Why would it be? Noise pollution in the United States, Walker says, is an under-reported, under-studied issue; it has not really been addressed as a national public-health problem since the 1970s. The Noise Control Act of 1972 established the Office of Noise Abatement and Control within the Environmental Protection Agency, and epidemiological studies were funded, expanding data and the academic field. But when the Reagan administration effectively shut down federal noise research (the abatement office was closed in 1982), regulation became a decentralized, local issue.

Walker says that noise-exposure studies in the '70s, and many more recent studies as well, generally measured noise and its impact on health using A-weighted decibels, which emphasize loudness levels in terms of the frequencies that the human ear is most explicitly sensitive to. On the decibel scale Walker cites, breathing is typically a 10, subway trains a 95, and live rock-music concerts around a 120, a pain threshold. Research has revealed that a decibel level of 70—a vacuum cleaner, or even a loud workplace—can be experienced as “annoying,” she explains; that level has also been linked to hypertension and ischemic heart disease, hearing impairment, and diminished cognitive performance.

Transport, construction sites, and industrial/HVAC/power-generating equipment typically produce the loudest sounds. Such data have led to government regulations and policies aimed at protecting human health. Now, Walker says, a growing number of both epidemiological and occupational research studies “suggest that in addition to a sound’s loudness, its frequency profile is also an important characteristic to consider.” For example, a study focusing on raw decibels would not necessarily capture infrasound and other low frequencies that people sense in their bodies and that can trigger physiological responses such as “fight or flight.” Walker was surprised by the intensity, and often frustration, expressed in the responses to her Greater Boston Noise Survey: “I feel like it’s impacting my health”; ‘I feel like even if I complain about it, nothing will be done about it,” she recounts: “If you didn’t know they were describing some sort of assault.” On an individual, experiential level, she adds, “we do know these sounds are bothering us, because when we hear a neighbor’s bass beat in their car going by we get pissed off. But we also rationalize it because it’s an issue that’s not taken seriously. Maybe we don’t want to acknowledge it’s serious. But it is. Our bodies know that”: hearts start racing, stomachs clench, or people can’t focus on a task at hand.

She has found, through her recordings around Boston, her survey, and her Noise- Score app, that “it’s overwhelmingly the littler noises—that may not register high on decibel readers—that people are affected by and complain about.” Restaurant noises—from customers and music systems—“don’t show up in any epi-centered study,” she says, yet “living around a restaurant is a problem for a lot of people.” A barking dog may not violate a city’s noise ordinance, or appear in research studies. Yet little yapping creatures can “get under someone’s skin,” and louder