

## Public Perception Around Use of Reusable Bags During the COVID-19 Global Health Pandemic: Preliminary Summary Report

### Why conduct this type of survey?

As the world experienced the COVID-19 global health pandemic, the use of reusable items such as bags for shopping changed. Huge steps have been taken over the past few years in the United States to limit the use of single-use plastic grocery bags. Bag bans or fees have been instituted at state and local levels around the country. People are remembering to bring their own bag into the store or refusing a bag and hand carrying their items. However, this all changed in the spring of 2020. Stores that once encouraged people to bring their own bags into the store were putting up signs telling customers to leave their bags in the car. Cities that implemented disposable bag bans or fees paused such legislation. This study was conducted to get feedback from the general public to determine how they feel about only being allowed to use disposable bags.

### Why move away from disposable plastic bags?

Beach cleanup data at local and international levels show that disposable plastic bags are a major source of plastic pollution in our coastal environments (Ocean Conservancy, 2015; Adopt-a-Beach, 2018). Disposable plastic bags are also known to clog storm drains and pipes causing road or basement flooding. Lastly, any plastic in the environment poses a risk to wildlife health and safety (Derraik, 2002) and potentially threatens human health (World Health Organization, 2019). Plastic in the water or along coastal also negatively affects the economy, due to expensive debris removal and reduction in tourism dollars (Bear Peak Economics et al., 2019).

### Who took the survey?

The survey was taken by 1,960 respondents with about half of respondents residing in Ohio (696) or North Carolina (202). There was a wide distribution of ages taking the survey with most respondents ranging in age from 25-74. Only those 18 years or older were eligible to take the survey. The survey is predominantly skewed to the Caucasian race with 956 of 1,061 responses identifying as white. Efforts were made to diversify the audience taking this survey but were unsuccessful. Just over 75% of respondents were female, 25% were male, and a handful of respondents identified as gender neutral or gender non-conforming. The majority of respondents (90%) have achieved at least a 4-year college degree or higher. There was a wide range of annual household incomes responding to this survey with the greatest response to one household income being 20% for an annual household income of \$100,000 to \$149,000. The majority (66%) of respondents did not identify as having any conditions that made them high risk to health concerns from the COVID-19 virus. However, 30% of respondents did identify as having underlying health conditions or being over the age of 65.



## Survey Results and Discussion Reusable Bag Use

Before the COVID-19 global health pandemic, 77% of respondents identified as using their own reusable bags all or most of the time, 19% of respondents used their own bags some of the time, and 4% of respondents never use their own bags. During the COVID-19 global health pandemic (which is still ongoing at the time of publication), almost half of respondents stated that they are no longer using their own bags. Almost fifty percent of respondents said that store regulations prevent them from using their own bags. Bag regulations were put in place, despite no guidance being offered by government health organizations or scientific evidence, because of possible but unfounded concerns that reusable bags can carry Coronavirus. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) grocery store and retail workers page provides options for staff to stay safe. They do not suggest avoiding the use of reusable bags, but encourage employees to wash their hands after touching them. It is important to note the CDC suggests frequent handwashing after touching any public or other commonly touched surfaces (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019.)

When respondents were asked which types of carrier containers they felt were cleanest and safest to use during the COVID-19 global health pandemic 29% chose paper bags, 27% chose their own reusable bags, 18% said plastic bags, 15% said no bag or hand carry items, and 11% said a box. Therefore, store regulations on preventing the use of reusable bags are not justified by leading health organizations or customer preference. Concerns of store staff safety have been touted as the main reason for preventing the use of reusable bags, but to avoid this issue customers can be required to bag their own items if they choose to use their own bags. Once customers are allowed to start using their own bags, 85% of respondents stated that they will use their own bags all or most of the time, 11% of respondents will use their own bags some of the time, and the same 4% will never use their own bags.

## Support for Legislation around Bag Bans or Bag Fees

Due to most grocery and retail locations preventing customers from using their own bags, state and local municipalities who had policies in place banning or charging fees for the use of single-use bags paused enforcement of these policies during the COVID-19 global health pandemic. Thirty-five percent of survey respondents said they are in support of pausing enforcement on bag fees or bags during the pandemic, with 24% of respondents having no preference, and 41% of respondents being unsupportive of pausing legislation around bag fees or bans. There is concern across the country that state and local governments will not reinstate policies in support of bag fees or bans hindering progress that has been made to limit use of single-use plastics like disposable grocery bags. However, 56% of respondents will support bag bans or bag fees post the pandemic, 9% percent of respondents have no preference, and 35% of respondents will not support bag fees or bans after the pandemic.

## Summary

In summary, the majority of respondents stated they often use their own bags, but currently are not able to because of store regulations that are not supported by leading health organizations, scientific evidence, or customer preference. The majority of respondents are also in support of reinstating bag bans and fees post the pandemic.



## Next Steps

The results from this study will be used to inform businesses and local municipalities as they decide how reusable bags will be used in a post pandemic future.

## References

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THE SURVEY WAS CONDUCTED BY JILL BARTOLOTTA, EXTENSION EDUCATOR FOR OHIO SEA GRANT AND THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY. IRB APPROVAL WAS RECEIVED FOR THIS PROJECT. IRB PROJECT NUMBER 2020E0465. FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY PLEASE CONTACT JILL BARTOLOTTA BY EMAIL AT [BARTOLOTTA.2.OSU.EDU](mailto:BARTOLOTTA.2.OSU.EDU). THIS STUDY IS MEANT TO SERVE AS A PILOT STUDY AND IS BY NO MEANS INTENDED FOR EXTRAPOLATION TO A LARGER POPULATION. **OHSU-TS-1525**

