

The Next Louisville: What Trash Cans Tell Us About Poverty

By JACOB RYAN 

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Sharon Cissell squints her eyes and points out to the street.

From her porch, she can see just beyond the curb, where a needle lies next to a discarded paper cup. The needle's bright orange cap is an unmistakable, yet unremarkable, sight in the Taylor Berry neighborhood, just west of Churchill Downs.

Cissell said the needles can be found along sidewalks, in yards and down alleys — a common piece of litter in a neighborhood besieged by trash.

"If it looked better, it might make a difference," she said.

Cissell worries the neighborhood's physical state welcomes the addicts and small-time crooks that plague the litter-filled streets. She's complained, along with many of her neighbors, but still, the issue persists.



Sharon Cissell (right) stands on her porch with Mandy Cissell (center) and William Cissell (left).

City data shows residents in

Taylor Berry report instances of litter at one of the highest rates in the city. Though city officials have closed nearly all of the complaint cases, the trash remains.

A review of city trash bin locations shows that, in 91 percent of the 340 complaints in Taylor Berry, there's no public trash can on the block.

This isn't unique to Taylor Berry. Across the city, data shows trash piles up in parts of town with the fewest public trash cans. In fact, 73 percent of all trash complaints reported to the city's MetroCall 311 service are not within one block of a trash can, the data show. And 41 percent of those locations had no trash bin within two blocks.

Cissell said the dearth of trash bins sends a message: her street just isn't a priority like those in growing downtown Central Business District, with 110 trash bins per mile – 101 more than her neighborhood.

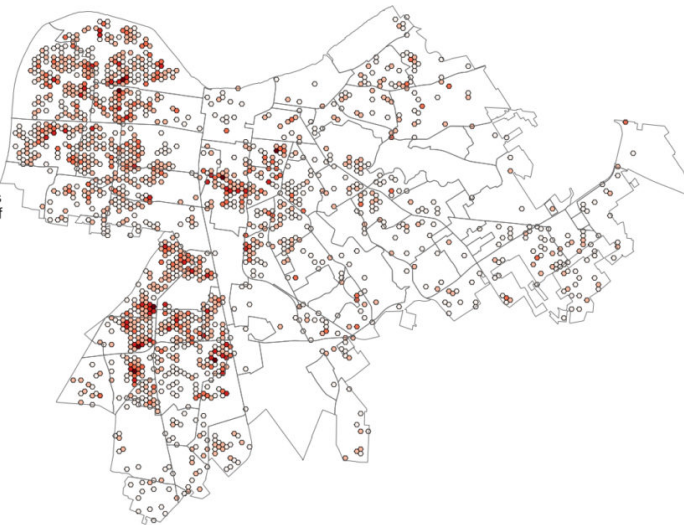
Louisville Trash Complaints

This map shows density of trash complaints where there is no trash can within one block.

Neighborhoods with more hexagons have more overall trash complaints.

Neighborhoods with darker hexagons also have more concentrated areas of trash.

Number of complaints



Source: Louisville Metro
Map by Alexandra Kanik

More trash cans in tourist areas

The city has scattered 980 public trash bins across Louisville, according to data provided by city officials.

The metal trash cans provided by the city's Public Works department typically cost between \$600 and \$1,200 to buy and install, city records show.

Harold Adams, a spokesman for the city's Public Works department, provided a map of public trash bins, but did not respond to multiple requests for follow-up interviews. Therefore, it's unclear who decides where to put trash bins or how it's done or if city agencies are considering ways to address the issue.

Louisville Metro Council records show some council members can designate trash cans for their districts, but they must use limited discretionary funds to do so.

Most public trash cans are clustered in downtown, along Central Avenue near Churchill Downs, up and down Bardstown Road, in NuLu and near Slugger Field — all pedestrian hotspots where tourists often congregate. City crews periodically empty the cans and the waste ends up in the landfill, instead of littered along roads and neighborhoods.

But in some areas, there are none. On a twelve-block stretch along 26th Street in the Russell neighborhood, a person walking from Duncan Street to Muhammad Ali Boulevard wouldn't pass a single trash bin. Residents complained about that stretch 31 times last year, data show.

Last year, city officials received nearly 6,000 reports of trash in the Urban Services District, data shows. More than 400 of those calls were repeats.

More than 35 percent of all trash complaints came from five neighborhoods: Taylor Berry, Portland,

Louisville Trash Can Placement



Shawnee, Old Louisville and Russell. These neighborhoods are some of the city's most historic. They're also home to many of the city's poorest residents.

Ruth Daniels has lived in Russell for more than three decades. She notices the trash, and she notices the lack of trash bins.

"It's the same message they've been sending us for the last 20 years," Daniels said. "We don't care about that part of town."

'If the people here don't care, why should I?'

A dirty and dangerous environment can heighten stress levels and shrink individual aspirations, said Daniel DeCaro, an assistant professor of psychological and brain sciences at University of Louisville.

When local government neglects the needs of a neighborhood, the effect can be broadly demoralizing, DeCaro said.

"That, alone, can have a very bad effect on psychological coping," he said.

Trash is just one of the complex issues that face the city's most struggling neighborhoods, but addressing the litter could have a big impact, said DeCaro.

He mentions the broken windows theory, first coined by criminologists George Kelling and James Wilson in a 1982 article in *The Atlantic* (<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1982/03/broken-windows/304465/>). They argued that small signs of disorder – like a broken window – lead to bigger, more serious criminal problems.

Policing models based on the broken windows theory have been problematic and led to discriminatory practices, but DeCaro said the base theory about the neighborhood impact seems to hold up otherwise.

DeCaro also points out a 1990 study by psychologist Robert Cialdini in which paper handbills were placed on the windshield of vehicles in a parking garage. In one instance, the garage was cleaned of debris and trash. In another, the garage was heavily littered.

The results were just as Cialdini and his team anticipated. People were more likely to toss the handbills to the ground in the littered garage, as opposed to the clean garage.

DeCaro said people pay subtle attention to their social environment — “and then we infer assumptions about the people living there and our relationship with it.”

Haven Harrington, who lives in Russell, also points to the “broken window” theory when discussing the scourge of trash in the neighborhood.

“People tend to want to disrespect your neighborhood more when they see trash everywhere,” said Harrington, a past president of the Russell Neighborhood Association. “They think, well, if the people here don’t care, why should I?”

But data shows the residents have asked for help. Residents in Metro Council District 5, which encompasses Russell, Portland and Shawnee, report trash at one of the highest rates in the city.

Harrington said more trash cans are sorely needed, at least on major thoroughfares or every other corner.

“The biggest thing is, about aesthetics, to the outside visitor, it makes it seem like you care about everybody,” he said. “That says a lot about you as a community and you as a city.”

Cissell, the Taylor Berry resident, said she wanted to buy the small home she rents now. It was a good



deal and she hoped the residential neighborhood would be a nice place to raise her family.

But the crime keeps coming and the trash piles up. Her garage gets busted into weekly, and food wrappers and glass bottles fill her yard.

She once lived in Crescent Hill, east of downtown and home to historic Frankfort Avenue, trendy shops and Reservoir Park. It was clean, she said, and everyone seemed to want to keep it that way.

Here, in Taylor Berry, city crews also often miss her house on scheduled trash pick-up routes, she said. Cracking down on litter seems unlikely.

“You see trees and bushes planted downtown everywhere, but where are they here?” she asked. “You don’t see nothing nice here.”

The Next Louisville project is a collaboration between WFPL News and the Community Foundation of Louisville. For more work from the project, click here (<http://nextlouisville.wfpl.org/category/poverty-and-progress/>)

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