



LITTER STEALS THEIR FUTURE

The Hidden Cost of Litter — and a Practical Way to Reduce It

Executive Summary for Government Leaders

Litter is not just an eyesore. It is a preventable drain on taxpayer dollars, business revenue, and community investment.

Every bottle, wrapper, and cigarette butt left behind creates a chain reaction of costs: street sweeping, storm drain cleaning, manual labor, equipment, waste hauling, disposal, environmental remediation, and lost economic opportunity.

The United States spends approximately **\$11.5 billion every year** cleaning up litter.

California spends an estimated **\$400–\$500 million annually**.

Businesses bear approximately **80% of litter-related cleanup costs**, costs that ultimately affect the prices consumers pay.

Every dollar spent repeatedly cleaning up preventable litter is a dollar that cannot be invested in housing, childcare, public safety, infrastructure, parks, schools, workforce development, or other community priorities.

Litter steals their future because it steals the resources communities need to build it.

The Cost of Litter

United States

Approximately \$11.5 billion annually

Litter-related costs include:

- Public works cleanup crews
- Street sweeping
- Storm drain maintenance
- Highway cleanup
- Business property maintenance

- Waste hauling and disposal
- Illegal dumping response
- Environmental mitigation

Cleanup can cost approximately **\$0.17–\$0.79 for each littered item** and as much as **\$3,800 per ton**.

The consequences extend beyond cleanup. Litter can contribute to clogged storm drains and flooding, lower property values, damage community appearance, and increase operating costs for businesses.

California

Estimated Annual Litter Cleanup Cost: \$400–\$500 Million

California's litter-related expenses are spread across numerous agencies, programs, local governments, businesses, and property owners.

Public expenditures include activities such as:

- Street and sidewalk cleanup
- Storm drain cleaning
- Median cleanup
- Manual litter collection
- Equipment operation
- Waste hauling and disposal
- Illegal dumping response
- Environmental and water-quality programs

Because these costs are distributed across many different budgets, the true financial impact of litter is often difficult for taxpayers, and even government leaders to see.

Los Angeles: A Case Study

Los Angeles illustrates both the **cost of litter and the opportunity to reduce it without creating another law**.

City budget documents show that Los Angeles budgets approximately **\$36.3 million annually through its Measure W Municipal Return allocation** for stormwater and litter-related programs intended to improve water quality and reduce pollution entering the City's waterways.

Importantly, **\$36.3 million is not the City's total cost of litter**.

It does not include additional litter-related expenditures by the Bureau of Sanitation, the Office of Community Beautification, and other City departments.

The City's total financial burden associated with litter is therefore likely substantially greater.

We May Not Need Another Law

Many cities already have laws requiring businesses and property owners to keep their properties free of litter and debris.

Los Angeles is one example.

Existing provisions of the Los Angeles Municipal Code include:

LAMC §12.22

Commercial parking lots and mini-shopping centers are required to be kept clear of weeds, rubbish, litter, and combustible materials. Trash receptacles are also required throughout open areas.

LAMC §58.02

Weeds, rubbish, and other dangerous or injurious materials on private property may constitute a public nuisance subject to City enforcement and abatement.

LAMC §12.21

Commercial recycling areas must be maintained daily and kept free of litter, debris, spills, pests, and other hazards.

The opportunity is straightforward:

Before creating another program or spending more money cleaning up litter, consistently enforce the laws already on the books.

Education + Enforcement + Community Participation

Enforcement alone is not the goal.

Behavior change is.

Litter Steals Their Future combines public education with existing-code enforcement and community participation.

Education

Remind people that litter has economic, environmental, and community consequences—and that someone always pays for it.

Enforcement

Create accountability by consistently enforcing existing property-maintenance and litter codes.

Community Participation

Engage schools, businesses, residents, and community organizations in creating a shared expectation that littering is unacceptable.

The goal isn't to write more citations. *The goal is to need fewer of them.*

If a business knows that existing litter requirements will be consistently enforced, maintaining a clean property can simply become part of normal operations.

If residents repeatedly see the same anti-litter message in their neighborhoods, schools, businesses, and public spaces, we have an opportunity to change social expectations as well.

Measure the Results

Government should be able to determine whether an anti-litter strategy actually works.

A city can establish a defined pilot area and baseline, combine public awareness with increased enforcement for a limited period, and measure the results.

Possible performance measures include:

- Amount or weight of litter collected
- Storm drain debris removed
- Cleanup frequency
- Government cleanup expenditures
- Property-maintenance complaints
- Warnings and citations
- Business compliance
- Community participation

Then ask:

Did litter decline?

Did compliance improve?

Did cleanup requirements decline?

Did taxpayers save money?

If the answer is yes, expand what works.

What Could We Do With the Savings?

Reducing litter doesn't merely create cleaner streets.

It allows public and private resources to be used more productively.

Money no longer required for preventable cleanup could support priorities such as:

Housing

- Reduce permitting and development costs
- Support affordable housing
- Assist first-time homebuyers

Children & Families

- Lower-cost childcare
- After-school programs
- Summer youth programs

Public Safety

- Police and community safety programs
- Fire prevention
- Emergency preparedness

Infrastructure

- Street and sidewalk repairs
- Lighting
- Parks
- Transportation improvements

Education & Workforce

- Career training
- School technology
- Recreation programs
- Workforce development

Or government can simply **spend less**.

Reducing a preventable expense is itself a legitimate public-policy objective.

A Supply Chain Problem

Litter is also a broken supply chain.

Every product has a supply chain before it reaches the consumer. That supply chain shouldn't simply end when someone throws the product away.

When materials are discarded improperly, communities pay to collect and dispose of them instead of recovering their remaining value.

Circular systems can transform waste into:

- Recovered materials
- Energy
- Economic value
- Jobs
- Community investment

The same principal businesses use to eliminate waste and improve productivity can be applied to our communities:

Prevent the waste first. Recover value wherever possible. Stop paying repeatedly for a problem we can reduce.

A Partnership, Not Another Government Program

Litter Steals Their Future is designed to work **with** communities.

Supply Chains for Good invites cities, counties, elected officials, public agencies, schools, businesses, and community organizations to participate.

Government partners can:

- Identify an area for a measurable litter-reduction pilot
- Increase enforcement of existing litter and property-maintenance codes
- Help establish baseline cleanup costs and performance measures
- Engage local businesses and schools
- Reinforce the campaign through existing communications
- Co-sponsor a **Litter Steals Their Future** billboard in their community

The billboard campaign provides public education while government and community partners work on behavior change at the local level.

The Opportunity

We already spend billions cleaning up litter.

We already have many of the laws needed to prevent it.

Businesses, residents, schools, and government all have a role to play.

Instead of accepting litter cleanup as a permanent cost of doing business, let's find out how much of that expense we can prevent.

Change the behavior. Measure the results. Reduce the cost.

LITTER STEALS THEIR FUTURE

If we ignore it... they live in it.

C.J. Nord, C.P.M., CSCP (She/Her)

Founder, Supply Chains for Good

Enrolled member, Standing Rock Sioux

Cell 562-209-3002 CJ@SupplyChainsForGood.org

SupplyChainsforGood.org

