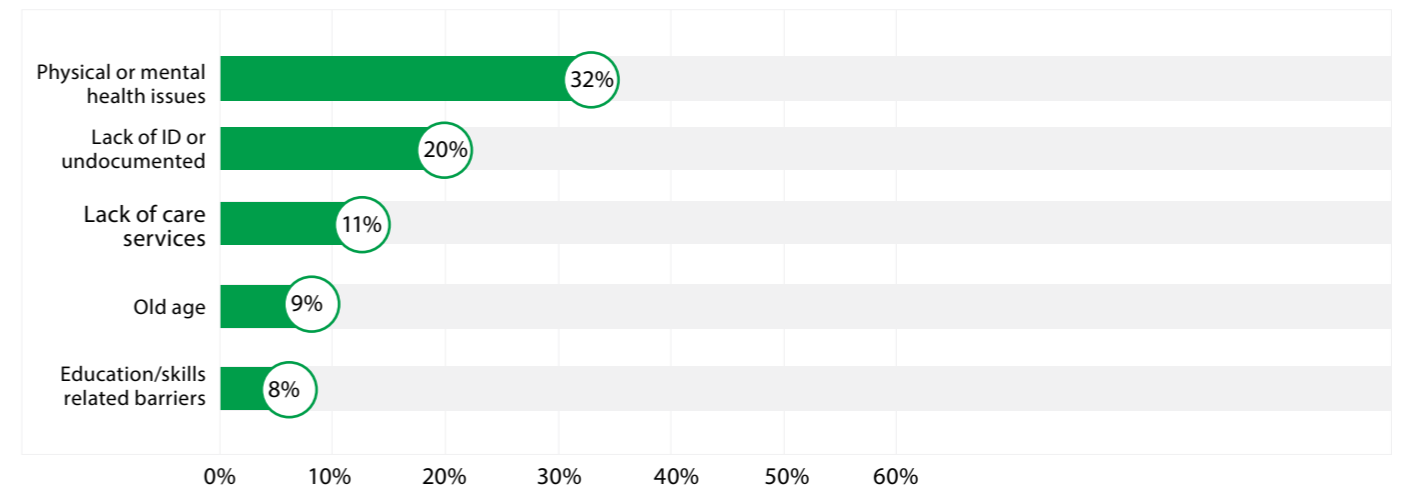
9 All names throughout the report have been changed for anonymity.

This finding indicates that many canners are highly familiar with the practice of recycling and the dynamics of NY State’s redemption system. The picture emerging is not that of an ad-hoc practice for quick cash - as canning is often depicted - but rather an experienced group of workers who have remained consistently active over time, which as additional findings indicate, may relate to the unique benefits derived from canning, barriers to other forms of remunerated work and/or insufficient social supports, among other factors.

In relation to alternative forms of work - slightly more than half (52.5 per cent) of canners reported having another way of working to earn money, and slightly less than half (47.5 per cent) have no other form of work and depend entirely on canning as a source of income (from labor).

Of those who do not have another source of employment, over half (57 percent) reported that they would prefer to be doing work other than canning, suggesting that canning offers a source of earnings for individuals who are otherwise faced with barriers to entry to the formal labor market. Among this group, the most common barrier to securing alternate employment was physical or mental health-related.

## Barriers to securing alternate employment<sup>10</sup>



Qualitative interviews expanded on some of these barriers and the ways in which they sometimes overlap to create formidable obstacles to canners in securing stable employment. For many canners, these obstacles combine with lack of or insufficient access to social protection and support, to create situations of acute economic vulnerability. In this context, earnings from canning become a lifeline.

## Canning as a supplement to existing income

Fatima works a 9-5 full time job but cans on the side for the extra income. She fills up her minivan with materials for redemption, taking care to work in areas where she does not know anyone because of the stigma she feels is associated with this work. The earnings she gets from canning allow her to supplement her budget and support her family at a time where rising costs are creating economic pressure on her and her family.

## Canning as a lifeline for those facing barriers to employment

Daniel is in his early sixties. He worked as a chef in the Bronx for forty years, specializing in Jamaican food. During the pandemic he was laid off and fell back on canning to get by. He is now unhoused and unable to present for jobs because he needs access to a shower and professional clothing. He is hoping to use canning to build enough of a foundation to rent a room and be able to apply for jobs again.

10 Respondents could choose more than one option; top five response categories shown.

Rosa is 38 years old. She came to New York alone to earn money to finance her childrens' education in her native Ecuador and to support her aging parents. She initially worked as a day laborer in construction, but work dried up in the winter. Since then, she's been trying to find work through an agency that she pays to facilitate connections to jobs, but they rarely deliver, and have sent her across the city for an unsuccessful lead more than once. While she searches for more steady income, canning is a lifeline for her that allows her to rent a room, buy food and pay down her debts so she can start sending more money back home.

*"Sometimes I sit down and cry a little but it passes. I am trying to get ahead if God will help me to find a job. But in the meantime this helps me."*

Alfonso worked for many years in a slaughterhouse, until he seriously injured his leg at work in 2014. He has been in and out of surgeries ever since and, with his injury, at 62 years old, he has been unable to re-enter the workforce. His former employer supported him for a while but has since stopped, leaving Alfonso to find other ways of earning to pay for his food and the small room he rents for himself. Canning is Alfonso's only source of income, allowing him to cover his basic needs while also providing him a way to move, even though he is frequently in pain.

*"Me ayuda para caminar, para que no me quede más inválido" (it helps me to walk, so that I'm not an invalid).*

Neighbors save materials for him and, recognizing that he has mobility constraints, the redemption center he goes to processes his cans quickly, trusting he has done the correct counting himself.



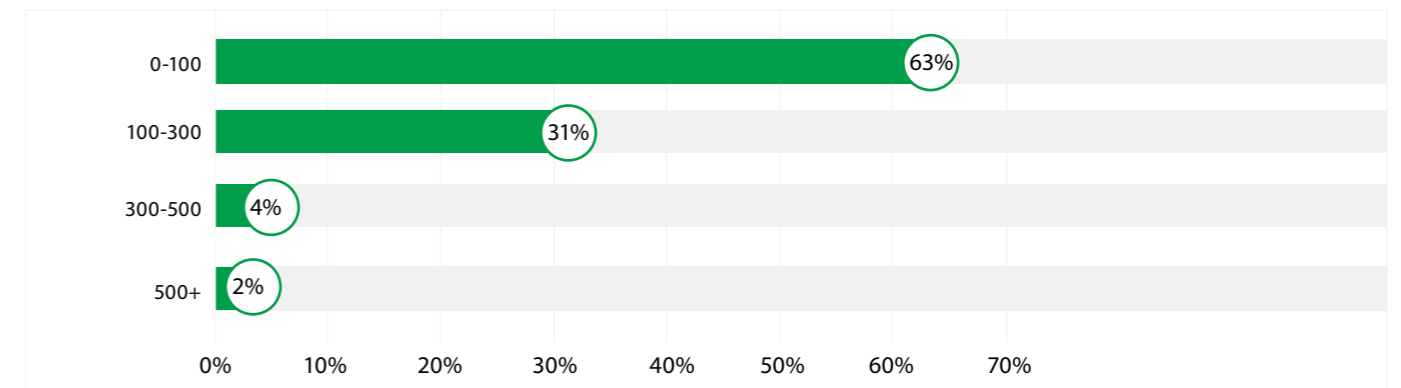
## Working conditions

### Time worked, earnings and spending

Time worked and earnings varied significantly across respondents. For those with full-time jobs, canning is something done in spare time - often at night or on weekends. Others described canning as a round the clock activity around which they organize their daily routines. On average, canners worked just under a 25 hour work week - akin to a part time job - 4.68 days per week and 5 hours per day.

Earnings also varied significantly across respondents - a reflection of the different meaning that canning has for an individuals' economic life (a supplement to income or a principle source of livelihood). On average, canners earned 119 dollars a week (median 75 dollars per week), meaning that they are effectively earning 5 dollars per hour, only one-third of the city's minimum wage.

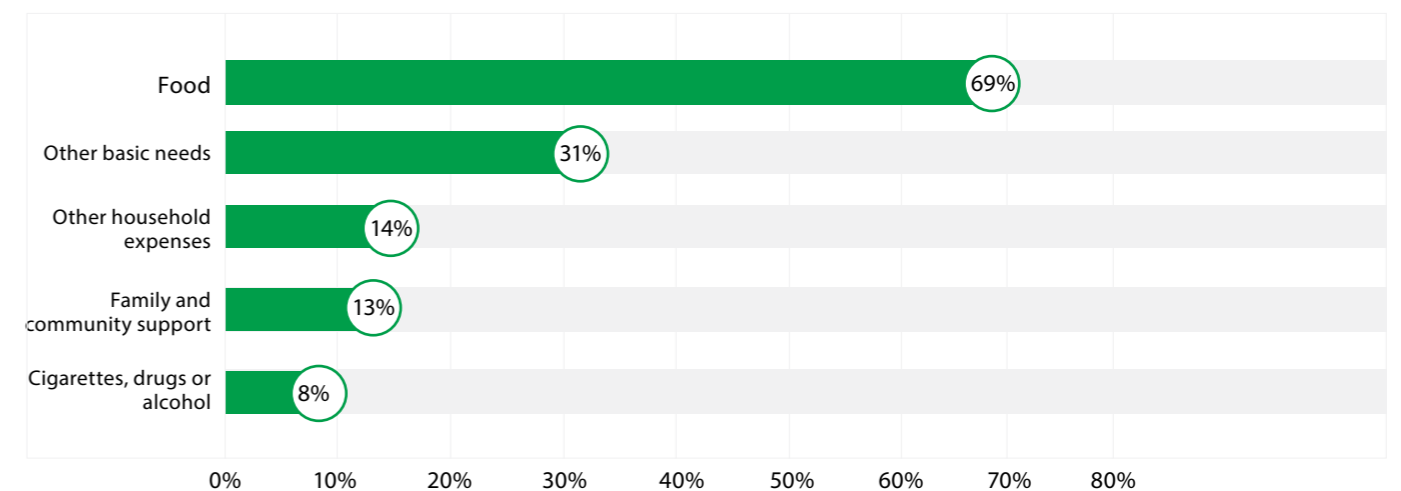
### Average weekly earnings distribution (amounts in USD)



Many canners form part of networks of dependency and community support - 35 percent of respondents reported that their earnings from canning are used (to any degree - either alone or as a supplement to other sources of earnings) to support dependents, and the average number of dependents reliant on canning earnings was 2.4.

For all canners, the most common area of spending (using earnings from canning) was on food - with almost three quarters of canners reporting spending the majority of their earnings from canning on food. The second most common area of spending was on other basic needs, including: housing, transportation, utilities, clothing and medication.

### Primary areas of expenditure with earnings from canning<sup>11</sup>



<sup>11</sup> Respondents could choose more than one option; top five response categories shown.

Additionally, 13 percent of respondents reported that the majority of their earnings from canning are spent on family members or the community (see “family and community support” in graph above). Examples of this kind of spending included remittances, charity in a country of origin, support to a neighbor, donations to the church, an education fund for a child, or even recreational spending on a grandchild.

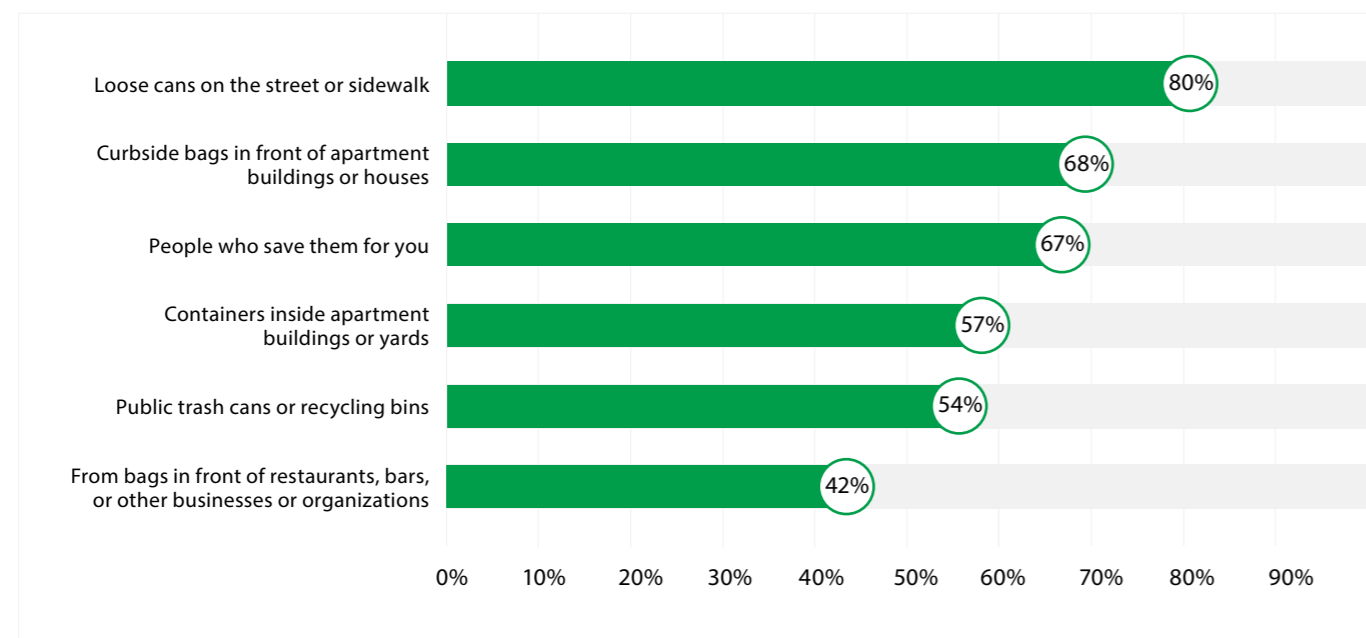
On the misconceptions and stigma surrounding the canning community and their consumption habits, one canner explained,

**“Not everybody that does this lives on the street. There ain’t no drugs. I ain’t homeless. They’re paying bills, they’re taking care of their family and stuff. People are paying a mortgage... If you’ve got kids, you can do the canning thing and put that money aside for them in a trust fund. And then when they get out and when they get grown, they can use that money to go to college and stuff like that. I know people who do that.”**

## Collection and redemption

Canners collect their materials from all types of sources, without any one single source heavily predominating. However, the most common source for collection is loose cans on the streets and sidewalks - illustrating the important role that canners play in keeping city streets clean, and diverting recyclable materials that would have otherwise been disposed of in landfills.

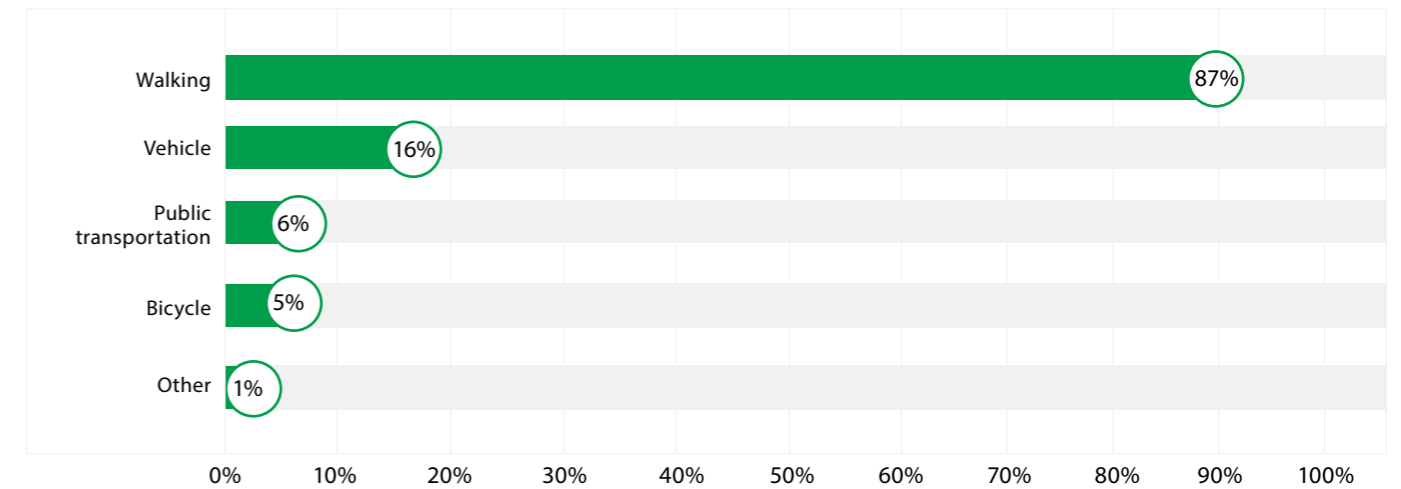
### Source locations for materials<sup>12</sup>



The act of collection itself has a low environmental footprint - almost ninety percent of canners reported walking to collect or redeem materials.

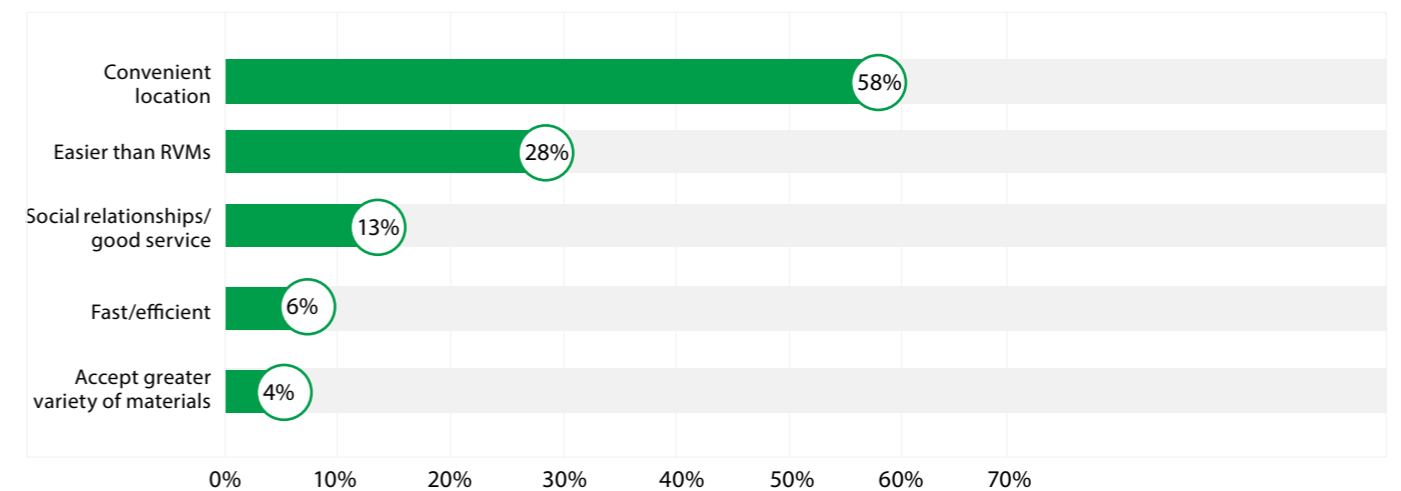
<sup>12</sup> Respondents could choose more than one option, all options shown.

### Primary mode of transportation while canning<sup>13</sup>



When asked what was the most important factor in choosing a site to redeem, most canners cited convenient location. Ease of redemption is also important to canners, and many spoke of the difficulties they face at underserved reverse vending machines where they face long lines, full or malfunctioning machines, and where they are limited in the types of materials they redeem. Redemption centers were typically preferred over reverse vending machine sites because of the ability to redeem larger volumes of containers more quickly.

### Motivations for choosing a site for redemption<sup>14</sup>



Over a third of canners reported only frequenting one site for redemption over the past year, and not using any other locations. Many of these canners expressed the importance of having a dedicated site close to home where they know what to expect, and may be familiar with the staff or other workers there.

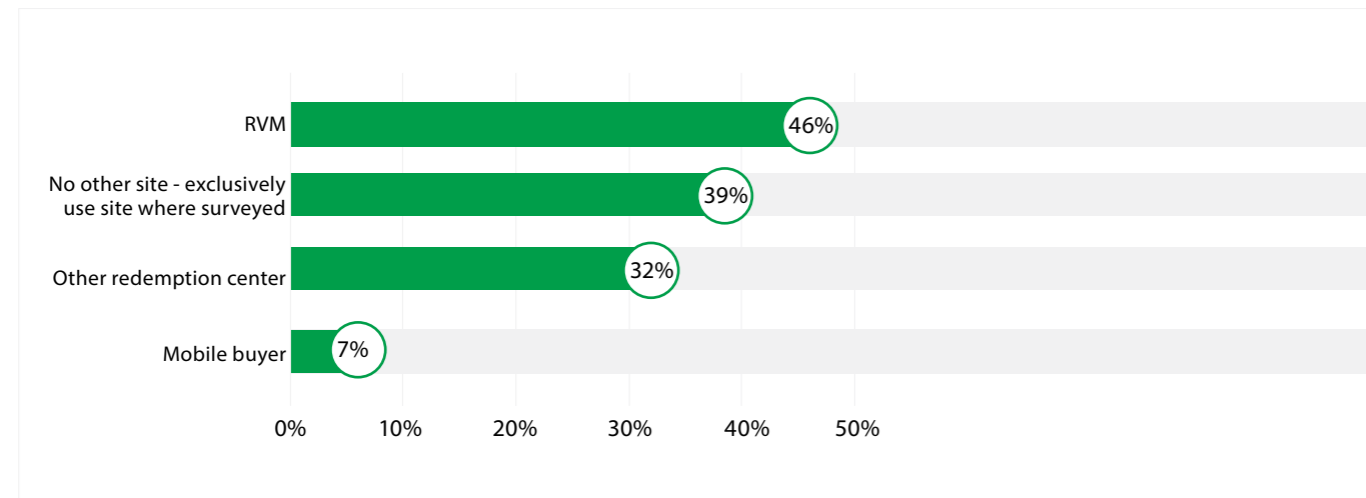
<sup>13</sup> Respondents could choose more than one option, all response categories shown.

<sup>14</sup> Respondents could choose more than one option; top five response categories shown.



Still, despite issues with servicing, reverse vending machines (RVMs) do play an important role in allowing canners to access redemption where and when they need it, including during times when redemption centers might be closed (many are closed Sundays, for example). This is particularly important for unhoused canners who may follow longer routes and can for long periods, and need to be able to unload materials as they go. Nearly half of respondents relied on RVM sites as a complement to their primary redemption site.

### Use of other types of sites for redemption (in the past twelve months)<sup>15</sup>



### Health and safety risks at work

Canners work outside, exposed to the elements, including increasingly extreme temperatures. Their work requires collecting and sorting through items that have been disposed of and may be mixed with other materials, including hazardous materials. As the recycling pick-up schedule has shifted to later in the evening in many parts of the city in response to the rat problem, some canners are faced with working late at night. Very few redemption centers offer any relief for canners in the form of access to running water, bathrooms or shelter. As a result, canners face a multitude of occupational health and safety risks which they have to navigate without sources of support from government or an employer, echoing the experiences of other workers for whom public space is a workplace, including street vendors and delivery workers. A longitudinal study conducted by Sure We Can and WIEGO over the pandemic showed that mental and physical health concerns were the principal area of impact on canners from the COVID-19 crisis - of greater concern even than loss of earnings. These impacts included COVID-19 infection, fear of infection and mental health issues, such as anxiety and isolation (Hartmann, Harvey and Hegel, 2021).

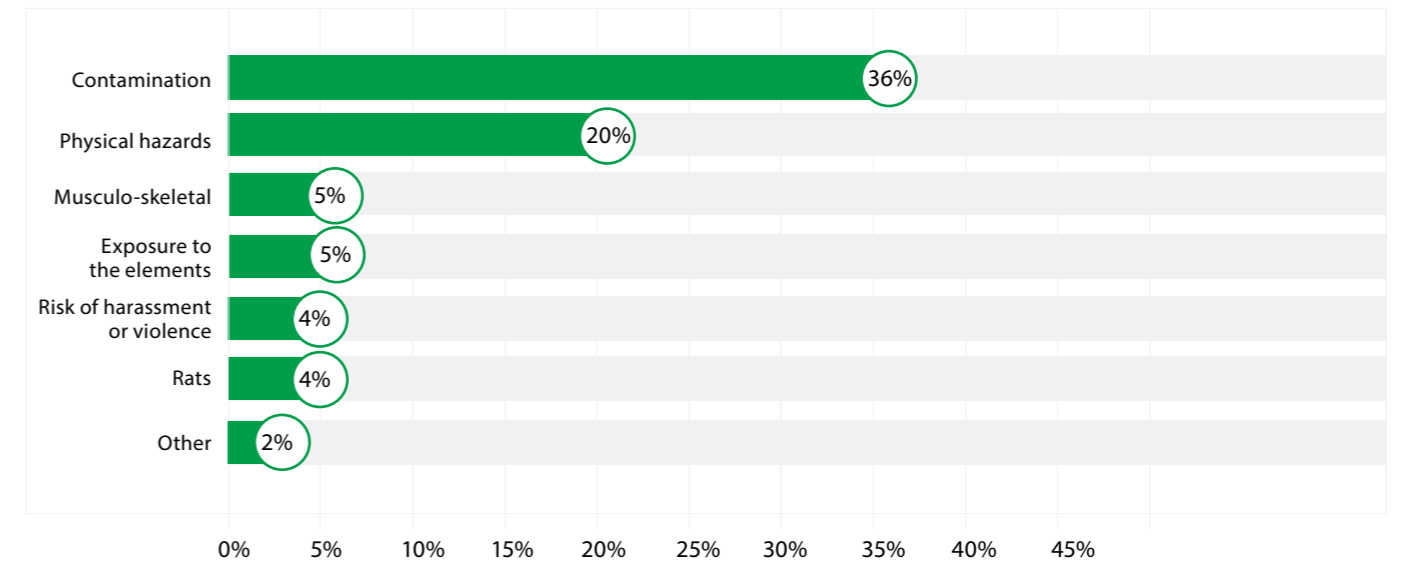
The current study confirmed that health risks remain a concern for canners - more than half (55 percent) of canners reported facing health risks canning. Of those reporting health risks, the most common risk was exposure to contamination, including germs and communicable diseases picked up through collection, and exacerbated by a lack of sanitary conditions and access to running water at worksites. Canners also described physical hazards at work, including the risk of cuts or lesions from broken objects or needles mixed with recyclable materials. Musculo-skeletal risks included strains or injuries from repetitive movements, bending, constant standing and walking, or carrying heavy bags of materials.

To cope with these risks, many canners source their own protective equipment, including gloves, masks and sanitizer<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> Respondents could choose more than one option

<sup>16</sup> For information on health impacts and coping strategies of canners in NYC during the COVID-19 crisis see the results of Sure We Can's longitudinal study carried out with WIEGO, available here: [https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/resources/file/NYCCanners\\_Report.pdf](https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/resources/file/NYCCanners_Report.pdf)

### Exposure to health risks while canning<sup>17</sup>



Exploitation and theft are also risks canners face. Ten percent of canners reported having been paid less than 5 cents at one point for their materials at least once in the preceding year, and forty-one percent of canners reported having had their goods confiscated or stolen in the 12 months prior.

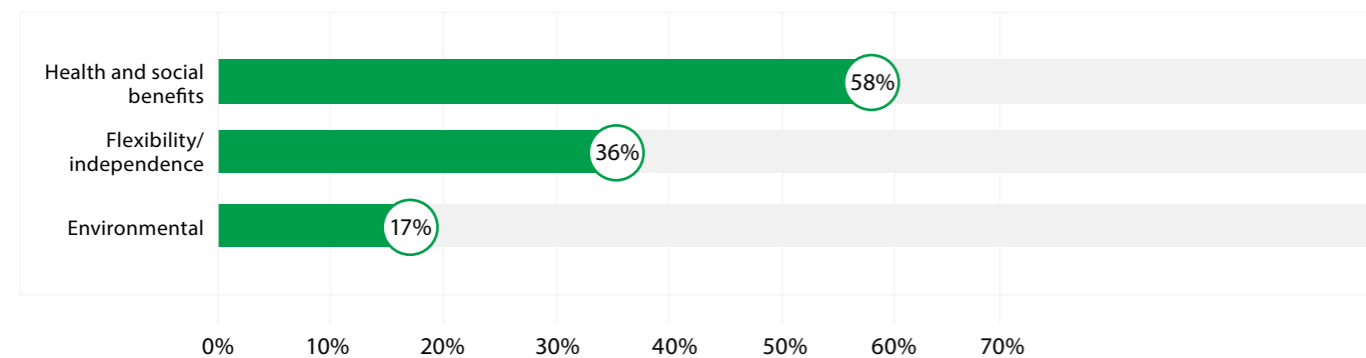


<sup>17</sup> Respondents could choose more than one option, all response categories shown.

## Health, well-being and other benefits to canning

As this report has shown, canners are disproportionately older adults (average age 54), and roughly one third (34 percent) suffer from chronic illnesses. For some, mental and physical health issues prevent them from accessing other forms of employment. At the same time, for many canners, especially those with chronic health issues, canning provides a health benefit. For others, canning benefits their overall well-being, giving them a sense of purpose or an alternative to potentially harmful behaviors.

### Benefits derived from canning<sup>18</sup>



The 58 percent of canners who reported health and social benefits of canning described a range of different examples of ways canning satisfies physical and mental health-related needs. For example, many older canners with chronic health issues, including those with mobility constraints, described canning as a way to keep active, as providing a framework for accessible, self-paced exercise and movement necessary for a range of different conditions - diabetes, heart disease and others. As one canner explained,

***“Canning gives you a chance to pace yourself. Like say if you’re the type of person that you can only exert yourself like maybe four or five hours a day. Canning is not an exertion ... you don’t exert yourself [too much] when you do it.”***

People also described a multitude of different ways that canning provided mental health benefits, including: an outlet for socializing, a form of distraction for individuals suffering from stress and anxiety, an important source of dignity and independence for older canners who are economically dependent on family members, and a source of calm and routine for canners living with mental illness.

The second most common reason canners reported benefitting from the work was the ability to have independence and make their own schedule (36% of respondents). This benefit in some cases also has a connection to mental health - for some canners with mental health issues who are unable to meet the strict requirements of formal wage work, canning offers a flexible alternative, for example. Relatedly, some formerly incarcerated canners described the important role that canning played in keeping them out of the system, by offering an accessible (no record checks) and flexible way to earn income legally, and to stay busy.

A further 17 percent of canners saw their work as providing an environmental benefit, which for many gave them a sense of pride. In describing what he liked about canning, one individual referenced the role of canning in reducing litter and contributing to the circular economy:

***“Canning to me became something that was useful. First of all it helps keep the environment clean. You don’t see a lot of cans on the ground or on the curb. You know what I’m saying? That’s not your line of sight. Two, it makes for a better economy because instead of producing an item when you’re just going to discard it, you take your can up, [and] put it in the bag...”***

<sup>18</sup> Respondents could choose more than one option; top three reasons shown (another 39 percent chose “other reasons”).

### Health and well-being benefits for retired or elderly canners

Pedro is 79 years old and living with his daughter while he goes through his citizenship process. He has no access to social benefits or employment, and spent a year in his daughters’ house battling depression until he discovered canning. Canning helps him comply with his doctors’ orders for exercise to address his chronic kidney condition, and to get out of the house and have a sense of purpose and independence. He recommends canning to older folks as a way to keep minds and bodies healthy in advanced age.

Kim immigrated from Korea as a young adult and worked in restaurants for many years. She has no family networks in New York and, during the pandemic, she started to suffer from debilitating depression, to the point that she was having suicidal thoughts. It was during this time that her superintendent suggested she start canning, and gave her some materials to get started. Over time, canning transformed her - she was reminded of the goodness of people by those who would save materials for her, she was able to enjoy the city in a new way, spending so much time outside, and she was moving her body in a way that allowed her to regain strength.

***“Now I have to move, something to do, versus staying in bed and just waiting to die. Then little bit move and then little bit collect...When depressed period, I hated people. ‘Oh, I don’t want to talk to people.’ But now [I’m] feeling like myself. Then I feel like appreciating the people. I started and then went out almost every day. Then my muscles got strong, my legs strong... Then also, I can enjoy the summer. Nature, four seasons. I love New York City again. Yeah, so recycling is good for aging people. Some sit every minute. I’m like, ‘Move!’ So I recommend this. I recommended it to people, these aging people, all the people, senior people. If you feel some depression, no energy... just go outside and start collecting and move.”***

### Health and well-being benefits for working-age canners

Raúl is a day laborer from Ecuador who works in construction during the week when he can find work. He does not have family networks in the city. During the weekend, he cans as a way to supplement his earnings and to de-stress. When he’s not working and he’s sitting at home he gets anxious, so he cans to get out of the house and out of his head. He explains that his canning fund is specifically dedicated to remittances to his little girl back home.

***“Mi mente se despiega. Me siento tranquilo, me desahogo.” (My mind clears, I feel calm, I let off steam).”***

When Ben got out of prison, he turned to canning as a way to earn income and keep busy, in a way that would work for him. He has been canning for many years now and credits canning with keeping him and others out of jail.

***“So when I got out of the program and my money started running low, I started doing the redemption thing, the canning thing. It helped me keep money in my pocket. To this day, I’ve been on the streets for 15 years. I ain’t in jail. I haven’t been arrested, none of that. It makes you feel good because here’s something that when I was young, there was no five cent deposit on the can. Remember that?”***

***But that’s what I do now. Because I cut off my extra side [hustle]. I was like, ‘How am I going to survive without selling drugs and robbing people? Pick up the cans.’ At first I wasn’t thinking about that. I said, ‘You know what? You’re right, I could do that. I could pick up cans.’ I don’t bother people.***

***Because some people, you have a lot of guys that if you didn’t have your redemption centers and you had that canning process, a lot of guys would be in jail. Even myself. A lot of guys would be in jail.”***

## A pathway to environmental justice: Robust, inclusive bottle bills.

For many public officials, canners, environmental advocates and allies, creating and sustaining deposit-return systems like New York's Bottle Bill is common sense. The Bottle Bill has been described as a rare example of win-win policy for multiple stakeholders, and is not a risky bet - in New York, as in other places where similar policies exist, these have already proven to be highly effective. For example, in New York, the Bottle Bill has created the conditions for small redemption businesses to open across the state, creating jobs. It has brought recycling rates up and reduced litter year after year. And as this study shows, the Bottle Bill has created an incredibly important source of earnings for individuals who have few or no employment alternatives, and limited social supports. Earnings from canning are not just "nice to have" for the majority of respondents in this study - they are essential: to cover basic needs, to stay out of the criminal justice system, to support dependents, to make rent after losing a job, to build up enough of a foundation to even have the conditions to apply to a formal job, and for myriad other reasons. Also, as this study has shown, canning has far-ranging benefits beyond income - in promoting health and well-being, especially for individuals who are elderly, living with chronic mental or physical illness, or formerly incarcerated.

It is a reflection of the precarious and unequal state of the economy that anyone should have to depend on such poorly remunerated work, and under no circumstances does canning substitute for more systemic reforms to ameliorate widening inequality and poverty. Addressing the housing crisis, creating living wage jobs, and increasing access to robust social protection and social services is the only real way to transform the circumstances of the canners whose stories have been included in this study, who are bearing the weight of systemic injustices while providing essential landfill diversion and litter abatement services.



However, increasing canners' earnings through a higher deposit *would make an immediate material difference*, which, in complement with other reforms, could have a sustained positive impact on reducing economic precarity for some of New York's most vulnerable and marginalized residents. Specifically, passing the Better Bottle Bill<sup>19</sup> (A6353/S237) in New York state's 2024 legislative session would bring benefits to diverse groups of stakeholders, not only canners; for example:

- **State government** would benefit from the millions of tons of waste diverted from landfills at no cost, and increased revenue from unredeemed deposits.
- **Local governments** would benefit from reduced strain on municipal recycling systems, and would see local economic development benefits through the boost to struggling redemption centers that the increased handling fee would provide.
- **Canners** - disproportionately elderly, immigrants and people of color - would benefit from increased income at a time of skyrocketing costs, increased competition, strained/insufficient social safety nets and increasing precarity.
- **Present and future generations** would benefit from the significant decrease in litter clogging streets and waterways, and the increase in recycling that is so critical in working towards a more circular economy.

Neglecting, eliminating, or not implementing Bottle Bills *does* present risks. As stated previously, if the handling fee that allows independent redemption centers to exist and operate in New York is not regularly updated, it is easily outpaced by the cost of doing business, and quickly becomes insufficient for most redemption centers to stay open. In 2023, collapsing redemption centers across the state undermine the efficacy of the policy. Rather than maximizing the clear, existing benefits of the Bottle Bill, inaction to update the Bill in NY state would lead to a reduction in all the positive impacts listed above, as litter would increase, recycling rates would go down, and circular economy workers - both canners and those at redemption centers - would suffer. This would, in turn, increase the strain on social support systems that are already pushed to the brink, especially in NYC.

A key aspect of a robust Bottle Bill is the inclusion of as many types of containers as possible (including wine bottles, milk products and others)<sup>20</sup>, which could pose a logistical challenge at many redemption sites in NYC. In New York, the state agency with oversight responsibility over the Bottle Bill, the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), has struggled to meet its obligations in relation to the redemption system due to chronic underfunding and an unclear regulatory framework.



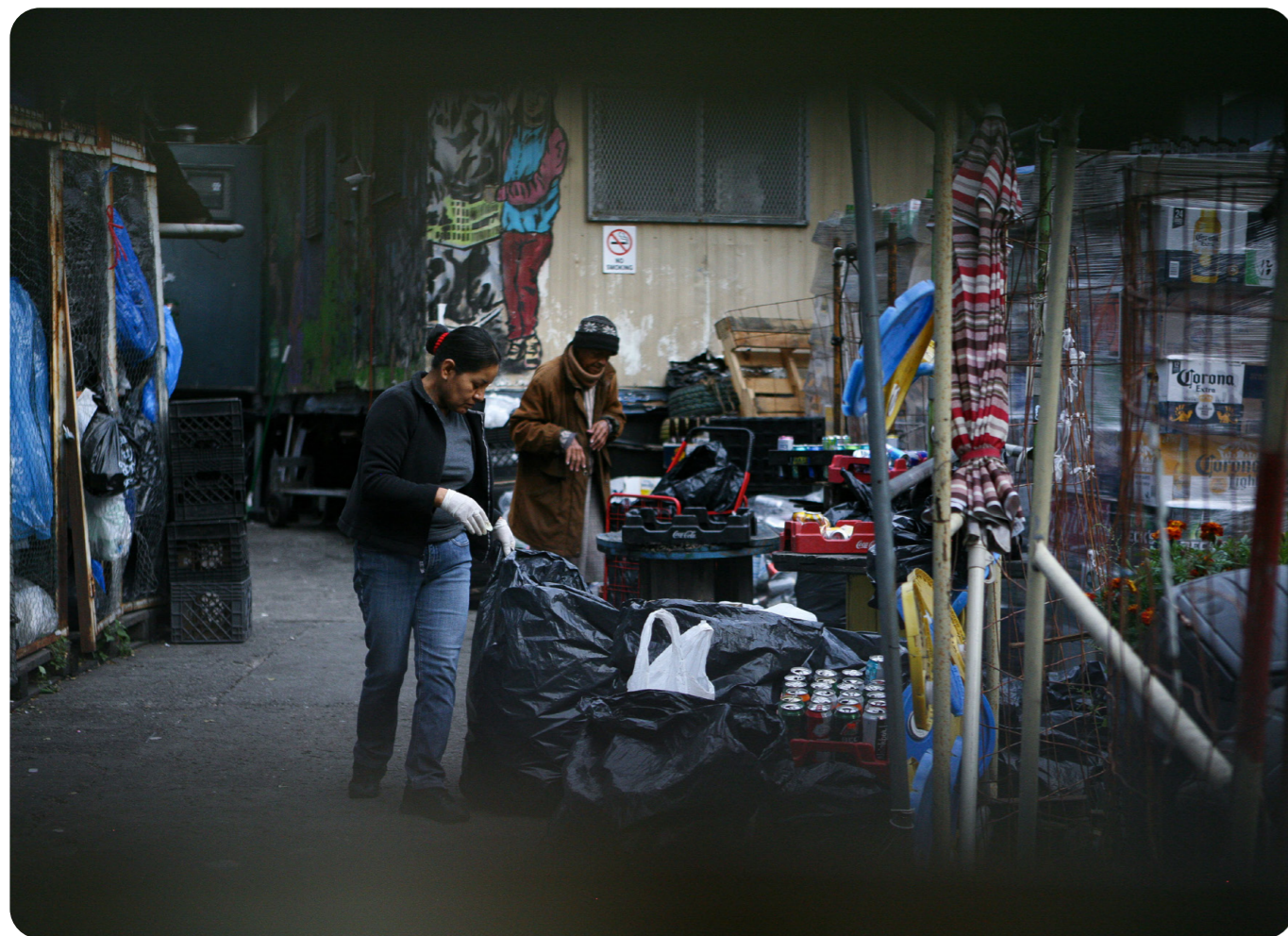
<sup>19</sup> For more on the proposed legislation see: <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2021/A8668>

<sup>20</sup> For a full list of containers currently covered and not covered under the Bottle Bill see: <https://dec.ny.gov/environmental-protection/recycling-composting/bottle-bill>

However, if given access to the hundreds of millions of dollars of revenue to the state from unredeemed deposits, the DEC would be well-equipped to invest in measures to promote access to redemption sites and alleviate these burdens.

Initiatives that support the sector at large and canners in particular can be undertaken beyond the deposit system itself. For example, access to materials discarded by others but still retaining value, including recyclables like bottles and cans, is typically highly policed in the United States, and especially in New York City, where searching for reparable, recyclable, or reusable material in bags of refuse left by others for disposal is considered a crime. This is true regardless of the conscientiousness of the recycler in selecting the material they collect or their diligence in being hygienic or non-disruptive in their work habits. This punitive approach to recycling only serves to chill efforts to promote waste diversion and achieve environmental justice. To counteract this, states and municipalities should consider frameworks promoting a public right to access waste. Additional frameworks can be created that further promote the well-being, recognition, and destigmatization of canners as essential workers, such as a “Recycler’s Bill of Rights.”

While passing a Bigger, Better Bottle Bill provides a clear pathway to improving conditions for independent recyclers and redemption centers alike, there are also steps that can be taken now, without legislative action. This study reveals the importance of redemption centers to canners, not only economically, but also as a place for community engagement. The closure of redemption centers threatens not only the workers employed at these small businesses, but also the canners and communities they serve. New York’s existing Bottle Bill states that the DEC has the power to provide centers with access to grant funding - which could be used as a critical stopgap measure to support centers on the brink of closure.

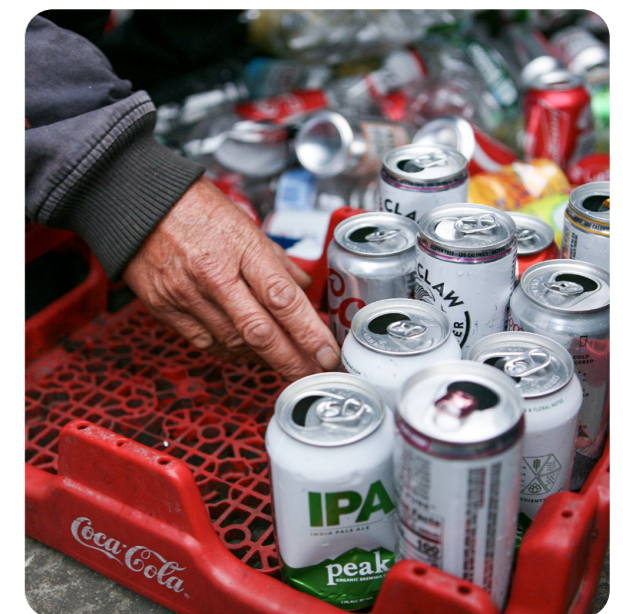


In addition to actions by the state, residents and businesses can also take immediate action to support canners. The most impactful thing that the public can do to support canners is to separate out deposit-marked cans and bottles for canners to easily collect. Many canners who participated in the study mentioned the critical importance of having networks of friends and neighbors who save materials for them, which provides both higher earnings relative to work time and important social connection. Because the types of containers eligible for redemption are quite limited, canners are often faced with sorting through large bags of trash or mixed recyclables, which takes time and can present health and safety risks. Residents can make materials safely and easily available by separating out redeemable containers for neighborhood canners. This can be done at any time - on recycling pick-up days or other days. Alternatively, neighbors and apartment building managers can get to know their local canners and set aside materials for them at designated times.

Similarly, businesses can support canners by connecting with individual canners to coordinate materials pick up. In 2024, when the Department of Sanitation’s new containerization rules come into effect, businesses can keep their containers unlocked (which is allowed under the rules) so as not to cut off access to canners.

Finally, the most important and enduring action that can be taken to support independent recyclers is to recognize the important role they play in the solid waste management system and the circular economy. First and foremost this requires a change of mindset and an absolute rejection of discriminatory language, depictions, and treatment of canners, who have been stigmatized by public officials and residents alike for many years. For the first time in New York’s history, canners have formed their own organization - the Alliance of Independent Recyclers - which should be recognized by the city government and included in decision-making around policies that impact canners’ livelihoods.

Deposit systems work because they incentivize everyone to participate in waste management. Whereas municipal recycling systems rely on volunteer labor in households, deposit systems place a value on the work entailed in segregating materials for recycling. Moreover, they create an opportunity for everyone to hold producers accountable for their waste. Assigning value to circular economy labor that is otherwise invisible should be at the core of any holistic and progressive vision of solid waste policy. If our aim is truly a sustainable urban culture, we must be sensitive to the needs and experiences of communities who bear the burdens of overconsumption and profligate waste. This means designing and investing in systems that tap their wisdom and recognize the value of those who view curbside waste not as trash, but a resource to be recycled or reused.



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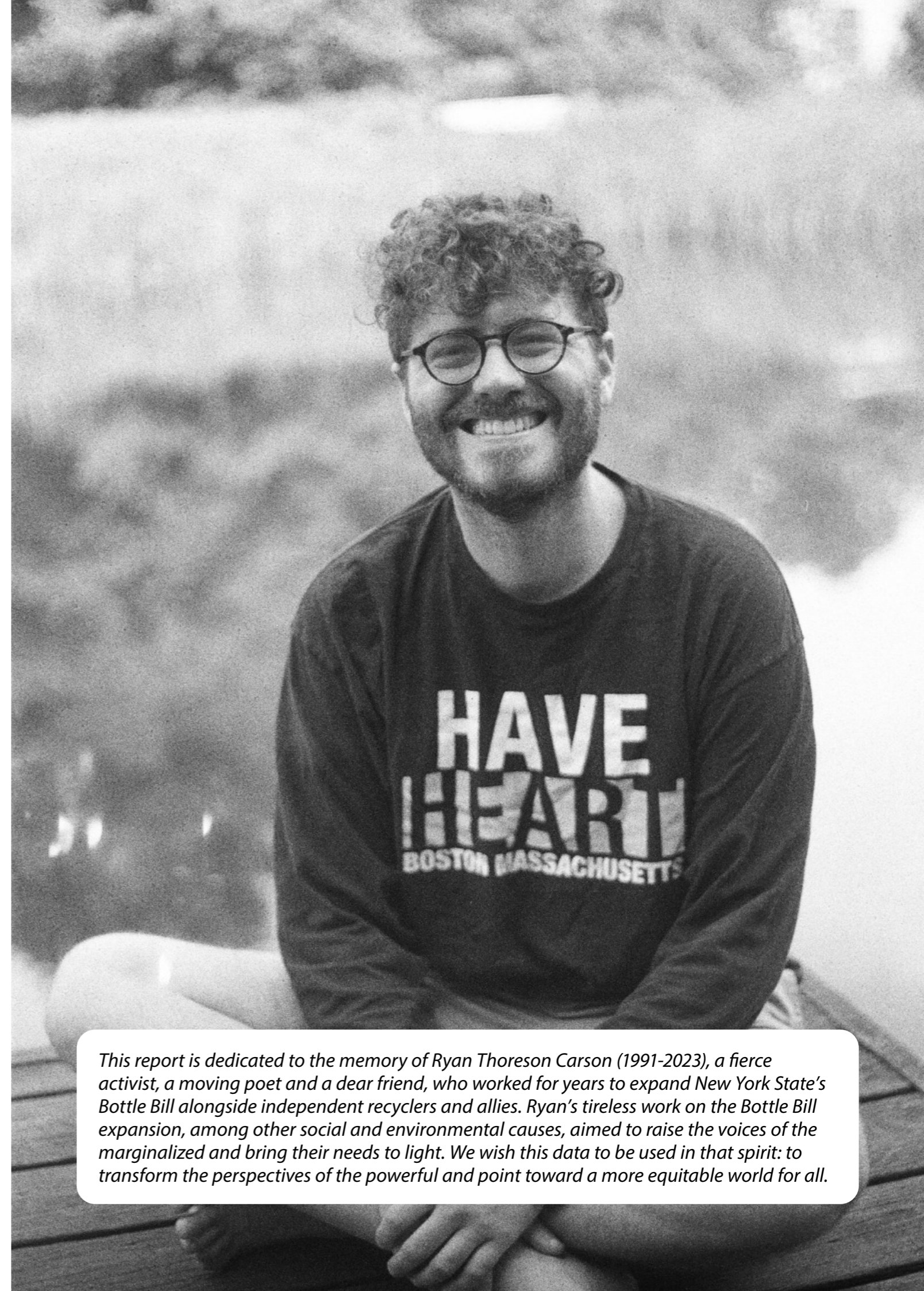
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*This report is dedicated to the memory of Ryan Thoreson Carson (1991-2023), a fierce activist, a moving poet and a dear friend, who worked for years to expand New York State's Bottle Bill alongside independent recyclers and allies. Ryan's tireless work on the Bottle Bill expansion, among other social and environmental causes, aimed to raise the voices of the marginalized and bring their needs to light. We wish this data to be used in that spirit: to transform the perspectives of the powerful and point toward a more equitable world for all.*





**SURE WE CAN**  
WHERE EVERYONE COUNTS

