

CASE STUDY REPORT



Interview at Coopere-Centro (Cooperative for Work, Production, and Service Provision of Self-Employed Recyclable Material Collectors – Coopere-Centro).

Study Location	<i>São Paulo</i>
Organization or Researcher Who Conducted the Case Study	<i>Green Franquias Sociais</i>
Dates	<i>May to July 2025</i>

Introduction and Approach

This study aims to evaluate the concept of “decent income” for informal waste workers in the city of São Paulo, considering their working conditions, income, and quality of life.

The observed context shows that most informal waste pickers live on the streets, without access to adequate housing, food, or hygiene, relying on donations and facing exhausting workdays, often on steep terrain, which increases physical strain. Formal waste pickers generally have housing, albeit precarious, usually in peripheral areas, and enjoy greater family stability, though they share similar socioeconomic challenges. Many participants have histories marked by social exclusion, including drug use, incarceration, abuse, and family abandonment.

The research was conducted by Green Franquias, with two interviewers responsible for field diagnosis and a support team for logistics. Data collection took place in central São Paulo, covering the neighborhoods of Liberdade, Pinheiros, and Bom Retiro, working with the cooperatives Cooper Glicério, Coopamare, and Coopere Centro. The sample included formal waste pickers active in these locations and informal waste pickers who sell their materials at these units.

The methodology consisted of face-to-face questionnaires, lasting approximately one hour per interview, ensuring higher quality and contextualized responses. A total of 42 waste pickers were interviewed: 18 independents, 2 informally organized, and 22 formally organized. Although initial contact attempts were made through organizations and support institutions, effective access to the sample occurred through direct contact with the cooperatives, which proved more receptive and allowed the complete execution of the study.

A - Current earnings of waste pickers

Waste pickers form a heterogeneous group, predominantly composed of individuals in socioeconomically vulnerable situations who find in this activity an alternative means of survival amid the lack of formal employment opportunities. Many enter this work out of immediate financial need, while others follow family tradition, as recycling has become a historic occupation within their households. Regardless of initial motivation, the professional trajectory of waste pickers is marked by structural and economic challenges that directly affect their income-generating capacity.

The observed classification identifies three main typologies: independent waste pickers who work alone, typically using human-powered carts, covering streets and small businesses without access to large volumes or waste generators; informally organized waste pickers who maintain a minimal structure, often familial, with some investments such as motorized vehicles and sorting spaces; and formally organized waste pickers linked to associations or cooperatives, which provide adequate facilities, protective equipment, transport vehicles, and defined organizational processes, enabling access to large generators and regular supply contracts.

Most waste pickers work full-time, dedicating between 4 and 17 hours daily to collection, averaging 9.5 hours, yet still earn limited incomes. Material sources vary by typology:

independents collect from streets and small commerce; formal workers handle waste from large companies and institutional contracts. Events, renovations, and seasonal periods directly impact available collection volumes. Paper and cardboard are present in nearly all collections, while aluminum, having higher added value, is targeted by about 80% of waste pickers. Glass, due to its low value and heavy weight, is rarely collected by informal workers.

Income derives almost exclusively from selling recyclables, with average values ranging from R\$0.35 to R\$0.80/kg for paper and cardboard, R\$2.00 to R\$3.00/kg for PET, and R\$8.00 to R\$9.00/kg for aluminum, fluctuating according to market conditions and material quality. Only two interviewees reported additional income from collection services. Key buyers include final recyclers, intermediaries, scrap dealers, cooperatives, and material banks, with final recyclers offering the best payments, though they are not always accessible to informal pickers who depend on intermediaries and receive below-market prices.

Alternative income sources identified include social benefits like Bolsa Família, essential for supplementing basic expenses and providing minimal security amid work instability, as well as occasional jobs such as bricklaying, machine operation, environmental education lecturing, equipment transport, retirement, and digital content creation. However, these additional incomes represent a small share of the household budget and do not eliminate vulnerability.

Access to tools and transportation strongly influences productivity: 16 waste pickers use human-pulled carts, 2 use shopping carts, and only the 22 formally organized workers have access to trucks, enabling greater reach and collection volume. Lack of adequate equipment limits collection capacity and thus income.

Main constraints to income improvement include competition among pickers, adverse physical conditions (such as steep collection areas), wear or inadequacy of carts, limited time, price instability and low sale prices, reduced productivity due to age or fragile health, lack of sorting and storage space, limited availability of materials, and poor quality of collected waste.

Power dynamics in the recycling chain favor buyers and intermediaries, restricting waste pickers' bargaining power, especially informal ones. Buyer concentration in certain regions reinforces dependence on intermediaries who set prices below market levels. This economic fragility worsens with housing and food insecurity: some waste pickers live on the streets, exposed to violence and deprivation, struggling to maintain basic hygiene, access potable water, and adequate food. Those in precarious housing, such as peripheral areas and informal settlements, face risks of armed conflict, unsanitary conditions, and lack of regular infrastructure.

The analysis shows that waste pickers' incomes remain low due to structural, economic, and social factors: limited access to end markets, dependence on intermediaries, unstable prices, physical and logistical constraints, and lack of structured public support for training and formalization. Opportunities for improvement include expanding direct sales channels to reduce intermediaries, investing in equipment and vehicles, strengthening collective organization, providing technical training, and ensuring social security and labor inclusion. Support programs for logistics and credit access to purchase equipment can increase productivity and profit margins. These measures, combined with targeted public policies and

institutional partnerships, hold significant potential to reduce the socioeconomic vulnerability of waste pickers and promote dignified and sustainable working and income conditions.

B - Estimate of a living income

The estimate of a living income for recyclable material collectors is constructed based on the analysis of essential components to ensure a minimally adequate standard of living, considering the local reality identified through interviews and secondary data. The calculation begins with the cost of a healthy diet, estimated at R\$ 1064 per person per month, a value based on a SYSTEMIQ study aligned with a balanced and culturally appropriate diet, including access to fresh foods, proteins, and essential nutrients.

Regarding housing, the average cost found including water, electricity, and sewage is approximately R\$ 1,952 considering neighborhoods such as Guaianases, Centro, and Vila Prudente in the study.

Regarding healthcare, it was found that the waste pickers rely entirely on the Brazilian Unified Health System (SUS), with no regular expenses for health plans or medications. However, occasional costs may arise for transportation and for medicines not covered. In terms of education, it was observed that children attend public schools and benefit from municipal policies that provide uniforms and school supplies, with expenses limited to occasional costs such as transportation, school meals, or tutoring.

Since the specific amounts for healthcare and education could not be determined in the survey, 5% of the total amount of R\$ 425 was allocated to each of these areas (equivalent to R\$ 212.38 for healthcare and R\$ 212.38 for education). These estimates were adopted to ensure the minimum inclusion of these essential expenses in the calculation, recognizing the indispensable role of healthcare and education in ensuring a dignified life.

In the city of São Paulo, the cost of decent work for waste pickers can also be observed in the experience of a model cooperative that meets all legal, fiscal, and dignity requirements. In this context, the cooperative member, recognized as a partner, has as main expenses food (breakfast and lunch) at R\$60 per day, totaling R\$1,320 for 22 working days, plus R\$50 for PPE maintenance. Transportation is also included, with two daily bus fares at R\$5.90 each, amounting to R\$259.60 per month. The social security contribution (INSS), amounting to R\$535 per month (20%), guarantees social protection and access to governmental benefits. Considering all items, the total monthly cost to ensure decent working conditions in São Paulo reaches R\$2,164.60. As in other cities, the reality of informal waste pickers remains marked by precariousness, while cooperatives that comply with labor standards are essential to ensure dignity, safety, adequate working conditions, and technical and commercial support.

Additionally, a savings reserve equivalent to 10% of monthly costs (R\$ 561) was included, ensuring a financial safety margin for unforeseen events and enabling medium- and long-term planning.

For comparison, average incomes of similar occupations were analyzed: R\$ 1,894.89 for agricultural workers and R\$ 2,190.00 for unskilled construction workers. Average earnings for

jobs comparable to collectors were obtained through research from major media outlets and data from the São Paulo construction workers' union.

The estimated living income for a full-time worker is R\$ 3,544. This amount was calculated based on the total cost of a family living income, estimated at R\$ 6,166, according to the survey findings. To determine the individual income, the average of 1.74 full-time workers per household also obtained from the same survey was considered, dividing the family cost by this number.

This scenario contrasts with the official poverty lines in the country, set at R\$ 209.00 per capita per month for extreme poverty and R\$ 665.00 for poverty, according to the updated 2023 Cadastro Único criteria. These references highlight the gap between the income effectively earned by collectors and the minimum level necessary to guarantee decent living conditions, reinforcing the importance of public policies and institutional initiatives aimed at improving the income and working conditions of this social group.

C - Comparable Incomes or Minimum Wage

The analysis of comparable incomes and the necessary minimum wage is being conducted by considering occupations that require similar physical effort, demand low formal qualifications, and have socioeconomic insertion close to the reality of waste pickers. Reference salaries include the average wages of agricultural workers, estimated at R\$ 1,894.89, and construction workers, at R\$ 2.190, excluding more specialized roles. Also considered is the remuneration of street sweepers, a formal category performing activities analogous to waste collection and sorting, whose average monthly salary in São Paulo is R\$ 1,791 according to the collective agreement of SIEMACO-SP.

Additionally, the individual living income of R\$ 3,544 is considered, calculated from the family living income value of R\$ 6,166 divided by the average of 1.74 workers per household. The choice of these parameters is guided by the similarity of working conditions, the informality and low specialization present in the occupations compared, as well as the use of regional and sectoral data that provide greater accuracy to the analyzed socioeconomic context.

The assessment also considers the current official poverty and extreme poverty lines, set at R\$ 665.00 and R\$ 209.00 per capita per month, respectively, according to the CadÚnico updated after the 2023 reformulation of the Bolsa Família Program.

These indicators enable positioning the income of waste pickers within the framework of socioeconomic vulnerability, highlighting the significant gap between their earnings and the minimum amount necessary to ensure adequate living conditions.

Key Learnings and Recommendations

The work of waste pickers in São Paulo is characterized by intense physical effort, exposure to contaminated or sharp materials, and insecurity in the streets, all in exchange for an income still far below the value of the labor provided. In addition to the strenuous conditions, these workers face social devaluation, lack of government incentives, and prejudice, which further

increases their vulnerability. On the other hand, for many, recycling represents more than a source of income: it is a pathway to social reintegration, with testimonies of overcoming addictions, leaving illicit activities behind, and achieving stability and purpose.

Collection activities are strategically organized. Paper and cardboard lead both in volume (36%) and income (26%) due to their wide availability, ease of transport, and constant demand—especially driven by e-commerce and commercial waste disposal. Glass accounts for 15% of the volume and 6% of the income, collected mainly from bars, markets, and restaurants, where there is high concentration and easy access. Although heavy and of low value per kilogram, glass remains viable for cooperatives, which have the infrastructure and vehicles necessary for transporting large volumes. Aluminum, while representing only 4% of the volume, generates 16% of the income, reflecting its high value per weight, despite being less available and more time-consuming to collect. Among plastics, PET accounts for 7% of the volume and 10% of the income; rigid plastics for 8% and 14%, respectively; and flexible plastics (such as bags and films) for 3% in both volume and income. Despite their abundance, flexible plastics have low economic attractiveness, as large quantities are required to reach a profitable weight, combined with a low resale value.

Waste pickers' income is directly linked to their level of formalization: formal workers earn the highest incomes, followed by those informally organized, while fully informal workers record the lowest earnings. Factors that positively influence income and well-being include access to motorized vehicles, adequate equipment, structured workspaces, collective organization, and direct sales to buyers who pay fairer prices. For informal waste pickers, feasible improvements include replacing human-powered carts with ergonomic or motorized models, running awareness campaigns on proper waste separation, and strengthening cooperatives. However, barriers persist, such as lack of documentation, challenges in meeting formal requirements, and preference for the flexibility of informality.

Priority public policies should include formalization and training programs, integration of waste pickers into municipal waste management, issuance of identification documents, provision of PPE, access to suitable workspaces, and mechanisms to ensure fair trade. The private sector can also contribute by establishing minimum prices, facilitating access to more profitable markets, and investing in inclusive partnerships with cooperatives.

During the study, researchers faced difficulties in reaching informal waste pickers due to the absence of official mapping and the limited availability of these workers, even when financial compensation for interviews was offered. These limitations underscore the urgent need for policies that promote engagement, recognition, and appreciation of waste pickers, who play an essential role in urban sustainability.