

# Addressing Composting Compliance in Student Off-Campus Residences

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## Introduction

Composting organic waste is not only sustainable, but regenerative for farmers and the earth. The City of Berkeley certainly thinks so, and in July 2014 the city passed a law requiring “**all residential properties of 5 or more units...to provide recycling and organics collection for their tenants’ food scraps, food soiled papers and any plant debris generated at the property.**” UC Berkeley has embraced composting as one of the pillars of its Zero Waste by 2020 goal, and proper waste disposal is easy on campus and in campus housing. However, more than 70% of students live in off-campus housing, and those residences may not provide mandatory recycling and organic waste collection services.

After Freshman year, I moved into an off-campus (i.e. not owned by UC Berkeley) apartment and noticed that the apartment building did not provide a green bin for organic waste. When I contacted my building manager about the lack of composting services, he told me he used to provide a compost bin for the building, but then removed it because it was smelly and residents knocked it over on multiple occasions, creating an unpleasant mess. He was not aware that by law, buildings such as his were required to provide composting services.

I began to wonder if the problem was bigger than just my apartment building, and I started paying attention to the availability of green bins when I went to friends’ apartments. From the informal data I collected, I suspected that several buildings were out of compliance with this important city law. And so I began my investigation into not only understanding the availability of composting services to students living in off-campus residences, but also trying to find viable solutions.

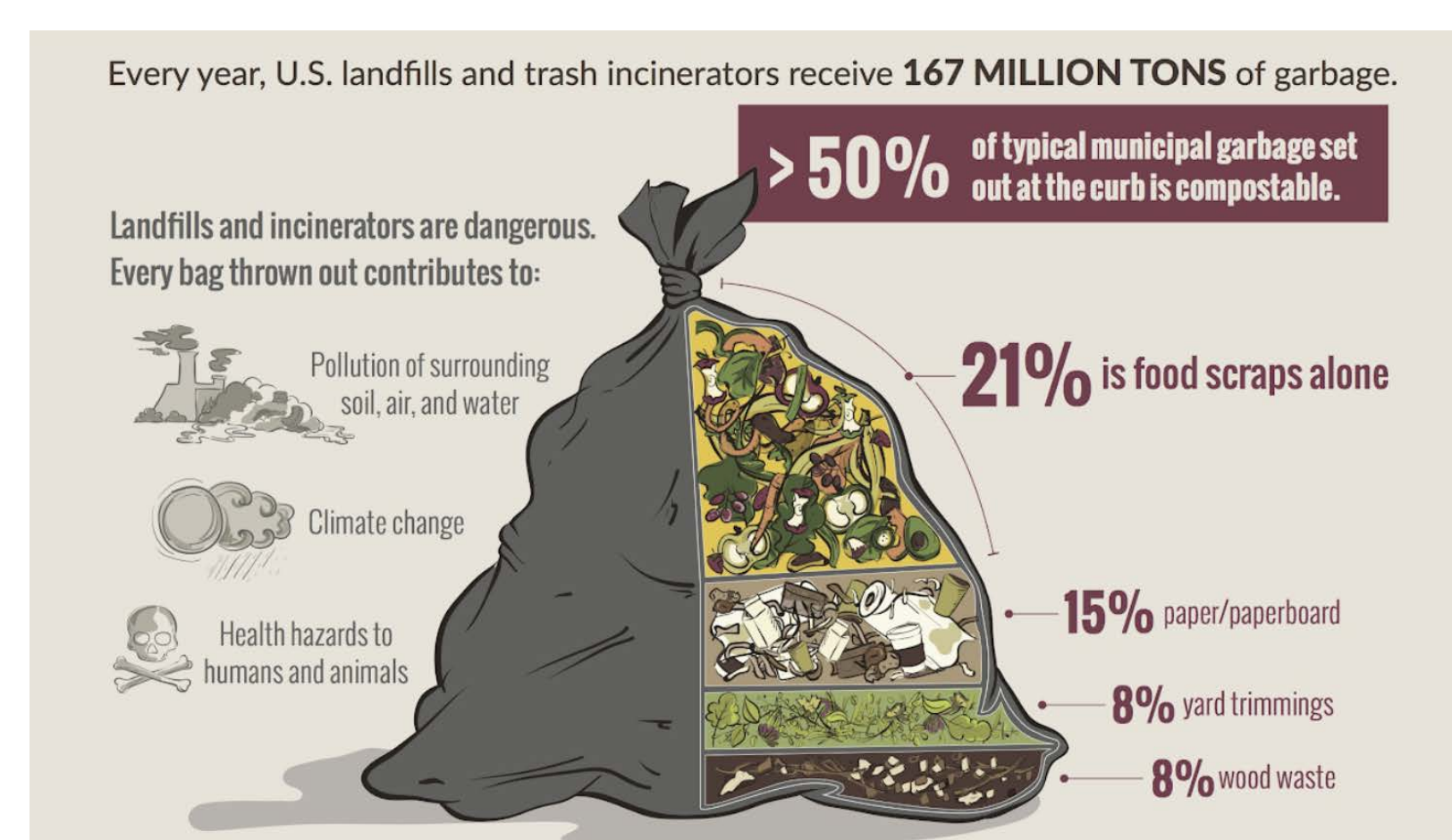


Figure 1. Over half of average municipal garbage is compostable.

## Project Goals

The goals of this project were two-fold.

1. Figure out whether access to composting services for students who live off-campus is actually a problem
  - a. what percentage of students do not have access
  - b. if students care about whether they have access or not
2. Understand the reasons why property managers fail to provide organic waste collection services for tenants despite the July 2014 Berkeley city law

My hypotheses were that 1) many students do lack access to composting services in their residences and want to gain access and 2) building managers are unaware that providing composting services is written in the law, since compliance checks by the city government are only done if a tenant complains.

## Materials and Methods

To begin, I created a survey that addressed two key data points:

1. Student access to composting services in off-campus residences
2. Student interest in utilizing composting services (i.e. If their building has a green bin already, do they utilize it? If their building does not, would they utilize it if it became available?)

My original plan was to contact the building managers of the students who did not have access to composting services in their residences (with student permission), but not many students were comfortable sharing the contact information of their landlords, and response rate was very low among the building managers I did contact. Consequently, I decided to pivot and work with the City of Berkeley and mobilize students to create change themselves.

First, I reached out to a Councilman and worked with him, his assistant, and the leaders of UC Berkeley’s Zero Waste Coalition to come up with an event aimed at raising awareness about the composting law and mobilizing students to ask for green bins at their residences. We named the event “Tattle Drive,” as the primary objective was to have students “tattle” on their landlords for not providing the mandatory composting services. I worked in conjunction with the Zero Waste Coalition’s Zero Waste Week so in addition to learning about my project, students also learned about what is compostable and why composting is important to people and the planet.

## Results and Outcomes

Of the 70 survey respondents, around 30% responded that their off-campus housing did not provide organic waste collection services, and of those 30%, 93% said they would utilize composting services if they became available.

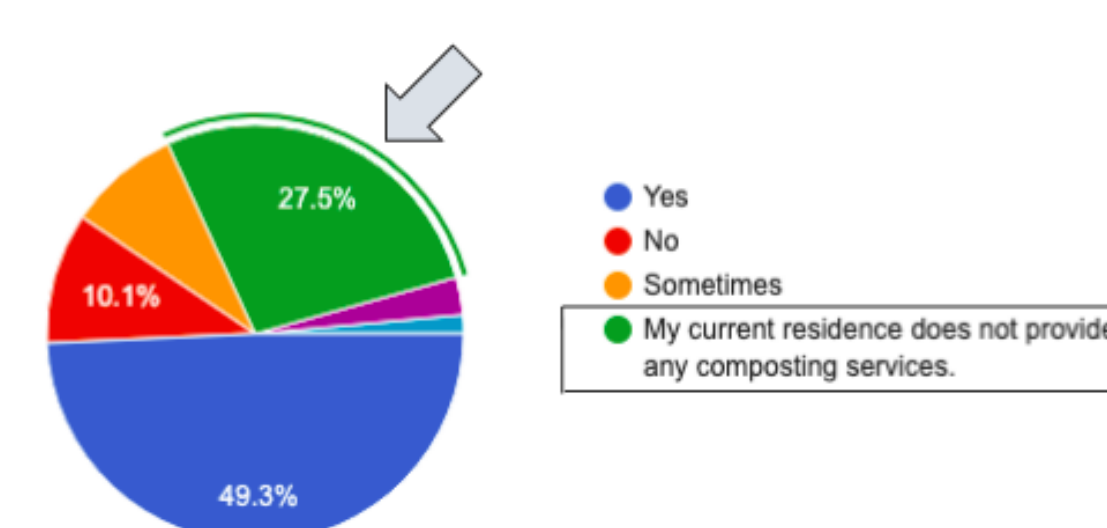


Figure 2. Results from my survey, answering the statement “I currently utilize the composting services my residence provides (i.e. I throw away organic waste into the compost bin).”

While the number of building managers who responded to my email about the lack of composting services at their property was unfortunately low, I was able to work with a couple managers to implement those services. One manager echoed my own building manager’s laments about previously providing a compost bin but having difficulties with smell and messiness. To address her concerns, I created a “Composting 101” document with resources from the city that could help mitigate those problems.

Since my original plan to work directly with building managers did not go as smoothly as planned, I shifted my focus to raising awareness among students. I collaborated with the City of Berkeley and the Zero Waste Coalition to host a “Tattle Drive,” a three hour event in which I talked to students about the composting ordinance and handed out small kitchen pails that the City of Berkeley actually provides for free to encourage residential composting. None of the students I talked to were aware the city provides free kitchen pails, and many were excited to receive a pail and learn how they can report their building managers for non-compliance to the law.

## Conclusions

Composting is not a glamorous issue, but doing so is good for people and the planet. In landfills, anaerobic decomposition of organic matter leads to the production of methane gas, which is toxic to surrounding communities and a potent greenhouse gas capable of trapping 30x more heat in the atmosphere than CO<sub>2</sub>. On a brighter note, organic material that is properly separated and composted can be turned into nutrient-rich soil that promotes plant health and reduces the need for chemical fertilizers. By providing tenants with access to compost bins and collection services, building managers are not only avoiding unnecessary fines, but also promoting human and environmental well-being.

Throughout this project, I learned a lot about how cities create and implement composting programs. Berkeley is ahead of the national curve in terms of waste management, but there is still work to be done. By tackling the issue of non-compliance first by directly talking to building managers and then to students, I learned both perspectives and have a better understanding of how to promote composting programs in the future.



Figure 3. Happy composters with their new kitchen pails, provided by the City of Berkeley.

## Future Goals

There are many ways to build on this project, such as increasing its scope to include all Berkeley residents rather than just UC Berkeley students or expanding the geographical boundary to all of Alameda County. Another direction could be to look deeply into why people choose not to compost and create stronger incentives to do so (for example, providing a larger green bin than landfill bin or creating educational campaigns about how to compost properly). Future research could also look into encouraging businesses to be more environmentally friendly by switching from plastic to compostable cups, straws, take-out containers, etc. After all, businesses create far more waste in general than households.

## Literature Cited

- Stop Waste
- Recycling Rules Alameda County
- City of Berkeley Department of Public Works

## Acknowledgements

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