

Should Cities Be Quieter?

Noise is the one form of pollution we are expected to find charming.

7 min read

Before you read

- **decibel** — the unit used to measure the loudness of sound
- **logarithmic** — increasing by multiplication rather than by equal steps
- **chronic** — continuing over a long period
- **cumulative** — building up through repeated additions
- **ordinance** — a rule made by a local authority
- **exemption** — permission not to follow a rule that applies to others
- **regressive** — affecting those with least advantage the most
- **trade-off** — an acceptance of one loss in return for a gain elsewhere



A covered arcade in Osaka: every shop's sound system competing with its neighbours'

¹ Walk the length of a covered shopping arcade in Osaka on a weekday evening and you will pass through perhaps forty distinct sound systems, each one calibrated to be audible over its neighbours. Add the crossing chimes, the recorded greetings, the announcement that a train is approaching, the second announcement that it has arrived. None of it is unpleasant on its own. That is the whole difficulty.

² Noise occupies an odd position among pollutants. Nobody defends dirty water. Noise, by contrast, is frequently described as liveliness, atmosphere, the sound of a city working — and anyone who objects is cast as humourless. Yet the health evidence has been accumulating for thirty years, and it is not about annoyance.

What the evidence says

³ The clearest findings concern sleep. Chronic exposure to night-time noise is associated with elevated stress hormones and raised blood pressure, and the association persists in people who report that the noise does not wake them. This is the uncomfortable part of the research: the body appears to respond to sound during sleep whether or not the sleeper is aware of it. Habituation is not the same as immunity.

⁴ The scale of measurement makes the problem easy to underestimate. Decibels are logarithmic, so an increase of ten does not mean 'a bit louder' — it means ten times the sound energy, and is perceived as roughly a doubling of loudness. A road that goes from 55 to 65 decibels has not got slightly worse. Moving a flat's bedroom to the quiet side of the same building can be the difference between those two numbers.

Who is actually affected

⁵ This is where the argument acquires its sharpest edge. Exposure to traffic and industrial noise is not distributed evenly. Cheaper housing sits beside arterial roads, railway lines and flight paths, because that is why it is cheaper. Within the same city, the ability to buy quiet tracks the ability to buy anything else, and the effect is regressive: those with the fewest alternatives absorb the most exposure, cumulatively, over years.

⁶ Noise is therefore not only a health question but a fairness question, and that is the strongest version of the case for regulating it. A nuisance that falls on everybody is a matter of taste. A burden that falls hardest on those least able to escape it is a matter of policy.

The case against

⁷ The objections are not frivolous. Noise rules are expensive to enforce, because enforcement requires measurement at a particular place and time, and the complaint usually arrives after the noise has stopped. Rules that cannot be enforced evenly tend to be enforced selectively, and selective enforcement falls on whoever is least able to object — which risks reproducing the unfairness the rules were written to correct.

⁸ There is a livelihood argument too. Restrictions on construction hours, on delivery times, on late-opening venues and street trade have real costs, and they are borne by businesses operating on thin margins rather than by the residents who campaigned for them. Every exemption written to soften that cost weakens the rule; every refusal to write one shifts the burden onto someone else. There is no

version of this that is costless to all parties.

⁹ And some noise is not negotiable. Emergency sirens are loud by design. Crossing signals chime for people who cannot see the lights, and campaigns to silence them have run directly into accessibility objections. A city engineered for quiet above all else would be a less usable city for some of the people in it.

Where that leaves the argument

¹⁰ The honest conclusion is not that cities should be quiet. It is that noise is a cost, that the cost is currently paid by people who did not choose it and are rarely asked, and that it is almost never counted when decisions are made. Treating it as a measurable cost rather than as atmosphere would not settle every case. It would at least mean the trade-off was being made deliberately rather than by default.

Part A Choose the best answer

Circle the letter next to the right answer.

1. **Why does the writer say the Osaka arcade is 'the whole difficulty'?**
 - A The individual sounds are unpleasant and should be banned
 - B No single source is objectionable, yet together they add up
 - C The arcade is louder than any road in the city
 - D Shoppers there have no way to leave
2. **What makes the sleep evidence 'uncomfortable', according to the passage?**
 - A It is based on a small number of studies
 - B The effects appear even in people who say the noise does not wake them
 - C It contradicts earlier findings about blood pressure
 - D It applies only to people living near airports
3. **Why does the writer explain that decibels are logarithmic?**
 - A To show that noise measurement is unreliable
 - B To show a ten-point rise is far larger than it sounds
 - C To explain why enforcement is expensive
 - D To argue that quieter areas are more valuable
4. **What does the writer mean by calling noise exposure 'regressive'?**
 - A It has been getting worse over time
 - B It affects older people more than younger people
 - C It falls hardest on those with the fewest alternatives
 - D It reduces the value of property near roads
5. **Which objection does the writer raise against noise regulation?**
 - A Noise has no measurable effect on health
 - B Rules that are hard to enforce tend to be enforced selectively
 - C Most residents do not want quieter streets
 - D Measurement equipment is not accurate enough

Part B Write your answer

Answer in two or three sentences, using the passage as your evidence.

6. **Explain why the writer says noise 'occupies an odd position among pollutants'.**

7. Summarise the fairness argument for regulating noise in your own words.

8. The writer argues that selective enforcement 'risks reproducing the unfairness the rules were written to correct'. Explain how that could happen.

9. Why does the writer bring up crossing chimes and emergency sirens near the end?

Part C Think deeper

There is no single right answer here. Say what you think, and say why.

10. The writer concludes that noise should be treated as a measurable cost rather than as atmosphere. Do you find that conclusion persuasive? Identify the strongest point on each side before you give your view.

11. Who should bear the cost of making a street quieter — the business making the noise, the residents who want quiet, or the city? Justify your answer, and say what your choice would make worse.

12. The passage says people who object to noise are 'cast as humourless'. Why do you think certain complaints get treated as a personality flaw rather than as an argument? Give another example of this happening.

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. **B** — No single source is objectionable, yet together they add up | 2. **B** — The effects appear even in people who say the noise does not wake them | 3. **B** — To show a ten-point rise is far larger than it sounds | 4. **C** — It falls hardest on those with the fewest alternatives | 5. **B** — Rules that are hard to enforce tend to be enforced selectively

Part B

6. Because unlike other pollutants it is often defended as liveliness or atmosphere, and objecting to it is treated as a character failing rather than a reasonable position — even though the health evidence is substantial. Accept answers noting that it is the one pollutant people actively value.

7. Noise exposure is concentrated on cheaper housing beside roads, railways and flight paths, so the people least able to move away carry the heaviest and longest exposure. A burden distributed that unevenly is a policy question rather than a matter of taste. Credit any answer connecting exposure to the ability to afford an alternative.

8. Rules that cannot be applied consistently get applied where objection is least likely — against those with least power to complain or appeal — so the heaviest enforcement lands on the same group already carrying the heaviest exposure. Accept answers that reach the idea of the powerless being targeted.

9. To concede a genuine limit to his own argument: some noise serves accessibility or safety, so quiet cannot be the overriding goal. It strengthens his case by showing he has accounted for the obvious objection. Accept either the content point or the rhetorical one.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the answer.

10. The question tests whether a student can state an opposing case fairly before disagreeing with it. Strongest point for: unpriced costs get ignored by default. Strongest against: measurement and enforcement costs may exceed the benefit, and some noise is not substitutable. Mark down answers that caricature the side they reject, whichever side that is.

11. Any allocation can earn full marks; the requirement is the second half — naming what the choice makes worse. Business pays: costs fall on thin margins and may close venues. Residents pay: those least able to afford it carry it again. City pays: funded from taxes paid partly by people unaffected. Refuse credit where no cost is identified.

12. Look for a mechanism, not a list. Strong answers notice that framing an objection as a personality trait removes the need to answer it, and that this works best where the harm is invisible or cumulative. Reward examples that fit the pattern rather than merely being complaints — smells, lighting, workplace temperature, screen time.

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