

**NOISE: THE MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH HAZARD THAT
“SHOUTS OUT”
FOR FEDERAL ACTION**

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It is often assumed that noise is merely an annoyance. Yes, noise does annoy but it does more than that - noise can adversely affect your mental and physical well-being. Looking at the publications listed on the Council on the Environment website, it becomes clear that noise is linked to adverse health problems. Our Federal government passed the Federal Noise Control Act in 1972 that stated that citizens were entitled to the quiet that promoted their good health and welfare. Following the passage of the Noise Control Act, the government established the Office of Noise Abatement and Control (ONAC) in the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). ONAC was responsible for producing literature that educated people to the dangers of noise.

In 1978 ONAC produced a pamphlet titled: *Noise: A Health Problem*. This pamphlet acknowledges that noise annoys but most of the pages are devoted to the health hazards related to noise. The pamphlet cites hearing loss, heart disease, sleep disruption, mental and social impacts, and the special adverse effects on children’s language skills, reading and learning as the potential harmful effects of noise. While the pamphlet’s introduction states that “well-documented studies to clarify the role of noise as a public health hazard are still required,” it goes on to say that the existing evidence so far demonstrates the “danger is real.” It concludes that “...noise is a significant hazard to public health. Truly, noise is more than just an annoyance.”

The United States Environmental Protection Agency in 1976 released a document entitled: *Aviation Noise - Let’s get on with the job*. This document stated that: “The evidence is overwhelming that, unless we make that system quieter, both human health and the financial health of the industry will continue to suffer.” However, the evidence is scant that the aviation industry and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) paid heed to the message of this document because little has been done to quiet the airport-related noises adversely affecting millions of people. The recent lawsuit by five mid-eastern states against the FAA’s recent Airspace Redesign Project that has increased the noise over the residents living in these states confirms the failure of the FAA to quiet aviation noise.

Additionally, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s *Noise - It Hurts* brochure warns about the dangers of noise at work, of passing traffic, of loud music blaring from stores and bars, etc. It concludes “...with some common sense, and a community effort, noise problems can be controlled. The above cited publications of EPA and ONAC can be found on the Noise Pollution Clearinghouse website, www.nonoise.org/epa.htm.

As noted above, the United States appeared to be in the forefront of abating noise but it now lags behind our European partners with respect to acknowledging the dangers of noise. When funding was cut off from ONAC during the 1980s, the EPA’s noise efforts essentially ceased. Recently, EPA has added a noise section on its website but for the most part, the federal government has moved away from its early posture that noise is a health hazard that requires educating people to its dangers and urging industries to produce quieter products. With noise

having increased immeasurably in our environment, it is unfortunate that the federal government abandoned its early efforts to curtail noise. Recognizing the need to refund ONAC, twelve years ago Congresswoman Nita Lowey of New York introduced legislation to refund the office in a limited way, focusing primarily on its educational role. While the bill had the support of many members of Congress, it did not pass. With our nation's focus now on Health Care, prevention of illnesses should be an important part of any health care package. Refunding ONAC with its emphasis on educating people to the hazards of noise, as stated in the legislation prepared by Congresswoman Lowey, would fit in with our concern about health.

President Barack Obama in a speech before Congress in February 2009 identified a young woman in the audience, Ms. Ty'Sheoma Bethea, who attends a school in Dillon, South Carolina where "...they have to stop teaching six times a day because the train barrels pass their classroom." The President's comment indicates his understanding of noise pollution. The literature on the detrimental effects of noise on classroom learning is overwhelming and our President should be supportive of H.R. 3221, the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2009 that already passed the House which "...includes a provision aimed at reducing classroom noise and improving the acoustical environment" of schools.

In response to the large numbers of complaints that come into New York City's Quality of Life hotline, New York updated its over thirty year old Noise Code and, hopefully, the Code will help lessen the din in our city. Similarly, citizens nationwide are asking their legislatures to pass anti-noise legislation. The immense increase in noise nationwide, the discomfort expressed by citizens because of the increased noise levels, and the growing numbers of studies confirming the noise/health link clearly indicates the need for the federal government to step up its activities to curtail noise, providing our citizens with a quieter, healthier environment.