STM JOURNALS

Research & Reviews: A Journal of
Toxicology

https://journals.stmjournals.com/rrjot/

ISSN: 2231-3834 (Online)
ISSN: 2349-1264 (Print)
Volume 15, Issue 3, 2025
September–December
DOI (Journal): 10.37591/RRJoT

Research RRJoT

Issue of E-Waste Management on Environment and Society

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Abstract

Electronic waste, or e-waste, is becoming an increasingly significant and urgent challenge for industries worldwide. E-waste includes discarded electronic items, such as computers, smartphones, televisions, refrigerators, generators, and various other household and office appliances, that are no longer functional. It poses significant environmental and health hazards because these devices contain toxic substances like lead, mercury, cadmium, and other harmful chemicals. Improper disposal or recycling of e-waste can lead to contamination of soil, water, and air, resulting in long-term ecological damage and health risks for surrounding communities. Despite the growing importance of electronic devices in modern communication, the rapid pace of technological advancements means that many devices quickly become obsolete, leading to their disposal. This cycle of frequent upgrades and rapid disposals contributes significantly to the global e-waste problem, as a result, the volume of discarded electronics continues to rise, further fueling environmental pollution. Effective management and recycling of e-waste are essential to mitigate its harmful impacts, but proper systems and awareness are still lacking in many parts of the world.

Keywords: Hazardous, trash, short life spa, constituents, Toxic materials, Health risks

INTRODUCTION

The electronics industry has become the largest and fastest-growing sector in the world, significantly transforming economies through its rapid technological advancements. Our increasing reliance on electronic devices, ranging from smartphones and laptops to televisions and household appliances, has sparked a revolution in communication, entertainment, and business. However, this growth is not without its dark side. Alongside the widespread use of electronics, there has been a parallel and exponential rise in electronic waste, or e-waste. E-waste refers to discarded electrical and electronic devices that no longer serve their intended purpose. These items, which include smartphones, laptops, refrigerators, washing machines, and many other appliances, contain a complex mix of hazardous materials such as lead, mercury, and cadmium. When improperly managed, these toxic substances can have a detrimental impact on both human health and the environment [1, 2].

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Received Date: May 06, 2025
Accepted Date: August 25, 2025
Published Date: December 2, 2025

Citation: Sonia Kaur Bansal, Rudhar Tak, Saloni Goyal. Issue of E-Waste Management on Environment and Society. Research & Reviews: A Journal of Toxicology. 2025; 15(3): 1–7p.

One of the primary drivers of the e-waste crisis is the rapid pace at which technology evolves. As new and improved devices are released to the market, consumers are quick to discard their old electronics in favor of the latest models. This constant cycle of consumption and disposal leads to a massive accumulation of e-waste, posing a serious challenge to global waste management systems. The term "electronic trash" or "e-waste" encompasses a broad range of electrical and electronic equipment, some of which contain as many as 1,000 different chemical compounds, many of which are hazardous to health. These materials can be classified into hazardous and non-hazardous categories, with the hazardous ones posing significant risks to ecosystems and people, particularly in areas where proper recycling infrastructure is lacking [3, 4].

The growing volume of e-waste presents several challenges, particularly in terms of its management and disposal. A major contributing factor is the lack of proper understanding and awareness surrounding e-waste disposal methods, as well as insufficient infrastructure to handle the growing problem. Additionally, the rapid automation of industries and the increasing complexity of electronic devices have outpaced regulations governing e-waste recycling. As the demand for electronic devices continues to surge, especially in emerging markets, the e-waste crisis is expected to worsen unless more effective systems are put in place to manage it [4, 5].

The impact of e-waste is particularly severe in developing countries, where it is often handled by informal sectors that lack the resources or knowledge to safely manage it. In India, for instance, e-waste generation is a significant issue with major cities, like Mumbai, Delhi, and Bangalore, among the largest contributors. In fact, ten states in India account for approximately 70% of the country's total e-waste production. Despite these high levels of e-waste, India faces enormous challenges in recycling and managing this waste. As of 2012, the country had only 20 designated e-waste recycling facilities, most of which were concentrated in just two cities. This limited capacity for proper recycling results in most of the e-waste being disposed of improperly, either through illegal dumping or unsafe recycling practices, further exacerbating the environmental and health risks [6, 7].

In terms of global impact, e-waste presents a major environmental challenge. The harmful chemicals found in discarded electronics, such as lead, mercury, and cadmium, pose significant risks to the environment when improperly disposed of or recycled. These toxic substances can contaminate soil, water, and air, affecting both local ecosystems and the health of people living in those areas. The dangers of e-waste are particularly evident in countries with large informal recycling sectors, where workers, often in impoverished conditions, dismantle and burn e-waste to extract valuable materials. These hazardous practices release toxic fumes and particulate matter into the air, leading to air pollution and health risks for those exposed. Moreover, the uncontrolled disposal of e-waste into landfills and open dumpsites contributes to groundwater contamination, with metals, like cadmium, leaching into the water supply [8, 9].

The global demand for electronic products shows no signs of slowing, and as a result, e-waste production will continue to increase in the coming years. To combat this, it is essential that comprehensive e-waste management systems are developed and enforced worldwide. This includes improving public awareness of responsible e-waste disposal, enhancing recycling capabilities, and implementing stricter regulations on the movement and recycling of e-waste. Countries must also invest in safe, environmentally friendly recycling technologies that can handle the growing volume of e-waste while recovering valuable resources and reducing environmental harm. As the e-waste crisis deepens, it is critical that both consumers and industries take responsibility for the proper disposal of electronic waste to mitigate its long-term environmental and health impacts (Figure 1) [10–12].

- The major objectives of e-waste management are to reduce, reuse and recycle.
- Some of the e-waste consists of valuable or materials inside which can be reused or recycled.
- "Extended Producer Responsibility" is one of the concepts introduced in e-waste management.
- Recycling electronic garbage reduces the amount of solid waste that is dumped in landfills.

ANALYSIS

During my research on e-waste, I came to realize the profound and growing impact it has on the world today. While I had heard about e-waste before, I hadn't truly understood its scale and the individual roles people play in contributing to the problem. As I delved deeper into gathering data, I quickly discovered that finding current and accurate statistics on e-waste was a challenge. Most of the available information was from the early 2000s, which felt outdated considering my interest in understanding present-day trends and differences in e-waste generation across countries. This led me to primarily rely on the Global E-waste Monitor of 2014, published by the Institute of Advanced Study of Sustainability, as my main source.

Research & Reviews: A Journal of Toxicology
Volume 15, Issue 3
ISSN: 2231-3834 (Online), ISSN: 2349-1264 (Print)

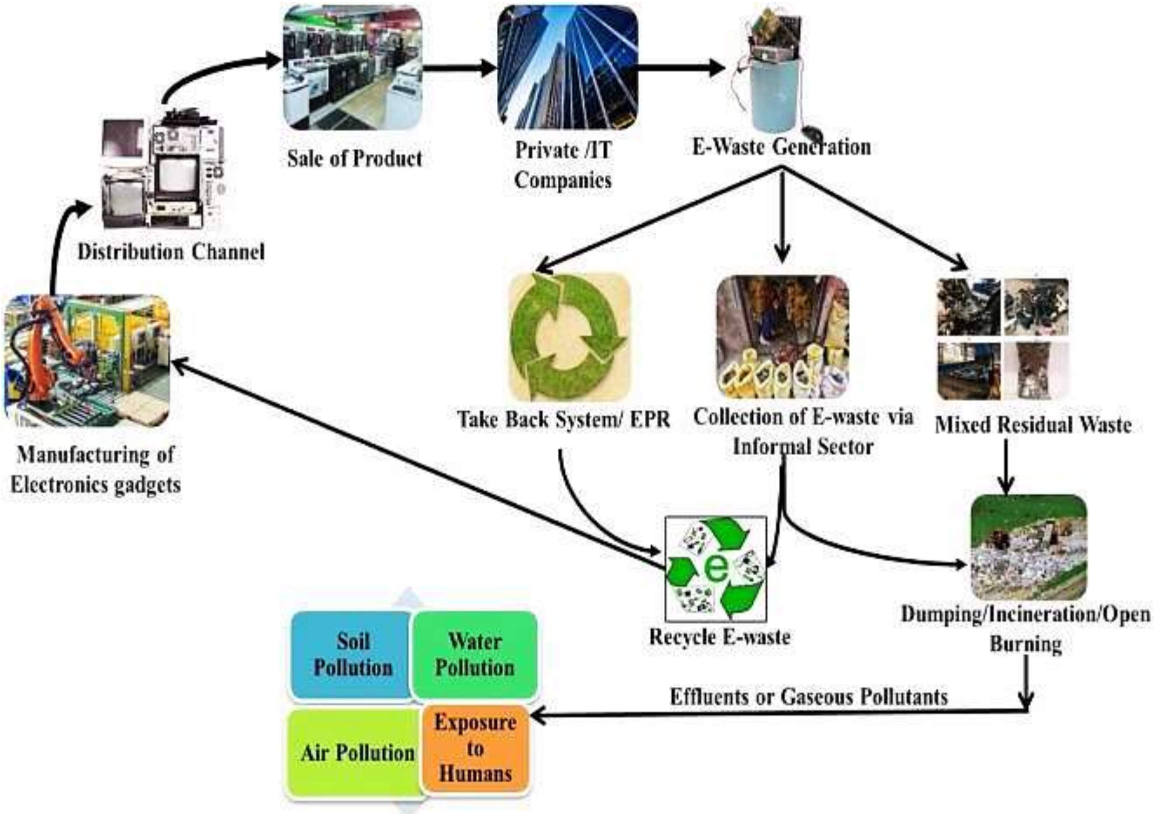

Figure 1. Lifecycle of e-waste generation, management pathways, and associated environmental impacts.

This stage of my research became especially fascinating to me. Having always enjoyed mathematics, I found great satisfaction in analyzing the data, comparing figures, and drawing conclusions from the numbers. One of the most striking findings was the massive amount of e-waste generated globally, totaling 41.8 million metric tons in 2014. Of this, Asia contributed the highest share, producing 16 million metric tons. However, when examining e-waste production on a per capita basis, I found an interesting disparity. Despite Asia's large overall contribution, the per capita e-waste production was much lower – only 3.7 kilograms per person – compared to Europe, where each person generated 15.6 kilograms of e-waste on average. This contrast emphasized the complex relationship between population size and consumption patterns, highlighting how different regions handle e-waste and contribute to its global total.

Table 1. E-waste generation and recycling by continent.

Continent	Produced in 1 year (mt)	Produced per person (kg/inh)	E-waste recycled (mt)	E-waste recycled (%)	E-waste recycled per person (kg/inh)
Asia	16	3.7	4.16	26%	0.962
Europe	11.6	15.6	4.64	40%	6.24
Oceania	0.6	15.2	0.01	1%	0.152
Africa	1.9	1.7	0.02	1%	0.017
Americas	11.7	12.2	1.4	12%	1.464
Total	41.8				

In addition to exploring e-waste production, I was also curious about the extent of e-waste recycling. Initially, the data seemed confusing, but I soon realized that presenting it visually would make the information easier to understand and more compelling for my audience. Through charts and graphs, I was able to bring clarity to the issue and highlight key statistics. Overall, my research into e-waste not only provided valuable insights into this global crisis but also allowed me to combine my love for mathematics with design to communicate complex information effectively. This experience deepened my understanding of the e-waste problem and reinforced the importance of sustainable e-waste management practices worldwide (Table 1).

- I was deeply shocked when I learned that global e-waste production had reached a staggering 41.8 million metric tons in 2014. This number was eye-opening, and I was driven to explore the regional distribution of e-waste and its per capita implications. As I examined the data, I found that Asia was the largest contributor to global e-waste, generating a total of 16 million metric tons. While the sheer volume of e-waste coming from Asia was overwhelming, what intrigued me further was the disparity in per capita production. Despite Asia's significant contribution to e-waste, the per capita production was only 3.7 kilograms per person. This was surprising, as it contrasted sharply with Europe, where per capita production was much higher, at 15.6 kilograms per person.
- This difference in per capita e-waste production pointed to a complex interplay between population size and individual consumption habits. Asia, with its massive population, may be producing more e-waste in total, but individual consumption rates were lower than in Europe. In contrast, countries in Europe, with smaller populations, have higher rates of electronic consumption per person, which leads to higher per capita e-waste production. This contrast revealed to me the need for a deeper understanding of how different regions manage their electronic consumption and disposal patterns, and why consumption habits need to be addressed in sustainable ways.
- Additionally, I turned my attention to global e-waste recycling rates, as this is a key factor in managing the growing e-waste problem. At first, visualizing the recycling data was challenging because the statistics were not immediately clear. However, after analyzing the information, I realized that much of the e-waste was not being recycled effectively. This highlighted the need for improved recycling systems worldwide, especially given the scale of e-waste being produced.
- In summary, my exploration of e-waste production and recycling rates illuminated the enormous scope of the problem and underscored the need for sustainable practices across different regions. The stark contrast between per capita production in Asia and Europe, as well as the inefficiencies in e-waste recycling, pointed to significant challenges that must be addressed. My goal in presenting these findings was not only to raise awareness about the e-waste crisis but also to inspire action toward more responsible and sustainable e-waste management practices across the globe.

DATA GATHERING AND EXAMINATION

A comprehensive review of e-waste management explores a variety of sources, including research papers, reports, and articles, which provide a thorough understanding of the challenges, trends, and knowledge gaps in managing electronic waste. This field of study has evolved significantly over the years, as the volume of e-waste increases, and the need for sustainable solutions grows. The importance of gathering both quantitative and qualitative data is emphasized in addressing the e-waste crisis. Quantitative data, including information on the production, recycling rates, disposal techniques, and environmental impacts of e-waste, is critical for assessing the extent of the issue. Government publications, industry trade journals, and comprehensive databases serve as essential sources for gathering statistical data, offering valuable insights into the scope of e-waste and its environmental consequences.

Equally important are qualitative methods, such as conducting interviews, surveys, and focus groups with stakeholders in e-waste management – manufacturers, recyclers, policymakers, and consumers. These approaches help provide deeper insights into the attitudes and behaviors surrounding e-waste, enabling a better understanding of how e-waste is perceived and managed in different sectors. Such insights are crucial for informing the development of strategies that aim to improve management practices and promote sustainable disposal and recycling practices.

Case studies from various regions and countries are another valuable resource in e-waste research. These case studies reveal real-world examples of successful e-waste management initiatives, offering a closer look at the challenges encountered and lessons learned. They also provide insights into best practices, which can be adapted to other contexts, showing how solutions can be tailored to different cultural, economic, and infrastructural conditions. These case studies help researchers and policymakers understand which strategies work and under what circumstances, fostering more effective e-waste management systems globally.

Field observations, such as visits to recycling facilities, landfill sites, or e-waste collection events, are also crucial to e-waste research. These direct observations allow researchers to document the practical realities of e-waste management, identifying operational inefficiencies and areas where improvements are needed. This firsthand knowledge is invaluable in shaping recommendations for better management systems.

Once data is collected, it is subjected to analysis using various statistical and qualitative methods. The analysis helps uncover patterns, trends, and correlations that inform the understanding of e-waste management and its long-term environmental and societal effects. Systematic analysis provides clarity on the most pressing issues, such as the impacts of improper disposal or ineffective recycling, and helps researchers propose actionable solutions.

Ethical considerations play a critical role in the research process. Ensuring the protection of participants' privacy, minimizing harm to individuals and the environment, and adhering to informed consent procedures are fundamental to conducting responsible research in the e-waste sector. Researchers must carefully balance the need for comprehensive data with ethical principles to maintain the integrity of their work.

Furthermore, validating the accuracy and reliability of the collected data is essential to ensure the findings are trustworthy. Cross-referencing information from multiple sources and critically evaluating the credibility of each source adds rigor to the research process. This validation process enhances the quality and reliability of the research, making it more useful for policymakers, industry leaders, and other stakeholders.

Documentation is another crucial aspect of e-waste research. Clear and detailed records of the research methods, sources of information, and findings are vital for ensuring transparency, reproducibility, and credibility. Proper documentation enables other researchers to verify the results, compare findings, and build upon existing work, thereby advancing the field of e-waste management. By maintaining an open and accessible record of research practices, the scientific community can work collectively to address the global challenge of e-waste.

REVIEW ON E-WASTE

E-waste, which includes discarded electronic devices, can be categorized based on its physical and chemical properties. Technological advancements affect the chemical composition of e-waste, with some materials, such as gold and silver, remaining stable, while others, like palladium decreases and copper increases. Despite these technological changes, the overall chemical makeup of global e-waste is expected to remain relatively stable.

E-waste contains hazardous chemicals, such as lead, cadmium, and mercury, which pose significant risks to both human health and the environment. Accurately predicting the amount of e-waste generated in developing countries is difficult due to insufficient data. Methods based on scenarios and input from stakeholders are being used to address this challenge. In many developing countries, informal sectors handle up to 90% of e-waste, highlighting the need for improvements in waste collection and recycling processes, particularly as Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) systems are increasingly implemented.

Improper treatment of e-waste in developing nations, such as China, India, and Vietnam, leads to serious environmental and health risks. These risks are exacerbated by inadequate knowledge and resources for proper e-waste management. Hazardous elements in e-waste, along with by-products from recycling processes, contribute to contamination of air, soil, and water. Soil contamination is a significant issue, with activities, like open burning and manual dismantling, leading to the release of harmful substances, such as dioxins, into the soil, as observed in Vietnam. Air contamination is another consequence of improper e-waste disposal, with burning releasing toxic fumes and particulate matter that degrade air quality. Studies in India have shown elevated levels of heavy metals in the air around e-waste burning sites. Water contamination is also a major concern, as illegal e-waste dismantling and open-air burning release toxic chemicals, such as cadmium, into groundwater, surpassing regulatory safety thresholds.

Exposure to e-waste has been linked to serious health effects, particularly neurotoxic impacts, which affect vulnerable populations like pregnant women and children. Studies from South America and China have found elevated blood lead levels and other health hazards associated with e-waste recycling activities.

The recovery and recycling of e-waste involve the separation and disassembly of valuable materials, such as precious metals, and less valuable components like plastics. The recycling process faces challenges due to the varied value of materials, with precious metals being highly valuable and plastics being less so. Ongoing research aims to improve recycling technologies and address the challenges associated with e-waste management, including the development of more effective recycling methods.

RESULT

Global E-Waste Statistics

Current data on the volume of e-waste generated (e.g., from the Global E-Waste Monitor).

Resource Depletion

E-waste contains valuable materials like gold, silver, copper, and rare earth elements.

Research Should Investigate

The loss of these valuable resources through improper disposal and inefficient recycling methods. Occupational Health and Safety: Informal e-waste recycling, often prevalent in developing countries, exposes workers to severe health risks.

Research Should Focus on

The health hazards faced by e-waste workers, including respiratory problems, neurological damage, skin diseases, and cancer.

CONCLUSIONS

Effectively addressing the e-waste issue necessitates a multifaceted strategy. Environmentally sound recycling methods are essential for recovering valuable resources while minimizing environmental damage. Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) initiatives place accountability on manufacturers for the end-of-life management of their products, encouraging environmentally conscious design and responsible recycling practices. Consumers also play a critical role by making informed purchasing choices, extending the usable life of their devices, and utilizing appropriate disposal methods. Improper disposal of e-waste leads to soil, water, and air pollution from hazardous chemicals like lead, mercury, and cadmium. Toxic substances released from e-waste affect human health, causing respiratory issues, neurological damage, and other chronic illnesses.

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