

# Social distancing rule breakers, beware: Boston 'vigilantes' are reporting your violations

Fed-up residents are exposing and reporting others who aren't following health guidelines.

By [Matt Rocheleau](#) Globe Staff, Updated April 2, 2020, 5:34 p.m.



A just about empty Summer street during the mid afternoon traffic hour viewed from the Fort Point Channel. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Pickup [games of basketball](#). [Co-workers enjoying lunch](#) together. A [child blowing bubbles](#) while strolling down the sidewalk with family.

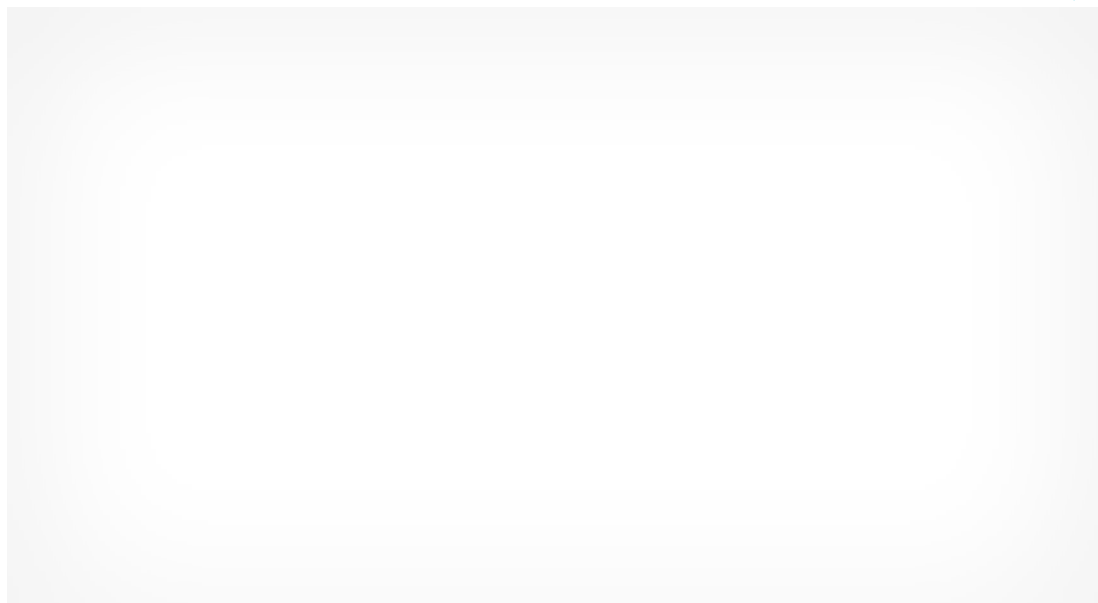
A few weeks ago these were all harmless, heartwarming activities.

But in the age of coronavirus, they are drawing looks of disgust, shame on social media, and a flood of complaints to police and local authorities, who are fielding a surge of reports of supposed social distancing violations.

In fact, concern about the highly contagious virus has turned some area residents into social distance vigilantes — cranky and over the top in some cases, justifiably worried in others.

Some call city quality-of-life hot lines. Others dial 911. The most bold send public tweets or Facebook messages to authorities, or surreptitiously snap photos and videos and report them directly to police, demanding they clear parks, halt [soccer](#) games, and disperse those they consider scofflaws.

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“They probably won’t listen to you or me,” said Cambridge resident Cynthia Haynes. “But if a police officer came out, a state trooper came out, they’d probably leave.”

Haynes, a chef in her 50s whose outdoor exposure is limited now to solitary walks with her dog three times a day and occasional grocery store jaunts, worries about the well-being of residents most vulnerable to the virus, including her mother, who’s in her 80s. So when Haynes sees people clustered in parks or in public, she takes action.

The first surveillance video she sent to police captured some teens playing basketball at Hoyt Field in Cambridge. A police officer, Haynes said, told her the basketball rims would soon be gone.

Another video captured adults at a park along Memorial Drive using an outdoor fitness station — without wiping down the equipment. That prompted her to ask the city to put fencing around the area.

Records show hundreds of annoyed citizens from all over the Boston area have logged similar complaints in recent weeks, with calls to municipal 311 services or in social media posts directed at police.

One complaint from Allston [read](#): “Landscape people with leaf blowers during a crisis? Can we stop this air blown COVID-19 spread? Please send Cops.”

[Another](#) featured a photo shot through a window screen in South Boston showing a half-dozen people chatting outside a home “No Social distancing?? What happened to 6 feet apart? I’m concerned for neighbors and passers-by. . . . One or two are coughing quite a bit too.”

Barbara Anthony, former Massachusetts undersecretary for consumer affairs, got into the mix recently, [tweeting](#) a

photo of a gathering of people in Harvard Square on a sunny day, along with the tag #StayHome.

A former prosecutor, Anthony is no stranger to levying criticism and said extraordinary times call for people to speak out, loudly. “That lack of responsibility [by people who don’t social distance] doesn’t just impact a single individual, it impacts entire communities . . . it affects all of us,” she said. “I think we need stricter enforcement.”

But if you thought the accused would go down without a fight, you’d be wrong. Some have fired back at their complainants.

One person in Roslindale [wrote](#) in to Boston’s 311 service: “News flash folks — a family playing baseball at Fallon field is not going [to] spread COVID-19. Mind your own business and [find] something else to complain about.”

Still, law enforcement has taken notice of the illicit gatherings. After a resident tweeted at the City of Somerville about people “not practicing social distancing in the park,” the city quickly responded, and dispatched an officer to the scene.

Spokesmen for area police agencies said people have generally been cooperative when officers have responded to calls and asked groups to disperse.

To be clear: It’s not a crime to be near someone else or gather in large groups in Massachusetts. Social distancing here is a health recommendation from state and local leaders.

But other states have enacted strict rules and bulked up enforcement. Police have charged pastors for holding church services, broken up weddings and parties, and more, [according to media reports](#). Lithuania’s capital city launched drones to patrol and prevent gatherings in public spaces.

In Massachusetts, Boston Mayor Martin J. Walsh and Governor Charlie Baker have repeatedly urged residents to stay

home, except in emergencies or to get groceries, medicine, and other essentials. They've encouraged going outside for exercise and mental well-being, but stressed that when residents leave their homes they should maintain proper distance from people they're not living with.

Both leaders have so far resisted issuing orders that can actually be enforced. There are no fines or other penalties for being socially adjacent. That could change, officials have warned, particularly if there's a lack of compliance.

"I know the mayor in New York is imposing a \$500 fine if people don't practice social distancing," Walsh said Monday. "I hope we don't have to do that."

He also worried that the temptation to relax distancing discipline could be heightened with warmer weather.

In response to Walsh's guidance, city workers have taken steps to curb recreational gatherings, including posting signs encouraging social distancing at parks and closing playground and tot lots. They've removed street hockey, soccer, and tennis court nets.

City workers zip-tied basketball nets, but some players persisted. The city then bolted pieces of plywood together to cover the rims, according to a parks spokesman.

South Boston resident Taralynn Asack, 29, was propelled to document and point out violators on her social media accounts in part out of a sense of public service, in part out of boredom.

"I've taken it upon myself to be neighborhood watch," said Asack, an on-air sports reporter for DraftKings. "I've been going a bit stir crazy without any news. So I've just been going around Boston exposing people."

But Asack said her [posts](#) trend toward the positive and supportive and are designed to raise awareness.

“Who wants to be screamed at right now?” she said. “There’s too much uncertainty to be mean to each other. . . . We need all the kindness we can get.”

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Matt Rocheleau can be reached at [matthew.rocheleau@globe.com](mailto:matthew.rocheleau@globe.com). Follow him on Twitter [@mrochele](https://twitter.com/mrochele).

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