

Unusual salvo of fireworks in Chicago as city sees 700% jump in calls

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Already on edge on multiple fronts, many Chicagoans are now having to contend with yet another challenge to their peace of mind, not to mention their sleep — an unrelenting barrage of fireworks.

During late-night hours, the sound of loud explosions has echoed through many Chicago neighborhoods, resulting in a staggering increase in 911 calls. The city has received more than 7,000 emergency calls for fireworks disturbances so far this year, compared with only 842 last year during the same time period, a 736% increase, according to data provided by the Office of Emergency Management and Communications.

The numbers mirror increases in cities throughout the country, but those in the fireworks industry say they can be traced to the cancellation of organized shows because of the coronavirus pandemic. There has been a surge in complaints about fireworks in New York, Boston and Hartford, Connecticut. Residents of other cities, including Los Angeles and Baltimore, have taken to social media to vent their frustration.

There's always a jump in people setting off firecrackers, bottle rockets and shells in the Chicago area in the weeks leading up to July 4, but residents have noticed something different this year. And many have grown fatigued after hearing explosions into the wee hours of the morning.

Carly Oishi, who lives in the East Beverly neighborhood, said she has been hearing fireworks for the last few weeks, and said the explosions over her house sound like "shells raining down."

"It's exceptionally loud, like professional-grade-sounding sonic booms, not your normal crackling."

After being awakened in the middle of the night to the sound of thunderous fireworks, Laurie Rich said she spoke with some of the people igniting fireworks in her Brighton Park neighborhood.

Since then, "things have settled down," and the fireworks usually stop around 11 p.m., Rich said.

The fireworks frighten many house pets disturbed by the sudden bangs and bright flashes.

Fearful of the looming pyrotechnics, Rich said her cat would hide when the sun set "because he knew the freaky loud noises were going to come."

The Anti-Cruelty Society has heard from pet owners concerned about their animals because of the proliferation of explosions.

“We have noticed a number of people saying that there are a lot more complaints and their dogs are very sensitive to fireworks,” spokeswoman Bridget Bittman said.

The intensity of this year’s premature fireworks, amid a groundswell of demonstrators calling for racial justice, has piqued some people’s suspicions and led to online speculation that the proliferation of fireworks has behind it some sort of government or police plot.

But nationwide, those in the fireworks industry say they’ve seen an increase in sales as the coronavirus pandemic has led to the cancellation of many public fireworks displays.

“With a lot of the canceled shows, people still want to celebrate with consumer fireworks, so they’re going to bring the shows to their homes,” said Larry Farnsworth, a spokesman for the National Fireworks Association.

While fireworks are illegal to sell, buy or pop in Chicago, they are still accessible as people can easily travel to northwest Indiana or Wisconsin to purchase them.

George Kanavos, manager at Big Daddy K’s Fireworks Outlet in Highland, Indiana, said his store had seen a significant increase in sales this year.

“I think it’d be fair to say it’s definitely correlated to there being a lot more new customers in the market, being there are no more shows,” he said.

Phantom Fireworks, which bills itself as the top chain of fireworks retailers in the country, said in a release Monday that it “anticipates a sharp increase in first-time, at-home personal fireworks users” this year.

And Ohio-based Phantom noted that “In order to ensure a safe shopping experience, Phantom is encouraging customers to make their purchases early, in order to minimize last-minute shopping crowds.”

Some people in the industry also believe the surge in firework purchases has been spurred by months of quarantine and severe restrictions on social gatherings.

“Fireworks allow you to kind of come out on your neighborhood block, and friends can gather and watch,” Farnsworth said. “And it allows you to be socially distant. It gives you, in this particular time, a sense of normalcy.”

Fireworks complaints in Boston skyrocket by 2,300% during coronavirus pandemic

Boston police received 1,445 calls for fireworks in the first week of June alone

Boston Herald

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Complaints over fireworks being set off from before dusk to after midnight have skyrocketed in Boston by a staggering 2,300% — rattling many who just want to sleep or fear it's gunfire.

“People are frightened. People are losing sleep. Babies and kids are woken up. Pets are terrified. Our veterans and others with PTSD are experiencing real harm,” Mayor Martin Walsh said Wednesday at Boston City Hall, urging people to “stop it.”

Boston police received 1,445 calls for fireworks in the first week of June alone — up from just 22 in the same week last year, department spokesman Sgt. Det. John Boyle said. The department also received 656 calls about fireworks in May, up from 27 during the same month in 2019.

Not only are fireworks illegal in Massachusetts, but the nightly barrage of booms and bangs is causing real quality of life issues, Boyle said.

“Houses could burn down. People could be burnt,” Boyle said. “It's worse for our people that suffer from autism, our veterans and ... people that have lost people to gunfire as well as people who have dealt with any kind of gun violence. It can bring back a lot of post traumatic stress disorder.”

Lynn Morris, a 54-year South Boston resident, expressed her frustration at the daily disruptions.

“I know people are bored, and as the weather gets nicer and summer approaches, they want to celebrate, but this is not the way to do it. Living through this quarantine, we already have enough disruption to deal with in

our lives, it's just another unnecessary source of anxiety for so many," Morris said. "It's nonsense and completely selfish — enough!"

South Boston resident Annie Hargrave, 28, a Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center nurse who works rotating day and night shifts, said, "The constant disturbances — for extended periods at a time — are extremely bothersome and disruptive to my sleep."

Complaints about fireworks are also lighting up Boston's 311 hotline from people already on edge as protests against police brutality play out against the backdrop of a pandemic.

"There have been fireworks pretty much every single day for at least two months," wrote one Roxbury resident. "It is incredibly loud and disconcerting, particularly with current events."

City Councilor Julia Mejia, who is set to hold a community conversation about fireworks trauma at 6 p.m. Thursday on her [Facebook page](#), said the blasts that have been getting progressively worse since April are now "out of control" across the city.

Cops have seized boxes upon boxes of fireworks recently and made a few arrests. While the automatic assumption is the fireworks are coming from New Hampshire, authorities say some of those being set off here aren't sold in the Granite State.

People with information on where fireworks are being stored or sold are asked to call the police department's anonymous crime stoppers tip line.

Fireworks sellers thought lockdowns would kill their sales — but 2020 could be the best year ever. Just ask your neighbor.

"We are going crazy" from "bombings" that last until "4 a.m.," Brooklyn residents wrote on a neighborhood forum.

NBC News
Ben Popken

June 23, 2020, 5:16 PM CDT

Illegal fireworks are a regular part of summer nights in most cities, but residents are complaining that this year, the fireworks appear to be louder, more frequent and going on longer than before, waking up neighbors into the early hours of the morning.

Now, cities are cracking down.

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio is the latest to weigh in on the surge in illicit activity, announcing on Tuesday a multiagency task force to stem the flow of illegal fireworks into the streets of all five boroughs, after record numbers of complaints about the crackles and booms keeping residents up at all hours of the night.

They carry names such as "Avengeance - Widow Maker," "PoPo Magnet" and "Enduring Freedom" — but these pyrotechnics could put some unauthorized sellers in jail.

"We are going to start a huge sting operation," with undercover buys and arrests, de Blasio said at a press conference Tuesday. "We intend to go to the root cause. That is, the people who are supplying the fireworks, the folks who are profiting off illegal fireworks."

Complaints about the nightly nuisance have erupted in cities across the Northeast. Boston has reported a more than 2,000 percent increase in fireworks-related noise complaints, and city police announced they seized stockpiles.

Last week, Baltimore launched an investigation into the increased use of fireworks, while Salem, Massachusetts, has started patrolling for illicit pyrotechnics.

Brooklyn residents said street corners and intersections are littered with colorful, spent cardboard packages, along with the trademark red wrappers from firecrackers — all illegal for sale, transport or use in New York City.

According to the city, residents lodged more than 1,700 fireworks complaints in the first half of June, compared to just 21 during the same time last year.

“We are going crazy” from “bombings” that last until “4 a.m.,” with children and pets woken up and disturbed, Brooklyn residents wrote on one neighborhood forum. “Times are tough enough already.”

For years, major fireworks stores have set up shop right next to urban areas where fireworks are illegal. Outside Boston, stores selling consumer-grade pyrotechnics are clustered just over the border with New Hampshire. Across the Delaware River from New Jersey, a state in which large fireworks are illegal, and also north of Maryland, which restricts fireworks use to smaller items such as sparklers and spinners, fireworks stores line the borders with Pennsylvania, where all consumer fireworks are legal, including aeriels, roman candles, rockets and high-flying missiles.

The owners of fireworks retail chains say the locations are chosen based on local zoning laws and list a number of possible explanations for the sudden uptick.

“People are starved for entertainment. There’s no concerts, no theme parks, no casinos,” said Joe Van, managing partner of Florida-based Sky King Fireworks, which has locations in Florida, Indiana and Pennsylvania. “People are resorting to coming up with their own entertainment.”

While many people are feeling cooped up after months of coronavirus lockdowns and need to let off steam, there could also be a surge of patriotism at play, as states begin to reopen. An increase in family togetherness after so much time spent in quarantine could also be a factor, store owners say.

An overly successful promotion?

Another reason for the surge may be a marketing misfire by fireworks sellers themselves.

Expecting a 20 to 50 percent drop in sales due to the lockdowns, sellers in March planned one of their most ambitious discount programs of all time, launching a “buy 1, get 2 free” industrywide special offer.

Previously reserved mainly for narrow promotional windows or returning customers, the sale was instead extended from the Memorial Day runup through this past weekend, across their entire inventories, sellers say.

Instead of only advertising the promotion to previous customers, they took out billboards, radio ads and targeted online ads, in addition to their catalogs and direct mailers, hoping to capture business and keep their stores in the black amid the nationwide lockdowns.

Rather than seeing their business cut in half, stores have seen sales soaring more than 200 percent in some locations.

“Everyone was doing it,” said William Weimer, vice president of the retailer Phantom Fireworks, which reported a 15 percent increase in sales nationally.

When sales first started to tick up, fireworks sellers thought they were a “blip.” But shopping carts, pickup truck beds and vans kept filling up, and lines outside stores grew. There was no way to roll back the promotion, since the marketing material had already been paid for and the stores needed to live up to their promise.

“Once the cat is out of the bag, the cat is out of the bag,” Van, whose stores participated in the promotion, said.

While the program has come to its planned conclusion at some stores, the industry has already been able to net record sales.

“If trends continue, a year we thought might have no season at all, could conceivably have a banner year,” Weimer said.

There are also indications that some users are making homebrew fireworks, combining consumer-grade fireworks with pyrotechnic material from more powerful display fireworks they’ve been able to acquire, law enforcement sources said.

That can lead to dangerous, or even fatal consequences, experts warn.