

THE NUISANCE MUFFLER; A 21ST CENTURY INVASIVE SPECIES

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Exhaust gases exit the engine and travel through a series of components: manifold, front pipe, catalytic converter, resonator, and finally, out the muffler. The muffler is typically a metal box 15 to 25 inches in length that contains a series of chambers and perforated tubes. Such design creates “destructive interference,” where sound waves of the same frequency meet out of phase, so the peak of one wave aligns with the trough of another, effectively canceling out sound energy.

When individuals modify an exhaust, they are not poking small holes in the metal, as punctures creates unappealing hissing or sputtering sounds, rather than a deep growl. Instead, they perform a muffler delete: replacing the unit with a straight pipe, or installing a high-flow aftermarket mufflers that uses less restrictive baffling. The noise result: loud as chuck.

Costs vary. A bolt-on aftermarket muffler might cost between \$100 and \$500. A full cat-back system (replacing everything from the catalytic converter to the rear) can range from \$1,000 to over \$3,000. Some enthusiasts perform these installs at home using basic hand tools, but most people visit a custom auto shop who perform these methods illegally, under the guise of “off-road” use only.

The loud muffler trend we hear today is not modern; it has roots in the 1950s hot-rod culture,¹ as well as muscle car era of the 1960s and 70s. The 1990s and 2000s also saw a massive surge in the “tuner” scene,² popularized by the Fast and Furious film franchise, which glamorized loud exhaust on the Honda Civic, Subaru WRX, and Infiniti G35. When it comes to high-end exotic cars (Lamborghini, Ferrari, McLaren, Bugatti, Koenigsegg, and Pagani), a loud exhaust note is the byproduct of high-performing, high-revving engines. These vehicles are designed for the track. When it comes to regular cars however, loud exhaust systems is an intentional (and in my opinion, tasteless) aesthetic choice. Many people have gone over the acceptable noise level into nuisance territory. This, combined with the problem of aggregation, has severely compounded the problem. Driving culture in the United States, to say the least, has become madness, tacky, unpleasant, and dangerous.

Let’s just call it what it is: most people who modify their exhausts are the type of men one might call disrespectful and sadistic. Age ranges vary, from teens through middle age, and there is no single type, except the underlying insecurity to act out. For them, the loudness of their vehicle serves as social signaling (“Look at me! No one else does!”) and projecting an insecure identity (“I’m the man, right!?” “No Billy, you are sadistic.”). One might also refer to this as “small you-know-what syndrome,” “attention-seeking,” or “weak ego.”

The desire to create loudness and nuisance in the lives of others, also falls into place with Dark Tetrad personality traits. These are four interrelated, antisocial, and malevolent personality traits, namely Machiavellianism (“the ends justify the means”), narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism (finding pleasure in other’s pain, suffering, or harm).³ Recent peer-reviewed research suggests a correlation between a preference for loud cars and higher levels of sadism and psychopathy because the driver is consciously choosing to impose a disruptive stimulus on an unwilling public.⁴

1 A hot rod is an American car that has been modified, typically for speed and aesthetics. This usually involved taking pre-WWII cars (like 1930s Fords) and stripping them down to reduce weight, swapping in more powerful V8 engines, and customizing the bodywork (chopping the roof, lowering the suspension, etc.)

2 The “tuner scene” is car modification subculture centered on enhancing the performance and aesthetics of vehicles with aftermarket engineering, especially on Japanese cars like the Honda Civic and Nissan 240SX. Called “tuner” because of its intent to precisely tune (to technically adjust and optimize) the engine, intake, exhaust, and suspension components in order to increase performance and change style.

3 Note: masochism is finding pleasure in one’s *own* pain, suffering, or harm.

4 Julie Aitken Schermer, “A Desire for a Loud Car with a Modified Exhaust System is Predicted by Being Male and Higher Scores on Psychopathy and Sadism,” *Current Issues in Personality Psychology* 12, no. 1 (2024): 35.

There are also drivers who operate older vehicles with rusted-out mufflers. A rusted muffler sounds broken and raspy. They might try the excuse, “I don’t have the money to repair it.” The truth is, it only costs between \$200 and \$600 to replace, and they spend that money monthly on cigarettes, casinos, and booze. So excuse not taken.

Modified exhausts present actual environmental and public health concerns. Many modifications involve removing the catalytic converter or the Diesel Particulate Filter (DPF) in trucks. These components are critical for decreasing nitrogen oxide and particulate matter emissions by *hundreds of percentage points* compared to the original factory condition.⁵ Under the Clean Air Act, it is illegal for anyone — owners, mechanics, or dealerships — to remove or disable emissions control devices on a vehicle intended for street use. The EPA’s National Enforcement Initiative specifically targets this because removing these components creates a blind spot in the vehicle’s onboard diagnostic (OBD) system. This internal computer relies on sensors to monitor and control pollution; once the hardware is removed, the system can no longer detect toxic exhaust, resulting in massive and immediate increase in harmful pollutants without one’s awareness. This applies to virtually all passenger vehicles and light trucks manufactured from 1996 onward, the year the EPA mandated the universal adoption of OBD-II systems across the United States.

It seems like individual drivers are never held accountable, but the EPA’s enforcement strategy is purposefully upstream. Rather than relying on roadside police stops, federal Special Agents from the EPA’s Criminal Investigation Division focus on dismantling the manufacturers and commercial distributors of illegal defeat devices (any piece of hardware, software, or mechanical modification designed to bypass, defeat, or render inoperative a vehicle’s emissions control system). Thus, the EPA aims to suppress the practice at its source. This still leaves everyday Joe Shmoe’s modified exhaust undetected and unpunished. Local law enforcement is rarely equipped nor incentivized to perform the technical inspections to identify emissions-system tampering. Which I think is also part of the problem. Why aren’t they?

Noise pollution is increasingly recognized as a physiological stressor. Recent research indicates that chronic exposure to high-decibel traffic noise is linked to increased cardiovascular disease and sleep dis-

5 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. “National Enforcement and Compliance Initiatives: 2024–2027.” EPA.gov, 2024.

turbances in urban populations.⁶ Modified vehicles contribute disproportionately to the degradation of the “acoustic commons” in American neighborhoods. Acoustic commons means the shared sound environment. The sonic air we all “breathe” or “absorb” is a public resource like a park, a clean river, or the atmosphere, that needs protection.

Loud exhausts are both public and private nuisances. A *private nuisance* is a non-trespassory interference with another’s interest in the private use and enjoyment of their land. A *public nuisance* is an act that interferes with a right common to the general public, such as health, safety, or comfort. Most states have statutes similar to the Uniform Vehicle Code, requiring every motor vehicle to be equipped with a muffler *in good working order* to prevent *excessive or unusual noise*. The nuisance threshold may be subjective, but most jurisdictions set specific decibel limits around 95 dB for stationary testing. Normal conversation typically hovers around 50 dB. A gas-powered leaf blower is 80–100 dB. A jet engine taking off is about 120 dB, which can cause immediate physical pain to someone nearby and unprotected. I find it pretty ridiculous we are collectively allowing vehicles to be as loud as leaf blowers, which I also hate by the way. Do you need to run that shit constantly for hours, going over and re-going over the same spot? Some of these people ... they don’t think about how their actions affect others.

The state of California now mandates significant, non-correctable⁷ fines for modified exhausts that can exceed \$1,000. Many states have followed suit to prohibit the sale of “straight pipes” intended for street use. Individual fines for operators typically range from \$100 to over \$1,000 depending on the jurisdiction. The regulatory focus however, as I said previously, is shifting toward the businesses that enable these modifications: repair shops and retailers are targeted with stiff penalties. For example, New York now imposes fines of up to \$1,000 per violation on shops that install illegal equipment, with the added threat of revoking business licenses for repeat offenders. On a federal level, the EPA takes an even stricter approach: civil penalties of nearly \$5,000 for each individual defeat device manufactured, sold, or installed.

The ubiquity of this issue is seen in all 50 states. No place is immune. Affordable aftermarket parts, social media car culture, poor parenting, and people with sadistic personalities have created the chaos we see today. A Lamborghini or Ferrari is engineered to sound aggressive. I can respect a high-perfor-

6 Jialu Wang et al., “The Impact of Traffic Noise on Human Health: A Review of Post-2021 Findings on Cardiovascular and Mental Health,” *Journal of Environmental Management* 310 (2022): 118.

7 Even if you fix the illegal modification and bring the car back to the station to prove it, you still have to pay the full fine.

mance sports car having a strong sound, but even that should still be respectful of nuisance statutes. But modifying Hondas, Infinitis, Subarus, Dodges Challengers, Ford Mustangs, Ford F-150s, BMWs, Nissans, Audis, Benzes, and Chevys? That's a child's frustrated cry.

Did we forget the power of silence? The elephant is a perfect example. The largest land animal, full of tremendous force. He doesn't need to roar. You can just feel his presence. True strong people don't need to shout from rooftops.

Hopefully citizens continue reporting these nuisances to crackdown on individuals, and EPA special agents and state-level agencies continue the important fight. We must advocate for stricter enforcement and higher fines as deterrents.

These people need to seriously ask themselves: is my egotistical insecurity, quenched by a fleeting moment of hateful attention, more valuable than society's needs for peace, quiet, and clean air?

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About the Author

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