

# What really happens to old clothes dropped in those in-store recycling bins

 [cbc.ca/news/business/clothes-recycling-marketplace-1.4493490](https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/clothes-recycling-marketplace-1.4493490)

If you've been to a mall recently you might have spotted something new. Clothing donation bins are popping up in more and more retail chains.

Some of the biggest names in fashion have launched take-back programs. They want you to donate your unwanted clothes, shoes, curtains, even underwear. In some cases, shoppers get a coupon or discount on a future purchase.

*Marketplace* surveyed the labels on retailers' in-store donation bins and found they include a number of reuse and recycling claims — including phrases like "creating the new" — that seem to imply old clothes will be made into new clothes.



H&M has one of the most widespread donation bin programs. (CBC)

H&M Group has the most established and widespread of the in-store recycling programs, with bins in many of its more than 4,200 stores worldwide.

The Swedish fashion giant details what it does with donations in colourful ad campaigns featuring messages like, "Shred it into fibres and stitch into something new," and "Let's tear your jeans into pieces and make new jeans out of them."

Customers are urged to donate "any clothes or home textiles that are no longer wanted or needed" so they can be "given a new purpose."

More often than not though, that new purpose doesn't mean being transformed into a new piece of clothing, but rather being resold — often in a country thousands of kilometres away from the point of sale.

That's because actually recycling clothes into other textiles, particularly new clothes, is costly and difficult.

## Not so easy

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Author and environmentalist Elizabeth Cline says less than one per cent of clothing is recycled to make new clothing.

I:Collect, the company that handles the donations for H&M and several other major retailers, says about 35 per cent of what it collects is recycled and used for products like carpet padding, painters' cloths or insulation.

Cline says it's not a matter of simply turning "your old clothes into new garments," as another of H&M's ads suggests.

That's because many of our clothes are made of blended fibres, so they don't break down easily.

When you recycle cotton and wool, for example, it diminishes the quality of the material, she says.

"It weakens the cotton and wool strand and gives you a lesser product."

H&M's own sustainability reports acknowledge the challenge. Of all of the material used to make its estimated half a billion garments a year, only 0.7 per cent is recycled material.



Author and environmentalist Elizabeth Cline is no fan of so-called fast-fashion retailers. Critics like Cline say they produce inexpensive trendy clothing that's meant to be bought, worn and then quickly discarded for something new. (CBC)

Cline is also skeptical about H&M's motivations for its take-back program.

"The reason why H&M is focusing on textile recycling is because it's an easy sustainability win for them. It doesn't involve them changing their production model at all."

She's critical of so-called fast-fashion retailers, chains she says produce large volumes of cheap, disposable clothing.

About 85 per cent of unwanted textiles in North America end up in landfills — which amounts to more than 11 billion kilograms a year.

## Business model to blame?

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Claudia Marsales, Markham, Ont.'s senior manager of waste and environmental management, says the city north of Toronto banned textiles from its landfills because there was so much of it. Markham is one of only two Canadian municipalities to do so, along with Colchester, N.S.

Like Cline, Marsales takes issue with fast fashion's business model.



Claudia Marsales is senior manager of waste and environmental management for Markham, Ont., one of only two Canadian municipalities to ban textiles from landfills. The other is Colchester, N.S. (CBC)

Her city defines the term as "inexpensive, trendy clothing designed and priced to be bought, worn, then quickly discarded."

She wonders if H&M's recycling program is actually more about driving "foot traffic into the store" — especially since the retailer offers a discount to buy more.

She says it would take H&M more than a decade to recycle what it sells in a matter of days.

H&M says "vouchers are a way to show old textiles have a great value," and can help "change the mindset."

## Technology gap

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The retailer's website has extensive information on its sustainability program but no specifics on what happens to clothes from its donation bins.

The company says it has collected more than 57,000 tonnes of used textiles since launching

the program worldwide in 2013.

Cecilia Brannsten, H&M's environmental sustainability manager, says the company doesn't "want to encourage a throwaway attitude," and that its clothes are high quality and made to last.

She says fashion recycling is challenging, particularly since the technology isn't yet sufficiently advanced to be applied on an industrial scale. But she's convinced it's where the industry needs to be focused to become more sustainable.

Jennifer Gilbert, chief marketing officer for I:Collect, the firm that handles donated clothes for H&M, Levi's, Adidas and Reebok, said in an email the company has collected more than 600,000 kilograms of old garments from its Canadian partners since 2013.

Most of the donations it collects end up in second-hand clothing markets, often in Africa and Central and South America.

## Burning clothes in Kenya

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Kenya is one of Canada's best customers for second-hand clothes. In 2016, Canada exported more than \$160 million worth of used textiles globally, with \$22 million of it going to Kenya.

Much of it, however, isn't good enough to be sold, and in many cases, ends up in the trash.

- **Charities, resellers feel the pinch of stiffer tariffs on second-hand clothing flooding East Africa**

"Sometimes they pack very old items," says Maina Andrew, a used-clothing importer who was sorting through a shipment from Canada at the Gikomba market as he spoke with a field producer for CBC.

Like most of the importers, Andrew buys in bulk and often doesn't know exactly what's in the bale until he opens it.

He says many of the clothes are low quality and tough to sell.



Not far from a market in Nairobi, Kenya, there are piles and bonfires of discarded clothes. (Carolyn Thompson)

"If people don't buy them, we just dump them."

Not far from the market, there are piles and bonfires of discarded clothes made by popular brands, some with recycling initiatives.

I:Collect told *Marketplace* it's investing in a waste collection and recycling business in Kenya and "would like to see collection systems in every country that imports second-hand clothes."

## What to do with old clothes?

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So, if clothes recycling isn't quite all it's cracked up to be — at least not yet — what are the best ways to empty our closets without adding to the piles in landfills?

Marsales says your best bet is to find a way to give your clothes a longer life.

Repair them when necessary rather than buying new ones.

Consider a clothing swap where you trade your old clothes with someone else. She also suggests giving them to friends and family who will wear them again.

- **MARKETPLACE| Walmart says it has reduced food waste by 20% since CBC report**

If you do decide to donate, Marsales says it's important to do your research to find the right charity. And call the charity in advance to make sure you are only donating what the group needs.

But her most important advice is simply. "Don't buy so much."