

# In Praise of ‘Garbagemen’

When I was twelve my family lived on a small, dry piece of land in rural Texas. Since we lived far outside of any city limits, we couldn't rely on services like water (we had a well), sewage (we had a septic tank), or sanitation (we had a 12-year-old boy and a 50-gallon burn barrel). Before my weekend free-time could begin, I'd have a list of chores to get done, including burning the week's trash and burying the ashes in a pit dug in the back field.

One terrible Saturday I learned a valuable lesson about not burning spray paint cans when the wind is gusting at speeds that would get you ticketed in a school zone. The explosion was small but the brush was dry, and the ensuing fire came perilously close to my neighbors on three sides. Fortunately, the intervention of God and the Eastland County Volunteer Fire Department contained the blaze, saving my hide and several homes.

That was the day I gained an undying appreciation for firefighters – and sanitation workers. We don't fully value the work of “garbagemen” until we have to live without their services.

Considering that urban civilization would degenerate into chaos and disease without their labor, society is shockingly unappreciative of the men and women who maintain our system of sanitation disposal. It's not surprising, then, that few people are eager for such a career considering the work is thankless, dirty, and dangerous. Indeed, astonishingly dangerous: Sanitation workers have twice the fatality rates of police officers, and nearly seven times the fatality rates of firefighters.

But the work also requires a special type of knowledge and intelligence. Anthropologist Robin Nagle joined the ranks of

the underappreciated sanitation workers of New York City and discovered [what life in the mysterious world of trash collection was really like](#):

*One of the things that struck me very early on and that continues to puzzle me is the way in which some forms of knowledge are considered more valuable than others, and they tend to break along educational lines. College education is considered of higher status than the kind of education that lets a person know how to repair an engine, or design a truck that's going to be safer for the workers, or organize things.*

*An example: If you operate a mechanical broom and you have a route that you have to complete within a certain time frame for that day's shift, someone has designed that route. To design that route, they need to know what the directionality is of the streets you're supposed to be cleaning and at what hours the cars are off the curb (this is the New York City system of alternate side parking) and which street connects to which other street.*

*I would have no clue how to write a route like that without a lot of study. It takes experience, it takes time, and it takes real care and thoughtfulness to put together a route that will be efficient, that will flow, that will get the streets clean within the periods that the broom has access to the curbs and is within the confines of the 8-hour shift. I've heard experienced broom operators describe really well-written broom routes the way you might describe a wonderful rendition of an opera or a fine wine: "Wow, that was good. That was well done." But that guy—this one person in particular I'm thinking of that designed that route—who's ever going to applaud him for that?*

This side of paradise, the free market remains the most efficient way of allocating resources and determining the market wages for individual occupations. But the market is not

always the best method of apportioning gratitude and respect for specific vocations. We should remember that some of the most essential jobs are the dirtiest and lowest paid. While they may never gain the level of esteem earned by police officers and firefighters, we should give due honors to the sanitation workers who make our world a cleaner, more livable environment.

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