

Bins Have Been Removed

Few things expose the quiet frustrations of city life quite like hunting for a place to toss a coffee cup or a wrapper. In neighborhoods from San Francisco's North Beach to Seoul's crowded Myeongdong, people often find themselves in a "trash can desert," walking long blocks without a bin and turning a small errand into a frustrating burden.

This shortage is seldom accidental. It arises from calculated policies meant to curb illegal dumping and encourage personal responsibility. In both San Francisco and Seoul, officials tried removing public bins, betting that scarcity would yield cleaner streets. The outcomes have been uneven, showing that even prosperous cities can fumble basic public services.

Danny Sauter learned this during his 2024 campaign for San Francisco supervisor. Expecting heated debates on housing or homelessness, he instead heard voters circle back repeatedly to missing trash cans. Residents described walking blocks without spotting one, or watching familiar corner bins vanish overnight. After his election, Sauter advocated for 1,500 new cans in his district, insisting that easy access, not absence, might foster better habits.

San Francisco's experiment dates to the mid-2000s, when then-mayor Gavin Newsom, influenced by Tokyo's spotless streets, directed the removal of over a third of the city's bins. The total fell from about 5,000 to 3,000. The rationale: plentiful cans tempted households and businesses to dump private waste freely, evading disposal rules. Scarcer bins, the hope went, would deter shortcuts and prompt people to carry their trash home.

Seoul extended the approach even further, motivated by finances. In 1995, South Korea launched its pay-as-you-throw system, called jongnyangje, requiring residents to buy branded bags and pay by volume produced. Public bins quickly became convenient loopholes. Why buy bags when street cans were free? The city responded aggressively, yanking thousands from sidewalks and subway entrances. Numbers dropped from over 7,600 in the mid-1990s to under 5,000 recently, with sharp cuts between 2019 and 2023.

Both cities wagered on behavioral change: eliminate options and residents will adapt, hauling trash home as many Tokyoites do. Yet Tokyo's system thrives on profound cultural norms against littering, cultivated over generations with strong social enforcement. San Francisco and Seoul lacked that foundation. Litter simply relocated to alleys, planters, or around the few remaining cans, now overflowing with takeout containers and pet waste. San Francisco's cleanliness scores hovered around mediocre; Seoul tourists often listed bin scarcity as a top complaint.

Tests elsewhere have largely challenged the scarcity model. Philadelphia's trials in parks and shopping areas revealed a direct link: fewer bins increased litter, more bins reduced it. New York's subway system faced higher cleanup demands and more track fires after removals.

By contrast, cities that maintained or expanded bins have fared better. Portland nearly doubled its bins amid resident outcry and plans to add more. Washington, D.C., seen as one of America's tidier big cities, keeps far more cans per capita than San Francisco and budgets accordingly.

Many cities reversing course have also invested in premium designs intended to address practical problems like rummaging, overflow, and durability. San Francisco's years-long process yielded the Slim Silhouette, a stainless-steel model that resists tampering and simplifies maintenance, at roughly \$1,400. New York is deploying rat-proof upgrades at even greater expense. Seoul, in its turnaround, has rolled out vivid, larger-opening cans in busy zones, some with eye-catching designs for better visibility.

Expensive technology has been less successful. Solar-compacting bins with sensors, tried in Philadelphia and Tacoma, promised efficiency but suffered from theft, unused features, and persistent costs that negated savings. A frustrated former Philadelphia sanitation worker, fed up with overflowing expensive bins, deployed basic \$150 drums in neglected areas, collecting trash via twice-weekly pickups. His experiment showed that simple reliability can trump sophistication.

The cleanest places succeed through unglamorous consistency rather than clever policy. Disney parks position cans every 30 feet and require all staff to pick up any visible trash. Washington maintains thousands more bins than comparable cities and services them diligently. These approaches recognize a basic truth: making proper disposal easy tends to work better than making it difficult.

Signs now point to reversal in both cities. San Francisco's new models are appearing on streets, and Sauter secured specialized pizza-box bins in North Beach. Seoul has been adding thousands of redesigned cans since 2024, prioritizing tourist and nightlife districts.

The trash can dilemma reveals how quickly small frustrations erode public trust. When residents cannot perform a simple task like disposing of a coffee cup, they begin questioning whether their government can handle anything competently. The solution requires no genius, just commitment: enough receptacles where people need them, emptied before they overflow, backed by shared values against littering. Yet achieving this modest goal has proven surprisingly difficult, and the streets continue delivering their verdict.

- 1) Have you ever littered because you couldn't find a bin, and what went through your mind when making that decision?
- 2) Compare trash can availability in your hometown versus other cities you've visited.
- 3) When you travel, how much does street cleanliness influence your overall impression of a place?
- 4) Should cities prioritize changing citizen behavior or accommodating existing behavior?

- 5) What matters most for cleaner streets: more bins, frequent pickups, stronger social norms, or stricter penalties?
- 6) Why do Tokyo's bin-free streets work well while Seoul's and San Francisco's don't?
- 7) Do you think it's fair to expect people to carry their trash home?
- 8) Is the claim that removing bins forces "better behavior" realistic, or does it punish normal people for others' actions?
- 9) Should public cleanliness be treated mainly as a government responsibility or a shared social responsibility?
- 10) Can small problems like limited trash cans erode trust in government competence more broadly?
- 11) Would you support strict fines and surveillance cameras if it meant cleaner streets?
- 12) Was Seoul justified in removing bins to prevent people from avoiding waste fees?
- 13) In your area, what basic public service irritates people the most?
- 14) Does having more bins at home or work make organization easier, or just create more collection work?

Expose	(v)	to reveal or make visible something that was hidden or not obvious	The investigation exposed serious flaws in the company's safety procedures.
Block	(n)	a section of a street or area between intersections	She walked three blocks from her apartment to the coffee shop.
Curb	(v)	to control or limit something undesirable	The new regulations aim to curb excessive water usage during the drought.
Dump	(v)	to dispose of waste or garbage, often illegally or carelessly	Some residents illegally dump furniture in the alley to avoid disposal fees.
Scarcity	(n)	a shortage or insufficient supply of something	The scarcity of affordable housing has become a major issue in the city.
Yield	(v)	to produce or provide a result or outcome	The experiment failed to yield any useful results.
Prosperous	(adj)	successful, wealthy, or thriving economically	Singapore is one of the most prosperous nations in Southeast Asia.
Fumble	(v)	to handle something clumsily or make mistakes with basic tasks	The company fumbled its product launch with poor planning and communication.
Heated	(adj)	involving strong emotions or intense discussion	The town hall meeting became heated when residents discussed the tax increase.

Circle Back	(phr v)	to return to a previous topic or issue in conversation	Let's circle back to the budget question after we finish this discussion.
Spot	(v)	to notice or see something	I spotted my friend across the crowded restaurant.
Advocate	(v)	to publicly support or recommend a particular policy or action	The senator advocated for stricter environmental regulations.
Spotless	(adj)	completely clean without any dirt or mess	The hotel room was spotless when we arrived.
Rationale	(n)	the reasoning or logical basis behind a decision or action	The manager explained the rationale behind the new scheduling policy.
Evade	(v)	to avoid or escape from something, especially through cleverness	He tried to evade questions about his involvement in the scandal.
Deter	(v)	to discourage or prevent someone from doing something	Visible security cameras can deter potential thieves.
Loophole	(n)	a way of avoiding a rule or law without technically breaking it	The company used a tax loophole to reduce its payments significantly.
Yank	(v)	to pull something suddenly and forcefully	She yanked the door open when she heard the fire alarm.
Wager	(v)	to bet or make a risky decision based on an uncertain outcome	They wagered their entire budget on the success of the new product.
Haul	(v)	to carry or transport something, often with effort	The workers had to haul equipment up five flights of stairs.
Cultivate	(v)	to develop or encourage the growth of something over time	The teacher works hard to cultivate critical thinking skills in her students.
Overflow	(v)	to fill beyond capacity so that contents spill over the edges	The river overflowed its banks after days of heavy rain.
Hover	(v)	to remain at a particular level without significant change	Unemployment rates have hovered around five percent for months.
Fare	(v)	to perform or get along in a particular situation	How did you fare on the final exam?
Outcry	(n)	a strong public reaction of anger or disapproval	The public outcry over the decision forced the mayor to reconsider.

Tidier	(adj)	neater or more organized in appearance	The new apartment is much tidier than our old one.
Per Capita	(adv)	for each person in a population	The country's per capita income has increased over the past decade.
Course	(n)	a direction or path of action	The company changed course after receiving negative customer feedback.
Rummage	(v)	to search through something carelessly or hastily	He rummaged through his desk drawer looking for his keys.
Silhouette	(n)	the outline or shape of something	We could see the silhouette of the mountain against the sunset.
Tamper	(v)	to interfere with or make unauthorized changes to something	Someone had tampered with the lock on the storage unit.
Deploy	(v)	to put something into use or position strategically	The military deployed additional troops to the border region.
Vivid	(adj)	bright, intense, or producing strong mental images	She gave a vivid description of the accident she witnessed.
Negate	(v)	to nullify or cancel out the effect of something	The benefits of the program were negated by its high cost.
Sanitation	(n)	systems and services for public health, especially waste disposal	The city's sanitation department collects trash twice a week.
Trump	(v)	to be better than or defeat something	In this case, practicality trumps aesthetic considerations.
Point	(v)	to indicate a direction or show evidence of something	Recent trends point to a shift in consumer preferences.
Dilemma	(n)	a difficult situation requiring a choice between undesirable options	She faced a dilemma about whether to accept the job offer or stay in school.
Erode	(v)	to gradually wear away or weaken something	Years of neglect had eroded public confidence in the transit system.
Receptacle	(n)	a container for holding waste or other materials	Please place all waste in the designated receptacle.
Verdict	(n)	a decision or judgment, especially an official one	The jury delivered its verdict after three days of deliberation.