

Where Did All the Trash Cans Go?

Finding a place to throw away a coffee cup can be surprisingly difficult in big cities. In San Francisco and Seoul, people often walk many blocks without seeing a single trash can. This creates a frustrating problem for residents and tourists.

This shortage is not an accident. Both cities removed many public bins on purpose. City officials believed that having fewer trash cans would make streets cleaner. They thought people would learn to carry their trash home instead of littering.

Danny Sauter discovered how much this bothered people during his 2024 campaign for San Francisco city supervisor. He expected voters to talk about housing costs and homelessness. Instead, people kept complaining about missing trash cans. They told him that bins they had used for years suddenly disappeared. After he won the election, Sauter asked the city to add 1,500 new trash cans to his district.

San Francisco started removing bins in the mid-2000s. The city had about 5,000 public trash cans, but the mayor decided to remove over a third of them. He was inspired by Tokyo, where streets are very clean even though there are almost no public bins. The idea was simple: if there are fewer trash cans, people cannot dump their household garbage in them illegally.

Seoul had similar reasoning but for different reasons. In 1995, South Korea created a new system where residents must buy special bags for their trash and pay by volume. Many people didn't want to pay for these bags, so they started throwing away their household trash in public bins for free. This prompted Seoul to remove thousands of bins from streets and subway stations. The number dropped from over 7,600 to under 5,000.

Both cities expected people to change their behavior and carry trash home like people do in Tokyo. But this didn't happen. Tokyo's clean streets depend on strong cultural habits that developed over many generations. San Francisco and Seoul didn't have these same traditions. Instead, trash ended up in alleys, flower pots, and around the few remaining bins.

Other cities tested similar ideas. Philadelphia studied different numbers of bins in parks and shopping areas. The results were clear: more bins meant less litter, and fewer bins meant more litter. New York removed bins from some subway stations and later found that fires on subway train tracks increased by 33%.

Cities like Washington, D.C. and Portland took a different approach. They added more bins and kept their streets cleaner. Washington has about 6,600 public trash cans, more than twice as many as San Francisco.

Now both San Francisco and Seoul are changing their plans. They are adding new, better-designed trash cans back to their streets. Seoul plans to have thousands more bins by focusing on tourist areas.

The lesson is becoming clear: making it easy for people to throw things away works better than making it difficult. Simple solutions often work better than clever ideas.

- 1) Have you ever had trouble finding a trash can in a city?
- 2) Is Seoul cleaner than other cities you have visited?
- 3) When you travel, do you notice if a city is clean or dirty?
- 4) Should cities try to change how people behave, or should they make things easier for people?
- 5) What is more important for clean streets: more trash cans, better rules, or different habits?
- 6) Why do you think Tokyo has clean streets without many trash cans?
- 7) Is it reasonable to expect people to carry their trash home?
- 8) Should the government or citizens be responsible for keeping streets clean?
- 9) Would you accept cameras watching for litter if it made streets cleaner?
- 10) What public service problem bothers people most in your area?
- 11) Do you think having more trash cans at home or the office helps you stay organized?

Block	(n)	a section of a street between two intersections	The library is just two blocks from my house.
Frustrating	(adj)	causing feelings of annoyance or discouragement	It was frustrating to wait in line for over an hour.
Shortage	(n)	a situation where there is not enough of something needed	There is a shortage of teachers in many rural schools.
On purpose	(phr)	deliberately or intentionally, not by accident	She arrived late on purpose because she wanted to avoid the opening speech.
Litter	(v)	to throw trash on the ground or in public places improperly	Please don't litter in the park; use the trash cans provided.
Bother	(v)	to annoy or cause trouble for someone	The loud music from next door bothered me while I was studying.
District	(n)	an area of a city or region with defined boundaries for administrative purposes	He represents the third district in the city council.
Third	(n)	one of three equal parts	She ate a third of the pizza and saved the rest.
Inspired	(adj)	motivated or influenced by someone or something to take action	Inspired by her teacher, she decided to become a scientist.
Dump	(v)	to dispose of waste carelessly or illegally	It's illegal to dump old furniture on the street.

Reasoning	(n)	the logical thinking behind a decision or action	The manager explained the reasoning behind the new schedule.
Volume	(n)	the amount of space something occupies or contains	We need to buy bags based on the volume of trash we produce.
Drop	(v)	to decrease or fall in number or amount	Sales dropped significantly during the winter months.
End up	(phr v)	to finally be in a place or situation, often unexpectedly	We took the wrong train and ended up in a different city.
Meant	(v)	intended or designed to produce a particular result	This program is meant to help students improve their English.
Approach	(n)	a way of dealing with or thinking about something	The school tried a new approach to teaching mathematics.
Twice	(adv)	two times as much or as many	This apartment costs twice as much as my old one.
Clever	(adj)	intelligent and showing quick thinking or creativity	She came up with a clever solution to fix the problem.

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