Who Litters and Why People Litter?

Along roadways, motorists (52%) and pedestrians (23%) are the biggest contributors to litter. Research also shows that individuals under 30 are more likely to litter than those who are older. In fact, age, and not gender, is a significant predictor of littering behavior.

Why do people litter? Here’s what KAB’s 2009 Littering Behavior in America research found:

- **Personal choice.** Individual behavior—or choosing to litter—means litter on the ground. Nearly one in five, or 17% of all disposals observed in public spaces were littering, while 83% disposed of litter properly. And 81% of littering was intentional, e.g., flicking, flinging, or dropping. On the other hand, individuals who hold the belief that littering is wrong, and consequently feel a personal obligation not to litter, are less likely to do so.

- **Litter begets litter.** Individuals are much more likely to litter into a littered environment. And once there, it attracts more litter. By contrast, a clean community discourages littering and improves overall community quality of life. Availability and proximity to trash and recycling receptacles also impact whether someone chooses to litter.

- **It’s “not my responsibility”.** Some people feel no sense of ownership for parks, walkways, beaches, and other public spaces. They believe someone else will pick up after them; that it’s not their responsibility.

Where do People Litter, and What Is Littered? KAB’s 2009 National Visible Litter Survey and Litter Cost Study identified individual behavior as the primary contributor to litter in all locations. Individuals are littering on roads and highways and in retail, recreational, and residential locations:

- **Roadway Litter** - Tobacco products, mostly cigarette butts, are the most littered item on U.S. roadways (38%). This is followed by paper (22%) and plastic (19%). Most of the litter on roads and highways is caused by people. Research shows that littering along roadways is generated by the following individual actions: motorists (52%); pedestrians (22.8%); improperly covered truck or cargo loads, including collection vehicles (16.4%); and improperly secured containers, dumpsters, trash cans or residential waste or recycling bins (1.5%)

- **Non-Roadway Litter** – Off the roads and highways, litter originates from many sources, but litter primarily collects at “transition points”. Transition points are entrances to businesses, transportation, and other places where items must be discarded before entering. Confection (candy, chocolate, gum, etc.) ranks at the top (53.7%) of what is littered at transition points; this is followed by cigarette butts at 29.8%.

Other locations that attract litter—starting from where most non-roadway litter occurs to least—include:

- **Storm drains** - Located primarily in gutters and designed to drain excess rain from paved streets, parking lots, etc. storm drains tend to attract cigarette butts, confection, and other litter.

- **Loading docks** - Areas behind retail and wholesale business where products are loaded/unloaded from trucks and trailers can become littered with cigarette butts, confection, and paper.

- **Recreational Areas** - Parks, beaches, courts, and open areas where people congregate for leisure activities create lots of opportunities for littering.

- **Construction sites** - Active residential or commercial construction are a trap for cigarette butts, paper, and plastic.

- **Retail** – High-traffic locations such as shopping centers, strip malls, and convenience stores can generate packaging litter, and cigarette butts and confection on the ground.

(Source: Keep America Beautiful Inc. website www.kab.org)