

Sorting through recycling bins to learn about alcohol use

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Credit: Kevin Casper/public domain

When researchers wanted to verify alcohol-use survey results at a senior housing center, they came up with a novel way to measure residents' drinking: Count the empty bottles in recycling bins.

Scientists compared the [recycling bin](#) results with two residential surveys

gauging drinking habits of people living in a San Diego complex for low-income, older adults.

"We were able to check how much the [residents](#) said they were drinking with the empty beer, wine and liquor containers they were actually putting in the recycling bins," said John Clapp, co-author of the study and professor of [social work](#) at The Ohio State University.

"In addition, we got important information from the recycling bins that you can't get from our two surveys, such as time patterns in drinking."

One of the most important results from the recycling data was that the amount of alcohol use showed a predictable pattern, spiking in the days after the residents received their social security checks and around holidays.

"That's not surprising, but it is not something that has been studied before in older adults," Clapp said.

"It suggests that social workers and others should target their alcoholism prevention programming to these times when there is the most alcohol use."

The study appears in a recent issue of the journal *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*.

This research began when Clapp was a professor of social work at San Diego State University. The managers of a housing complex for older, low-income adults approached him because they were troubled about alcohol use among their residents.

Clapp and his colleagues conducted a survey, but the management was concerned that it wasn't capturing the full extent of drinking among

those who lived there.

That's when the researchers decided to use recycling as a way to further probe alcohol use. They put two recycling bins on five floors of the residential center and checked them twice a week for more than a year (55 weeks), collecting all the beer, wine and liquor containers.

They then calculated the number of standard drinks (12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine or 1.5 ounces of liquor) consumed by the residents each week.

During the study, 3,014 recycled alcohol containers representing 14,103 standard drinks were collected from the residential center. The number of standard drinks estimated from the recycling bins was actually slightly lower than what the residents reported they drank in the survey (174 participated in the survey).

That's not surprising, Clapp said, since residents probably threw out some alcohol containers in the trash rather than recycling them or got rid of the containers in other ways.

Overall, the researchers estimated that about 10 percent of the residents (25 percent of those who said they drank alcohol) were at risk for alcohol abuse.

"It was important to learn this because limited research has been conducted on the prevalence of drinking among low-income [older adults](#)," Clapp said.

He said the use of recycling bins to measure [alcohol](#) use could be a good way to study people living in places like fraternities and residence halls.

"This type of research is inexpensive, unobtrusive and relatively easy to

do," Clapp said.

More information: *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*,
onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/%28ISSN%291530-0277

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