

Living Income of Waste Pickers in Colombia

Insights from Bogotá and Barranquilla

November 2025



Title:

Living Income of Waste Pickers in Colombia: Insights from Bogotá and Barranquilla

Project Name:

CARE Project – Collective Action for Recycling and Empowerment

Project Partners:

- Aluminium Stewardship Initiative (ASI)
- Compromiso Empresarial para el Reciclaje (CEMPRE Colombia)
- International Aluminium Institute (IAI)
- Canpack Colombia
- Crown Holdings
- One Planet Ltd (Roundtable on Responsible Recycling of Metals – RRRM)
- Recycled Materials Association (ReMA)
- Associação Brasileira do Alumínio (ABAL)

Funding and Support:

This report was developed within the framework of the CARE Project, with support from the ISEAL Innovations Fund, which is supported by the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs SECO and UK International Development. Additional support was provided by the Fair Circularity Initiative, which enabled this assessment under Phase 3 of the Living Income Study.

Suggested Citation:

CEMPRE Colombia & ASI. (2025). *Living Income of Waste Pickers in Colombia: Insights from Bogotá and Barranquilla*. Bogotá: CARE Project.

Copyright and Licence:

This work is licensed under a **Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0)** licence.

You are free to share and adapt the material for non-commercial purposes, as long as proper attribution is given.

For further information, please contact:

infocempre@cempre.org.co | info@aluminium-stewardship.org

CONTENTS

1.	EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
2.	INTRODUCTION AND APPROACH	5
3.	CONTEXT: THE COLOMBIAN LANDSCAPE FOR WASTE PICKERS	8
4.	A – CURRENT INCOME OF WASTE PICKERS	8
4.1.	Survey Results: Self-Reported Income and Material Collection	9
4.2.	Organisational Reports: Incentives Plan Data	10
4.3.	Estimation of Waste Picker Earnings	11
5.	B – ESTIMATION OF A LIVING INCOME	15
6.	C – COMPARABLE INCOMES OR MINIMUM WAGE	16
7.	KEY LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	17
8.	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	18
9.	ANNEX 1 – ADDITIONAL INFORMATION & FIGURES	19
9.1.	BOGOTA	19
9.2.	BARRANQUILLA	20

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study assesses the living income of waste pickers in Bogotá and Barranquilla, two major Colombian cities with active recycling sectors. Waste pickers play a vital role in Colombia's circular economy, contributing to resource recovery and landfill diversion. However, they often operate in precarious conditions, lacking formal employment, social protection, and stable income sources.

Using surveys with 81 waste pickers affiliated with 15 organisations, the research explores income sources, working conditions, and overall quality of life. Results show that 91% of respondents are “informally organised”, meaning they belong to recognised associations but do not receive social security coverage. Their average total monthly income — from material sales and public service tariffs — is COP¹ \$973,416, significantly below the estimated *living income benchmark* of COP \$4,240,706 for a family of four.

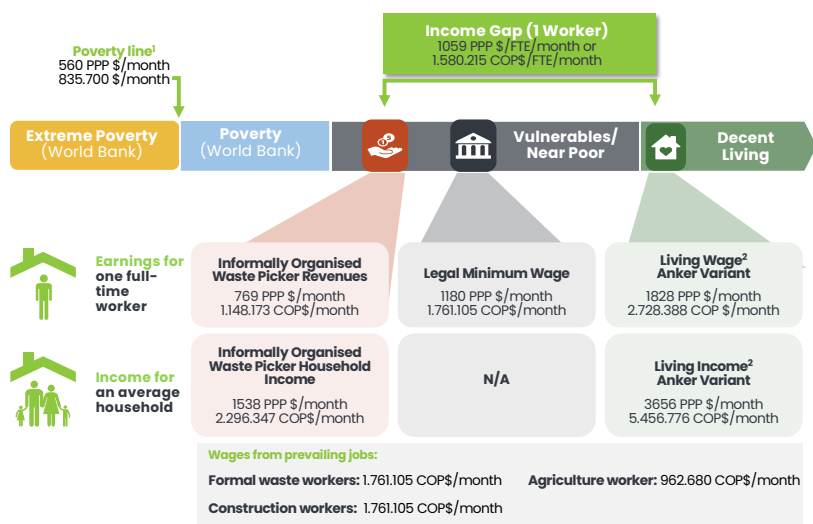
As illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, this income gap persists in both Bogotá and Barranquilla: in Bogotá, waste pickers earn a slightly higher average of COP \$1,148,173, while in Barranquilla, the average drops to COP \$833,611. These figures highlight a substantial and persistent shortfall when compared to the income levels required for a dignified standard of living, including access to healthy diets, decent housing, education, and social protection.

The study also analyses income variability by material type, finding that aluminium and rigid plastics, while collected in lower volumes, provide higher returns per kilogram. Access to transport and equipment influences earning potential, with those using motorised vehicles typically earning more. Regional disparities are also evident: in Barranquilla, 53% of waste pickers surveyed do not receive the public tariff component of their income, contributing to a 27% lower average income compared to peers in Bogotá.

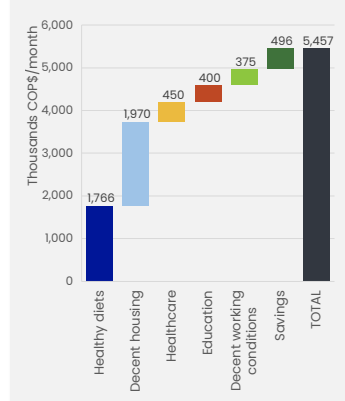
Key barriers identified include poor waste separation by households, fluctuating material prices (notably a sharp drop in PET value), limited access to equipment, and social stigma. Despite recent legal advances such as Decree 1381 of 2024 — which formalises the role of waste pickers in the public sanitation service — implementation gaps persist.

The report calls for expanded formalisation, improved payment transparency, material price stabilisation mechanisms, and targeted support (such as incentives and credit access) to ensure a decent, sustainable livelihood for Colombia's waste picker population.

¹ Colombian Peso (COP \$)

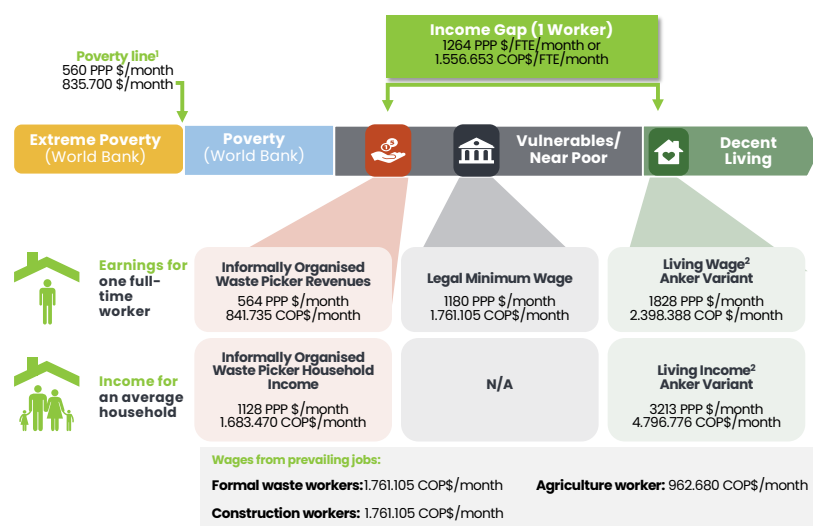


Healthy diet and decent housing represent about two-thirds of households planned expenditures for a decent life

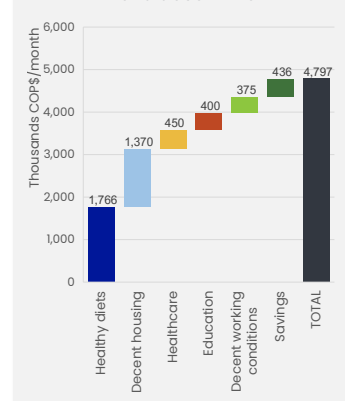


All \$ are in PPP 2025
 (1) World bank poverty line for lower middle income (835.000 COP\$/cap/day - PPP 2025) corrected for inflation for 2025
 (2) The concept of living wage is defined as remuneration received for a standard work week by a worker in a particular place sufficient to afford a decent standard of living for the worker and her or his family.
 Note that living incomes calculated in this study followed the Anker methodology but may not be considered Anker conformant given they have not been independently reviewed by the Anker Research Institute.

Figure 1. Income Gap for Waste Pickers in Bogotá



Healthy diet and decent housing represent about two-thirds of households planned expenditures for a decent life



All \$ are in PPP 2025
 (1) World bank poverty line for lower middle income (835.000 COP\$/cap/day - PPP 2025) corrected for inflation for 2025
 (2) The concept of living wage is defined as remuneration received for a standard work week by a worker in a particular place sufficient to afford a decent standard of living for the worker and her or his family.
 Note that living incomes calculated in this study followed the Anker methodology but may not be considered Anker conformant given they have not been independently reviewed by the Anker Research Institute.

Figure 2. Income Gap for Waste Pickers in Barranquilla

2. INTRODUCTION AND APPROACH

In Colombia, there are few studies focused on the quality of life of waste pickers and the factors that influence their ability to earn a living income. The latter is defined as the required earnings to afford a standard of living with all the components essential for a decent life. This concept acknowledges the right of every individual to earn an income that allows them to meet their basic needs, lead a dignified life and escape the cycle of poverty².

Historically, this population has also been excluded and stigmatised, despite playing an essential role in the country's environmental management and circular economy. To better understand the realities faced by this important group, a study was carried out in two cities with contrasting geographical characteristics—Bogotá and Barranquilla—which nonetheless share common challenges derived from their respective social, economic, and cultural contexts. In addition, the study took into account one of the income streams available to waste pickers: the recognition of their work as an essential activity within the public sanitation service. This allows them to receive payment through a portion of the user fees charged for the collection, transport, and final disposal of recoverable waste. However, informal working conditions and low earnings from the commercialisation of materials continue to affect the housing and health conditions of approximately 22,000 waste pickers and their families who rely on this activity.

This report presents the findings of the study on the living income of waste pickers in the cities of Barranquilla and Bogotá. It was conducted by CEMPRE Colombia with the support of Aluminium Stewardship Initiative (ASI), Systemiq, and Business for Social Responsibility (BSR) under the Fair Circularity Initiative (FCI)³, and as part of the broader CARE project being implemented by ASI in Colombia. The study was carried out through a 39-question survey administered to 81 waste pickers aged between 20 and 76 years (43 men and 38 women), all of whom belong to 15 waste picker organisations that are formally recognised as providers of the public sanitation service in the recovery component. These organisations are part of two initiatives led by CEMPRE: *Movimiento Re* in Barranquilla and *Reciclar Tiene Valor* in Bogotá. The study explores key dimensions including income, education, health, housing, social participation, and perceptions of wellbeing, integrating both quantitative indicators and the voices and lived experiences of the waste pickers themselves.

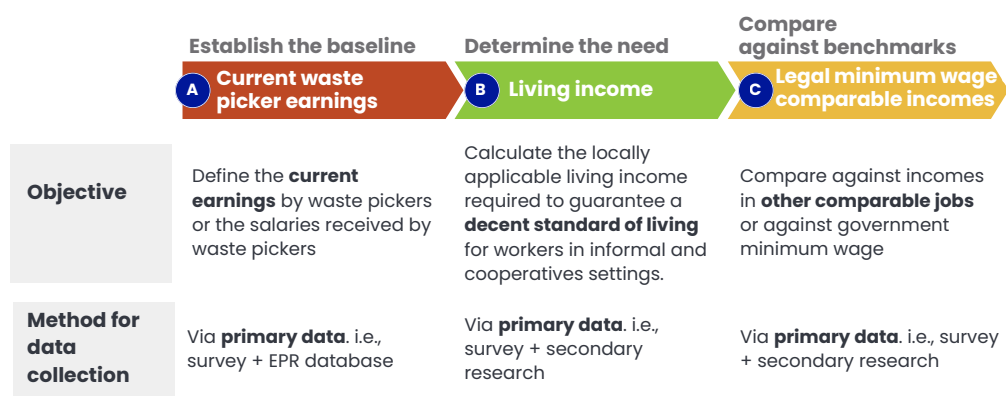


Illustration 1. Waste Pickers Organisation in Barranquilla

² Fair Circularity Initiative, Systemiq (2024). A living income for the informal waste sector: A methodology to assess the living income of waste workers in the context of the Global Plastics Treaty

³ More information here: <https://faircircularity.org/resources/living-income-phase-3-case-studies/>

The methodology of the Living Income Study was developed by FCI and Systemiq. It followed a three-part framework, as illustrated in Figure 3. First, to establish a baseline, the study defined the current earnings of waste pickers through primary data collection, primarily via surveys conducted with waste pickers affiliated with informal cooperatives. This step aimed to understand the actual income received from both material sales and public service tariffs. Second, to determine the need, the study calculated a locally applicable living income that would enable a decent standard of living for a household of four. This estimate considered key household expenses such as food, housing, education, healthcare, transport, and savings, and was developed using a mix of primary data and secondary research, drawing on national benchmarks and international methodologies such as those of the Anker Research Institute. Finally, in the third step, the study compared earnings against relevant benchmarks, including the legal minimum wage and average wages from comparable informal sectors, such as construction and agriculture. This comparative lens provides crucial context for understanding income adequacy in both cooperative and informal labour environments.



Unit: USD (or local currency) earnings per month for average household

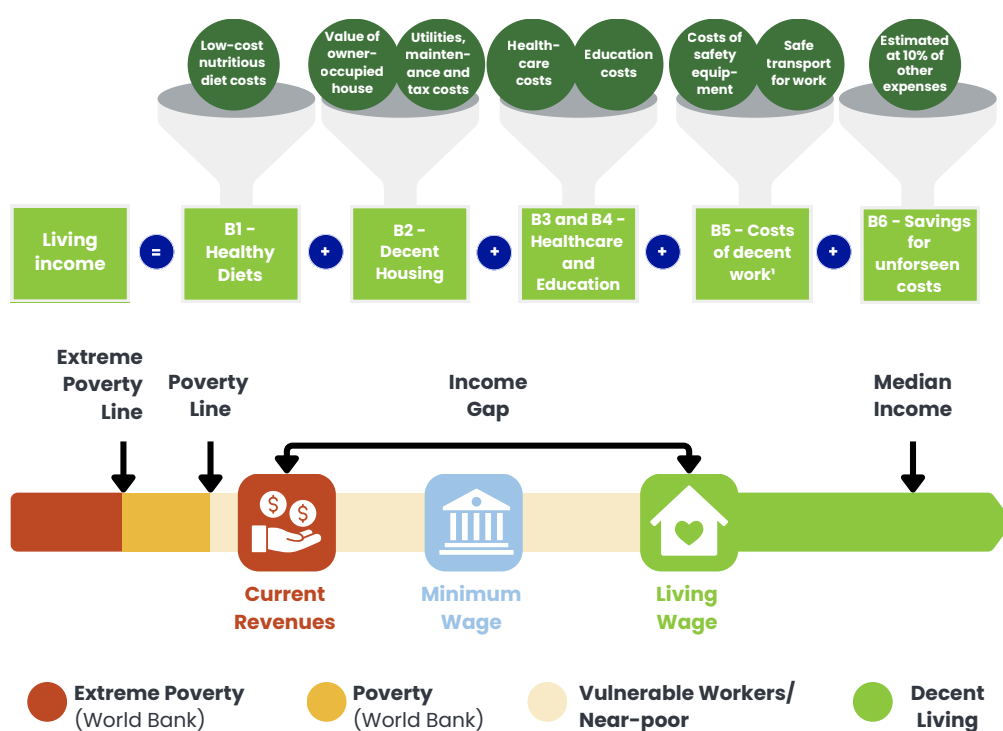


Figure 3. Living Income Study methodology. Source: FCI, Sistemiq (2024).

3. CONTEXT: THE COLOMBIAN LANDSCAPE FOR WASTE PICKERS

Colombia's experience in integrated solid waste management with the social inclusion of waste pickers is considered a global benchmark. For nearly half a century, waste pickers have fought for the dignity of their work, seeking social recognition, fair remuneration, and their effective inclusion in the public sanitation service. Over the past two decades, the regulatory framework in the sector has formally incorporated the activity of solid waste recovery.

In 2016, the government enacted Decree 596, later amended by Decree 1381 of 2024, which established the regulatory basis for defining the operational model of waste recovery within the public sanitation service. It also introduced a transitional regime for the formalisation of recycling work across the country. This allowed waste pickers to access payment through the sanitation service tariff, thereby formally recognising the work they have historically carried out.

The tariff for the recovery activity corresponds to a payment made by all users and is calculated based on the tonnes reported by each service provider. In line with the intent of the regulation, this payment should be passed on to each waste picker belonging to a recognised organisation. This opened the door for each waste picker to receive, in addition to income from selling materials, an additional payment for service provision—issued either monthly or every two months.

This framework required waste pickers to organise themselves as associations, cooperatives, or foundations, which is a prerequisite to being recognised as service providers and thus qualifying for tariff payments. As a result, most waste pickers in the country are now part of formal organisations. However, because the formalisation process is gradual, being part of an organisation does not guarantee access to social security or other labour rights. For this reason, this study refers to “informally organised waste pickers” as those who are members of a waste picker organisation but do not have access to social security.

Accordingly, and for the purposes of this study, the majority of waste pickers in Colombia are informally organised: they are affiliated with a waste picker organisation but do not receive social benefits (such as health insurance [EPS], occupational risk insurance [ARL], or pension contributions). No formally organised waste pickers were identified, as the reality is that none of the organisations currently cover social security costs due to their high expense. Meanwhile, the few independent waste pickers operating in the country are mainly homeless individuals who do not engage in recycling as a regular occupation.

4. A – CURRENT INCOME OF WASTE PICKERS

The waste picker population in Colombia plays an important role in reducing the volume of waste sent to landfills and increasing the share that is reintegrated into circular economy value chains. Most have been compelled to take up this work due to a lack of opportunities, barriers to accessing other types of employment, and the need to generate income independently. As this

occupation does not require a contract or fixed working hours, their earnings depend on the amount of material they deliver to the Waste Sorting and Recovery Stations (ECAs) operated by their organisations.

According to the survey, 91% of respondents identified as informally organised waste pickers. While they are part of a waste picker organisation, they receive no social security benefits from it. The remaining 9% described themselves as formally organised, affiliated with an organisation and receiving at least one form of social protection—whether occupational risk insurance (ARL), health insurance (EPS), pension contributions, or all three. None of the respondents identified as independent waste pickers. All surveyed waste pickers were affiliated with a waste picker organisation. Independent waste pickers—often people experiencing homelessness—typically hand over materials to whoever is involved in recycling commercialisation.

Due to poor household waste separation, waste pickers are forced to remove recoverable materials from street bins or bags before the municipal collection trucks arrive. As a result, 53% of respondents collect material directly from the streets, while 47% collect from residential complexes or commercial establishments acting as fixed collection points.

Working hours are part-time and vary significantly. Seventeen percent reported working 3–5 hours a day, 53% between 6–9 hours, and 30% over 10 hours per day. In terms of frequency, 23% work 2–3 days per week, 42% work 4–6 days, and 26% work every day. Regarding alternative income sources, 16% engage in informal sales (catalogue products, second-hand goods, street food, etc.), 10% occasionally take on domestic work such as cooking or cleaning, and 74% rely solely on recycling as their main source of income.

On average, survey participants reported earning COP \$834,286.89 per month from material sales and COP \$139,129 from the sanitation service tariff, for a total average monthly income of COP \$973,416.23. The standard deviation in income was COP \$796,959. Notably, 30% of respondents (all in Barranquilla) said they do not receive the tariff payment—likely due to a lack of awareness of their right, which allows some organisations to avoid distributing this income.

Reported income is also linked to vehicle access for material collection and transport: 40% use human-powered carts, 25% have no vehicle, 21% use motorbikes or motorised tricycles, 10% use pedal-assisted tricycles, and 5% use alternative transport such as market trolleys.

4.1. Survey Results: Self-Reported Income and Material Collection

Figure 4 presents income by material type, based on survey responses. Rigid plastic, aluminium, and cardboard generate the highest income, due to the relationship between market price, weight per kilogram, and material availability, as detailed below:

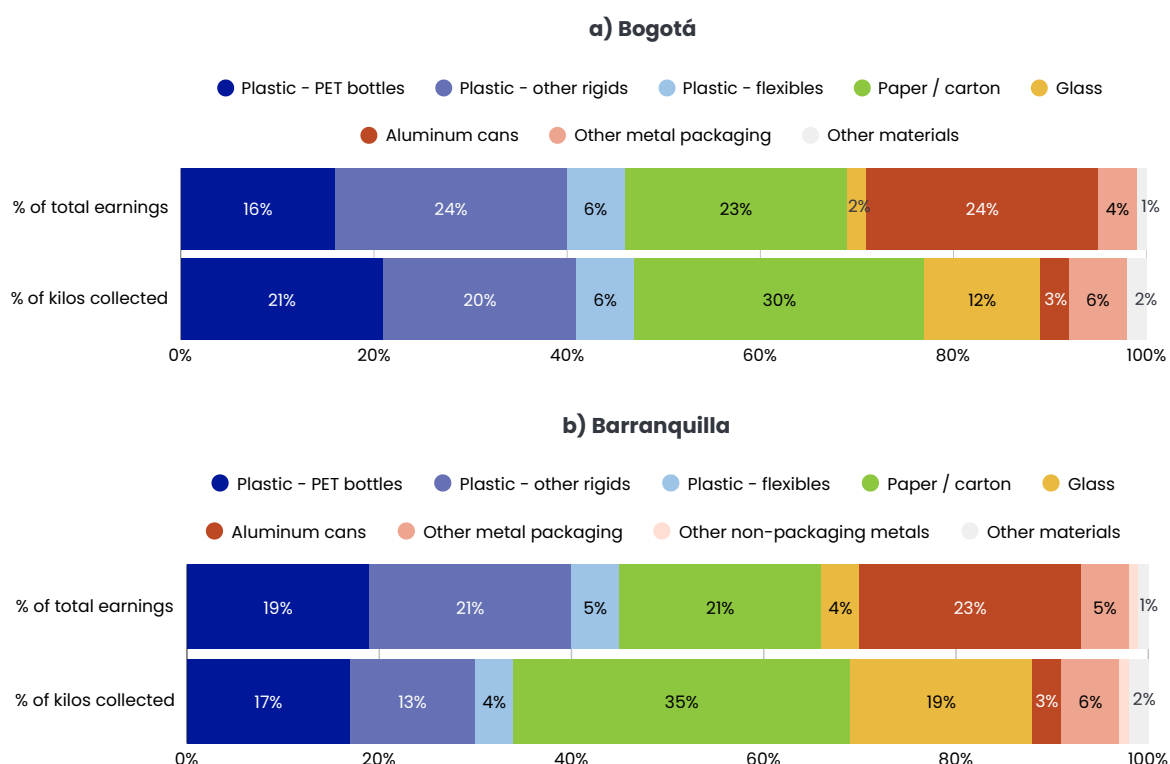


Figure 4. Percentage of income and kilograms collected by material type (based on survey data).
(a) Bogotá, (b) Barranquilla

Aluminium, while ranking third lowest in collection volume (3%), contributes significantly to income (23%) due to its high price per kilogram. Conversely, glass is collected more (16%) but yields only 3% of income. Cardboard and PET show proportional collection and income shares—22% and 33% for cardboard, and 18% and 19% for PET.

4.2. Organisational Reports: Incentives Plan Data

CEMPRE, through its programmes in these two cities, holds primary data on both the collection percentages and income shares by material type, based on over 300 waste pickers from the 15 waste picker organisations that participated in the survey. The information presented in Figure 5 is drawn from the monthly reports submitted by each organisation (from January to June 2025) as part of their participation in the Incentives Plan—an institutional strengthening strategy run through the *Movimiento Re* and *Reciclar Tiene Valor Bogotá* initiatives. The plan aims to increase material recovery and offset income losses from low-value materials. As part of this strategy, a monthly food voucher worth COP \$45,000 is awarded to approximately 50% of the waste pickers who show the greatest increase in material collection within each organisation. Therefore, each organisation must submit monthly reports detailing the total material collected by each waste picker, by type, to evaluate performance and determine voucher recipients.

The consolidated data from these Incentives Plan reports—comparing material type collection with the income each material generates—is presented below:

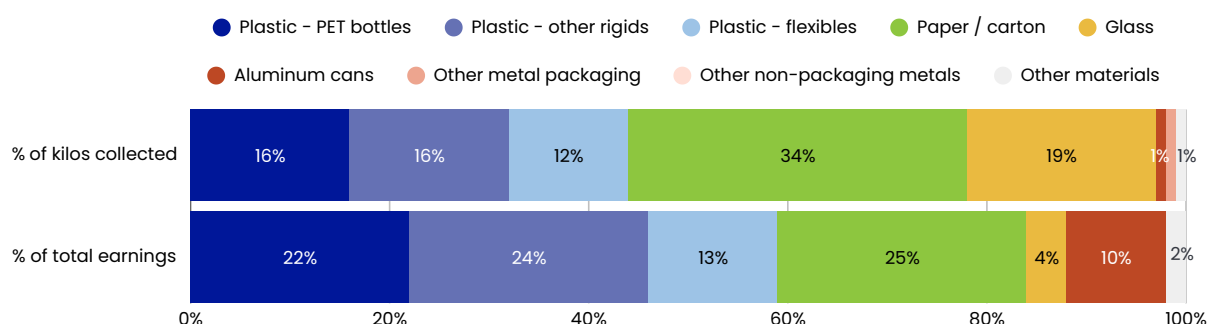


Figure 5. Percentage of income and kilograms collected by type of material. Based on information provided by Movimiento Re and Reciclar Tiene Valor, under the Incentives Plan

According to the average data reported through the Incentives Plan, materials such as cardboard/paper, rigid plastic and PET generate the highest levels of income. When analysing aluminium, it ranks fourth in terms of income (10%) despite representing only 1% of the total kilograms collected—making it the second least collected material by weight. Aluminium is highlighted here because it showed the greatest variation between the survey results and the data reported by the organisations in terms of income versus volume. The rest of the materials showed similar proportions across both sources.

4.3. Estimation of Waste Picker Earnings

Of the 81 waste pickers surveyed, 45 worked in Barranquilla and 36 in Bogotá. In general terms, the sources of material collection, the typology of the waste picker, and the frequency and method of payment were very similar across both regions. The data that showed the most significant variation was gender distribution, as illustrated in Figure 6.

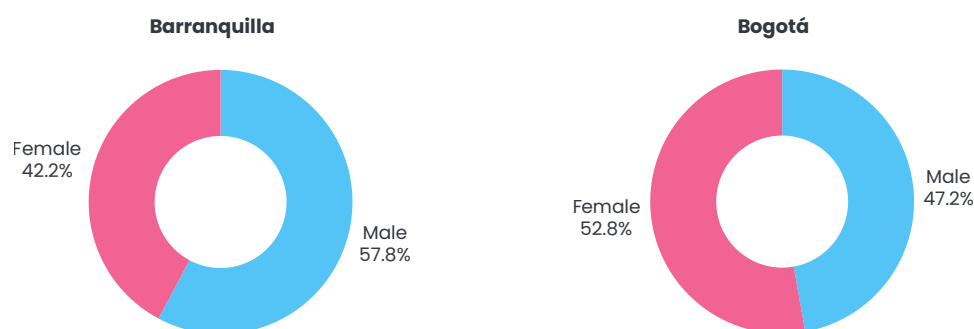


Figure 6. Gender distribution of the surveyed population by region

Another data point that showed a marked difference was the income received by waste pickers. In Barranquilla, 24 out of the 45 surveyed waste pickers reported not receiving income from the public service tariff for recyclable collection—representing 53% of respondents in that city. This may be due to a lack of awareness of their right to the tariff or because their organisation fails to pass the payment on to them. In contrast, 100% of surveyed waste pickers in Bogotá reported receiving the tariff. The absence of this income—which is meant to complement earnings from material sales—has a direct impact on overall income.

According to **Figure 7**, waste pickers in Barranquilla earn an average monthly income of COP \$833,611, which is nearly 27% lower than the average monthly income of a waste picker in Bogotá, which stands at COP \$1,148,173.

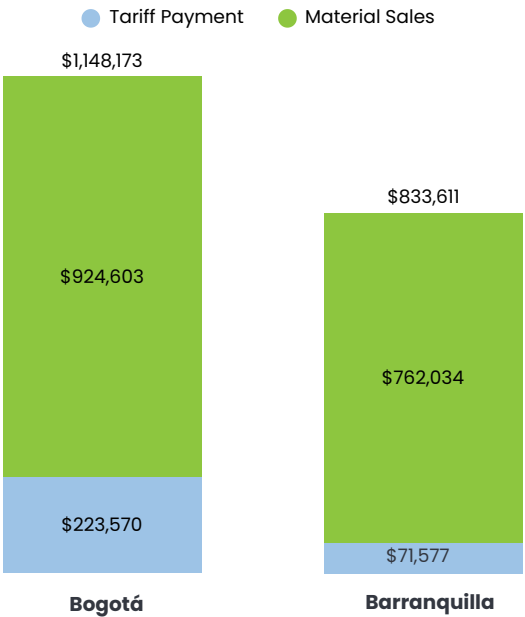


Figure 7. Average income per waste picker by region (values in COP\$)

This income disparity may seem contradictory when compared with how waste pickers perceive their living income in each city. The survey revealed that in Barranquilla, waste pickers tend to view their work positively and believe it allows them to meet their basic needs. In contrast, in Bogotá, waste pickers are generally more dissatisfied, feeling that the income does not reflect the amount of work required and is insufficient to cover their expenses.

When comparing perceived income levels reported by respondents with the data collected from the Incentives Plan reports, it was found that in Barranquilla, waste pickers believe they earn more than they actually do. The opposite occurs in Bogotá, where respondents believe they earn less than their actual income. This discrepancy may be related to the price per kilogram paid for each type of material, which varies between the two cities and is, in some cases, higher in Bogotá. Figure 8 illustrates income from the commercialisation of recyclable material in both Bogotá and Barranquilla, comparing survey data with that of the Incentives Plan.

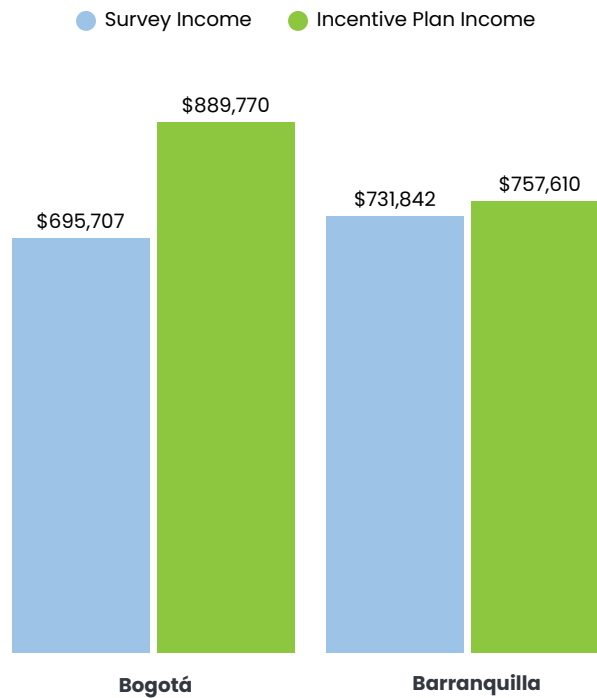


Figure 8. Income from commercialisation of materials – comparison between survey results, Incentives Plan, and price surveys in Bogotá and Barranquilla (values in COP\$)

This perception gap is directly related to the total kilograms of material collected per waste picker. The perception of kilograms collected (according to respondents) versus actual data from the Incentives Plan mirrors the perception of income: in Barranquilla, waste pickers believe they collect more than they do in reality, while in Bogotá, they believe they collect less than the actual amount.

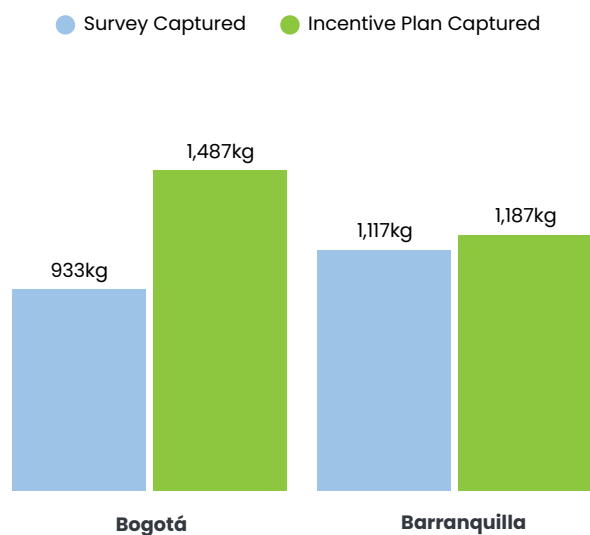


Figure 9. Perceived kilograms of collected material – comparison between survey results and Incentives Plan data in Bogotá and Barranquilla (values in kg)

When income is broken down by city and by type of material—based on actual quantities collected and income received, as reported through the Incentives Plan—it was found that materials like cardboard, PET, and other recyclables show a fairly proportional relationship

between collection and income. However, for materials like aluminium, glass, and rigid plastic, differences emerge. In the case of glass, collection rates are higher in Bogotá, resulting in a 10-percentage-point increase over Barranquilla. As for rigid plastic, it generates a higher share of income in Bogotá—ranking as the second most profitable material—while in Barranquilla, it ranks fourth.

It is also important to note that in both regions, there are clear differences in the prices paid to waste pickers for the materials they collect. According to the price survey, higher prices per kilogram are typically paid in Bogotá than in Barranquilla. This may be due to the centralisation of processing industries or the greater availability of materials in the capital, which has higher recycling rates.

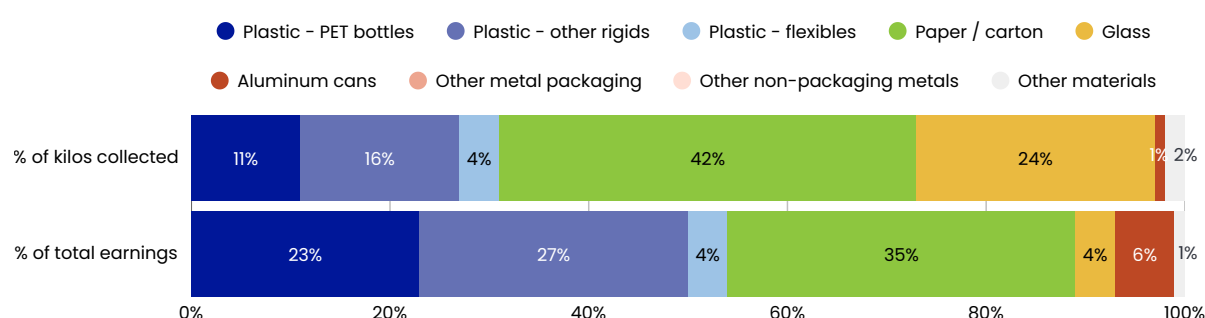


Figure 10. Percentage of income and kilograms collected by type of material. Based on information provided by *Reciclar Tiene Valor*, Incentives Plan participation for the city of Bogotá

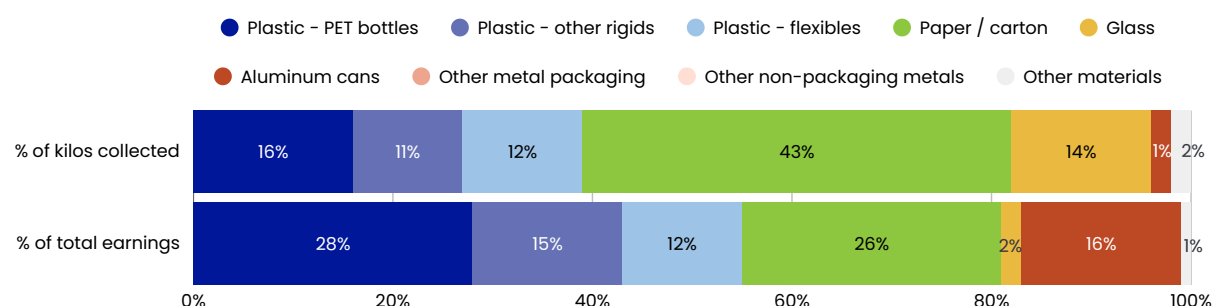


Figure 11. Percentage of income and kilograms collected by type of material. Based on information provided by *Movimiento Re*, Incentives Plan participation for the city of Barranquilla

In Colombia, recycling is often perceived as a complementary source of income rather than a full-time occupation for professional waste pickers. As a result, some members of the general population commercialise their own recyclables, thereby limiting access for waste pickers and reducing their potential earnings. Furthermore, it is common for non-recycling actors to demand payment in exchange for handing over recyclable materials, which increases operational costs and reduces the net income of the waste pickers.

This situation is further exacerbated by the community's poor waste separation practices, which leads to many recoverable materials ending up in landfills. In addition, fluctuating material prices and the lack of adequate transport vehicles restrict the potential for waste pickers to increase their income. This forces them to travel longer distances to collect recyclables, while the returns from some materials are disproportionately low in relation to the physical effort required for

collection and transportation. In certain instances, seasonal fluctuations can reduce the value of materials by over 50%.

The survey shows that the waste picker population in Colombia plays a vital role in the circular economy and in reducing landfill waste, but continues to face precarious working conditions that severely limit their quality of life. For example, 7% of respondents reported having no permanent housing—they are either homeless or live at their place of work. Most operate informally, without proper access to social security, and rely solely on recycling as their main source of income—one that is unstable and fails to meet the minimum threshold set by the national government to cover basic household needs.

Unfair competition, inadequate waste separation by the public, limited access to appropriate transport vehicles, and ongoing social discrimination all directly affect their productivity and income. Moreover, while certain materials generate higher income per kilogram, their low availability limits their economic impact, whereas more abundant materials often do not sufficiently compensate the effort due to their low prices.

5. B – ESTIMATION OF A LIVING INCOME

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), a living household income is one that enables the coverage of basic needs and promotes the overall wellbeing of its members, ensuring effective access to fundamental rights and the potential for development throughout the life cycle. In Colombia, there is no single official measurement of a "living income", but values can be approximated using national standards such as the minimum wage, the basic basket from DANE (National Administrative Department of Statistics), the MPI (Multidimensional Poverty Index), and international benchmarks.

The cost of a healthy diet refers to the monthly expenditure a household must make for all its members to have access to sufficient, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food. In Colombia, DANE calculates an extreme poverty line based on the minimum caloric cost of COP \$200,000 per person/month in 2024—this, however, only covers basic survival. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that in 2025, the cost of a healthy diet in Colombia is roughly 3–4 times this extreme poverty line—between \$600,000 and \$800,000 per person per month. Therefore, the monthly cost of a healthy diet for a four-member household is estimated at \$1,765,706.

In terms of the cost of dignified housing, this includes rent or mortgage, public utilities, and minimum maintenance. According to DANE's Quality of Life Survey and market data, average rent in cities like Barranquilla and Bogotá for a family of four is around \$1,000,000. Adding basic services, the total monthly cost for dignified housing comes to approximately \$1,250,000.

Breaking down housing costs by region (given that the cost of living is generally higher in Bogotá), the rent per square metre in Bogotá is about \$43,000. A 40 m² dwelling would cost approximately \$1,720,000. In contrast, in Barranquilla, rent averages \$28,000 per square metre, resulting in a cost of \$1,120,000 for the same-sized dwelling—housing being the category with the greatest variation among the living income components.

In Colombia, access to healthcare is available through either the contributory or subsidised system. However, additional costs such as co-payments, non-covered (non-POS) medications, transport, and private services can be significant. The minimum cost for healthcare under the contributory regime was calculated based on the contributions of a worker earning a minimum wage (\$1,423,500 in 2025): 8.5% from the employer and 4% from the worker, equalling a monthly health contribution of \$178,000. For this study, the estimate considers two adults covered by family affiliation, plus additional costs such as transportation and co-payments (e.g. \$4,700 per medical consultation or exam for those earning under 2 minimum wages). As such, total estimated monthly health expenses are \$450,000.

Education expenses depend on the age and level of education, and whether the household accesses public or private schooling. Estimated basic education costs—including school supplies, transport, and uniforms—total approximately \$400,000, based on a recent report by the WorldRemit platform.

The cost of dignified work includes transport, suitable clothing, personal protective equipment (PPE), and access to basic tools. The average monthly transport cost for one person using public transport in Colombia is around \$146,866. This value is doubled for two adults in a four-person household. Additionally, work clothing is estimated at \$70,000 per month. Altogether, dignified work costs are estimated at \$375,000.

Savings are estimated at 10% of the total living income (\$424,071). Summing all the components, the estimated base living income for a household of four people is \$4,240,706 per month in Barranquilla.

6. C – COMPARABLE INCOMES OR MINIMUM WAGE

Comparable income for workers with similar levels of informality can be drawn from sectors such as agriculture and construction. According to the Colombian Agricultural Society (SAC), in 2023, *jornaleros* (day labourers who work eight-hour days in agriculture) earned an average of COP \$560,295 per month, as independent workers in the sector. For 2025, this amount is estimated to have risen to \$962,680.99, accounting for inflation rates based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI): 9.28% in 2023 and 5.2% in 2024.

Regarding construction workers, data from two major Colombian job platforms – Computrabajo and Indeed (June 2025) – indicate that the average monthly salary of a construction worker ranges between \$1,394,709 and \$1,642,343. When factoring in legal benefits (including the 13th-month bonus paid mid-year and at year-end), severance pay, health and pension contributions, and the 2025 transport subsidy of \$200,000, the overall average income of a formal construction worker in Colombia is approximately \$1,761,105.

In this context, the average income of a waste picker more closely aligns with that of a worker in the agricultural sector, particularly when considering the informal and independent nature of these occupations in Colombia – which, in most cases, do not include access to social security or the minimum guaranteed income of a formal worker.

7. KEY LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The working conditions of waste pickers in Colombia present significant challenges. Many currently lack the rights and protections granted to formal workers under labour law: they do not earn a decent wage that fairly compensates their labour nor a minimum income sufficient to meet their households' basic needs. As a result, many are forced—along with their families—to live in precarious conditions, with limited access to adequate food and housing. The situation is particularly severe in a sector where much of the workforce is over 50 years old and relies on recycling as their sole source of income due to the lack of alternative employment opportunities.

It is important to recognise that, compared to a decade ago, there have been improvements. Today, the role of waste pickers is more widely acknowledged as a legitimate profession worthy of respect and value, thanks to public policies such as Decree 596 of 2016 and Decree 1381 of 2024. These regulations have granted waste pickers a central role in waste management, establishing that recovery activities must be carried out exclusively by waste pickers and their organisations.

To ensure full rights for waste pickers, it is crucial to enforce the current legal framework (Decree 1381 of 2024) and to promote progressive formalisation programmes, including universal affiliation to social protection schemes (healthcare, occupational risk insurance, and pension), as well as recognition of their rights as providers of public recovery services. It is also essential to improve access to higher-capacity and better-conditioned vehicles (such as motorised tricycles or cargo bikes) through subsidised credit schemes or financial support, enabling more efficient collection routes and improved productivity.

This effort must be accompanied by the strengthening of waste picker organisations, equipping them with the skills and tools needed to fulfil their responsibilities in terms of reporting, fair payment for materials, transfer of the service fee, and income transparency—ensuring that benefits effectively reach the workers. Technology platforms should also be implemented to enable transparent traceability that register collected materials per kilogram and disclose payment prices.

Mass environmental education campaigns should be intensified, particularly to improve source separation of waste by households, businesses and residential complexes. This would reduce the burden on waste pickers and minimise their need to sort through mixed waste. Community outreach and awareness programmes must also be introduced to tackle the stigmatisation and discrimination of waste pickers, recognising their essential role in environmental protection and in achieving Colombia's circular economy goals.

In terms of the scope, design future research to assess waste picker income in regions beyond major urban centres. Including intermediate cities like Villavicencio, Eje Cafetero, or Yopal would offer a more inclusive national picture. Investigate potential "exit pathways" for waste pickers facing declining income — such as informal construction, street vending, or moto-taxi services — to understand risks of labour migration and the implications for material recovery. Pay particular attention to the most vulnerable among waste pickers, including homeless individuals engaged in recycling, whose conditions and roles are not currently captured in organisational frameworks.

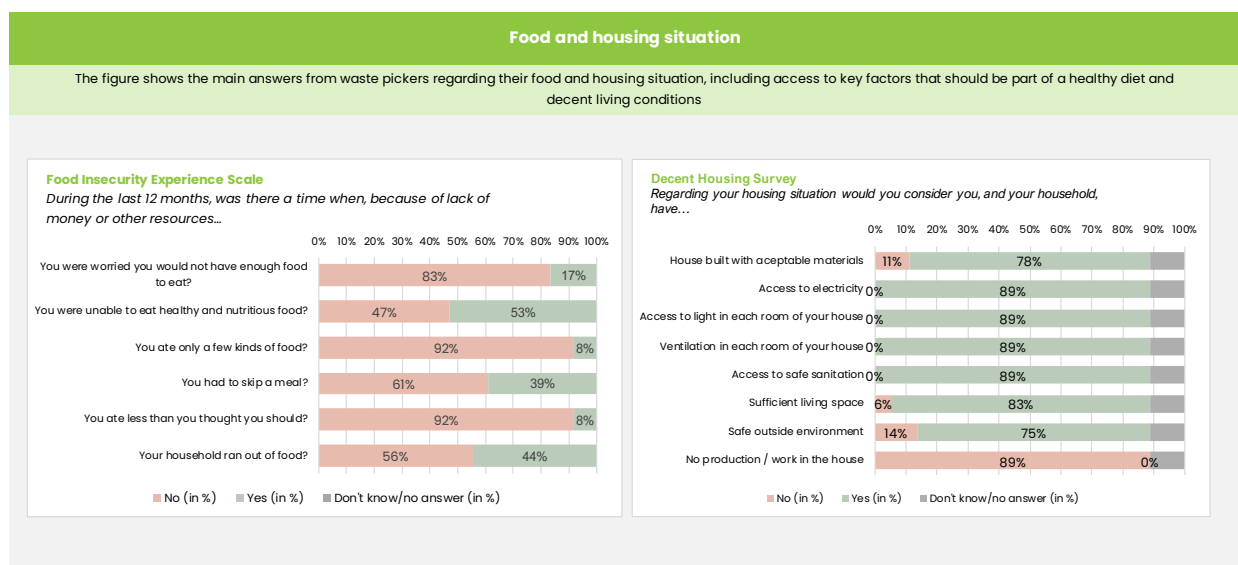
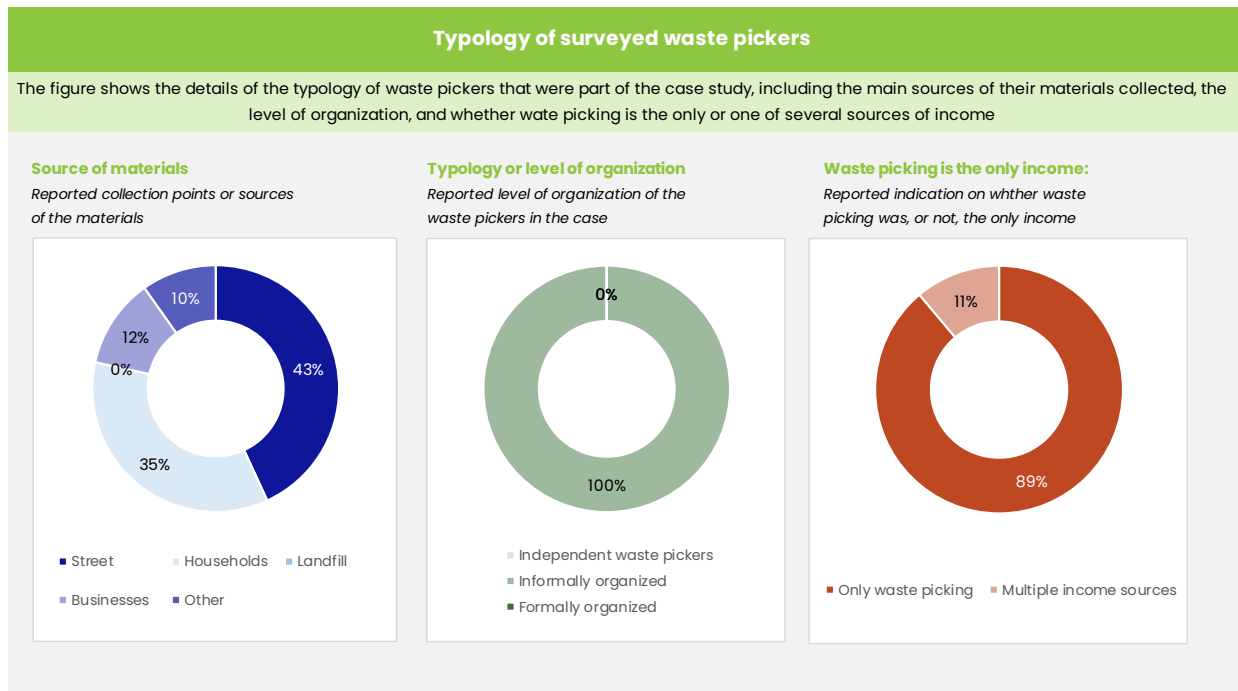
Policies should be developed to mitigate the volatility of recyclable material prices—through stabilisation funds or public procurement schemes—and expand economic incentive programmes (e.g. bonuses or differential tariffs) for those who increase the volume of material recovered. These measures would help ensure that waste pickers receive fair and stable incomes in line with the social and environmental value of their work.

8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our sincere thanks to the waste picker organisations and waste pickers who participated in the study, whose voices and experiences were essential to the development of this report. Their commitment was key to shedding light on the conditions, needs, and challenges faced by the recycling sector in Colombia.

9. ANNEX 1 – ADDITIONAL INFORMATION & FIGURES

9.1. BOGOTÁ



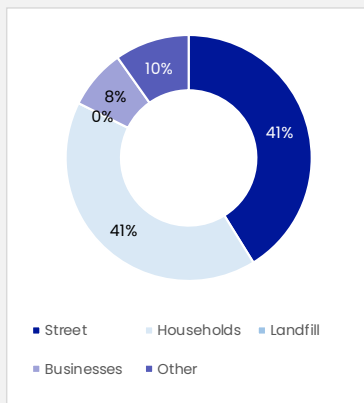
9.2. BARRANQUILLA

Typology of surveyed waste pickers

The figure shows the details of the typology of waste pickers that were part of the case study, including the main sources of their materials collected, the level of organization, and whether waste picking is the only or one of several sources of income

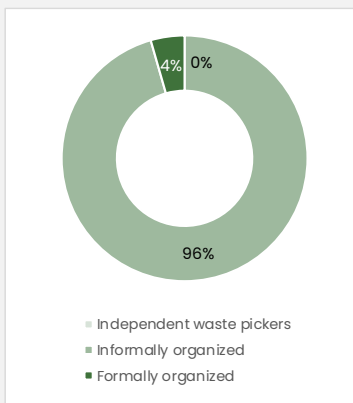
Source of materials

Reported collection points or sources of the materials



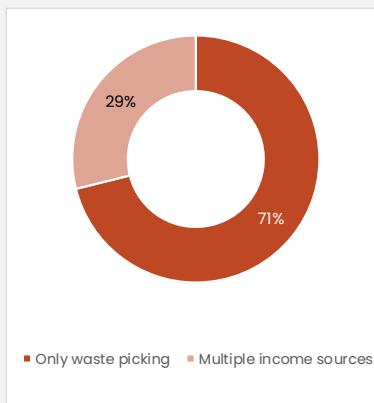
Typology or level of organization

Reported level of organization of the waste pickers in the case



Waste picking is the only income:

Reported indication on whether waste picking was, or not, the only income

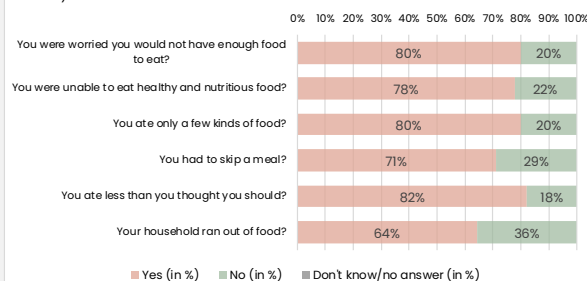


Food and housing situation

The figure shows the main answers from waste pickers regarding their food and housing situation, including access to key factors that should be part of a healthy diet and decent living conditions

Food Insecurity Experience Scale

During the last 12 months, was there a time when, because of lack of money or other resources...



Decent Housing Survey

Regarding your housing situation would you consider you, and your household, have...

