

A typical day of a **male street waste picker**

My name is Tshepo and I work as a reclaimer in Johannesburg.

I am 34 years old and have been doing this work for the last six years. I used to work in mines as a casual worker, but I lost my job when the mine started retrenching. I have a 5-year old daughter I need to support and there are no jobs out there, so I decided to become a reclaimer after I saw others doing this.

I usually start work at three am in the morning. I pull my trolley from Booysens and work in a different wealthy northern suburb each day of the week when rubbish is being collected from that suburb. On Thursdays and Fridays I work in Sunninghill, which is more than 29 km away. It takes me two and a half to three hours to get there. It is very dark when we start, and we usually travel as a group to where we need to work in order to protect ourselves from criminals. I pull the trolley and at times run so that I can get there in time. Some residents put their bins out the night before, so we start working on those. However, usually we wait for domestic workers to arrive at different homes and start when they take out the bins.

When we are working we also have to look out for private security guards because in some streets they do not allow us to collect materials. We are often threatened with arrest and some of us have been assaulted. We sometimes pay security guards to allow us to collect from a few bins before residents report us. Our biggest problems are in the areas where Pikitup has contracted private companies to collect the recyclables that we depend on. We need to go there extra early to get the recyclables before the private company comes to collect. Sometimes the company workers or security guards forcefully take the recyclables from us. Some residents get upset with us because they say the recyclables belong to the company. But other residents know that we cannot feed our families if we don't get the recyclables, and so they save them for us. We know that we collect more than the private companies as they only take the separated bags of recyclables, but we also salvage recyclables from the rubbish bins.

I go through bins to collect clean materials for a few hours until the Pikitup waste collection truck arrives at around 10h00 or when we are chased away by security guards. I usually take a break and buy something to eat and then start the long journey home. On a good day I can collect up to 200 kg of material that I have to haul back.

The return journey is longer than the one to Sunninghill because of the routes I take to avoid traffic and the challenge of climbing hills with such a heavy load. At times I can save time and preserve my energy by surfing down hills on my trolley. It takes me around five hours to get back to the area where I sort and store my materials together with other reclaimers. Once I get back around 5pm, I start sorting through what I collected by separating the various grades of materials. I usually finish work by 6pm, wash, cook my supper and then I am asleep by 7pm.



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