

Food Waste and Convenience: What the Homeless Lose Out On

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Food waste is often discussed as a purely environmental issue, but the lack of efficiency in how we produce and utilize food is very much a concern for world hunger and the homeless as well. According to ReFeedAmerica's statistics, we waste \$218 billion per year on growing, processing, transporting, and disposing of food that isn't eaten. Single restaurants dump 25–75 thousand pounds of food waste per year, and the industry as a whole estimates 133 billion pounds. Consider that one-eighth of the population, or 42 million Americans, is food insecure. It's not exactly hard to see what causes this when giving it more thought. A majority of an individual's carbon footprint is related to food, whether it's leftovers, poorly prepared meals, overprepared meals, expired food, recreational uses, etc. It's a problem that everyone is guilty of, but when this problem is gathered into a whole, it's a massive loss of potential and a failure of proper resource usage.

Theoretically, restaurants should have a lot to gain from reusing food waste, considering that they lose \$2 billion in profits, gain more per dollar, and earn favors from caterers with public consciousness on food waste. 47 percent of Americans answered that they wish to eat more at restaurants with food recovery programs. This isn't an unrecognized problem, as many programs such as ReThink Food NYC, ReFeed, FoodCycle LA, Food Oasis LA, the LA Regional Food Bank, and FoodFight! are making great efforts to collect thousands of pounds of food waste and

encourage restaurants to join a network of food donations and non-profit charities. Additionally, the FDA (Food and Drug Administration), USDA (Department of Agriculture), and EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) have since collaborated to educate Americans on the impact and importance of reducing food loss and waste.

So what's the issue? Consider the sky high numbers of food waste just listed and how absent from public consciousness the issue still is.

A mission statement from Refeed acknowledges that rescuing excess food and redistributing it is ultimately a band-aid solution to the systematic issues behind food insecurity. Namely, the culture of convenience formed by late-stage capitalism.

Eateries are full of systematic conveniences that are very easily taken for granted, such as single-use packaging, on-demand speedy delivery from phone apps, grab-and-go snacks, fast-food chains, supermarket stock, and placing orders before entering the restaurant. Too much food isn't just being bought, made, and wasted; the processes are also automated in several locations, including the customer's home, where waste is impossible to regulate. Consider that recycling food waste and all of the other environmental charity services recommended in this article are non-profit, meaning that the act as a whole is not recognized as common regulation. Frankly, even if restaurants could make up for the millions of dollars and profits they lose from food waste, there would be no country-wide or state-wide regulation or an entire culture of incentives that would encourage them to care.

Even food banks and donation services are guilty of falling into this culture as well. When you lose access to commodities, it becomes difficult for the "haves" to connect with the "have-nots." This is blatantly apparent with how most food-insecure citizens are unable to receive food without access to ID, documentation, knowledge on how to file said documentation, the internet to find that knowledge, phones to access apps and conveniences, and, darkly hilarious to the homeless: an address. This is why the urban homeless still demand free food from restaurants with food stamps and banks available; even if they manage to get packaged chicken, how are they supposed to cook it without appliances, carry a large item without storage or ease of transportation, or even store it without the food going bad? This isn't even counting the limitations caused by work conflicts, disabilities, and illnesses common to the homeless and low-income. There are food donation services that forgo this problem, such as soup kitchens that serve healthy meals, but this common blind spot is notable to the point that there aren't enough facilities that can serve the volume of homeless need or even be known to food-insecure citizens at all. And having the homeless rummage through unpermitted food donations and garbage is hardly a proper utilization of waste for both legal and common-sense reasons. Even if that's what it sadly has to come down to in the end for some.

The issue is very, very complicated, and the motivations and issues surrounding food waste explored here are merely an introduction to these problems rather than a primer on becoming conscious about them. However, the connection between food insecurity, food recycling, and convenience culture is key to understanding the larger scope of who these unregulated systems affect. Environmentalist efforts to both the perpetrators and the victims of waste are often ignored because its consequences seem too grandiose and far-off to care, but the effects are

indeed grounded and present every day. If you see anyone starving or begging for food in the country that uses 24% of the world's resources, remember how much food isn't being used properly.

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