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'They just kind of destroyed the place': Businesses closed for months now face looting aftermath

'As if COVID wasn't bad enough, now we've got this,' said a cafe owner

By [Tim Logan](#), [Janelle Nanos](#), [Matt Rocheleau](#) and [Anissa Gardizy](#) Globe Staff and Globe Correspondent, Updated June 1, 2020, 1:47 p.m.



A man cleaned up glass at Bromfield Nails near Downtown Crossing after damage caused by looting on Sunday night. BLAKE NISSEN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Chris Parsons, owner of the Oyster Club restaurant at 79 Park Plaza, went to bed Sunday night hopeful his restaurant had been spared from the violence wracking downtown Boston. He woke up Monday to learn looters had thrown rocks through his windows, pilfered the bar, and ransacked the place.

Kayla Levine was watching the news when she saw the liquor store near Copley Square that her family has owned since 1940 being looted. The damage in the neighborhood, she said, reminded her of the Boston Marathon bombings.

And Driss Elmokri raced downtown Sunday night to his Cafe Bonjour on Temple Street, arriving just as looters smashed the big front window. He stayed until 3:30 a.m., to make sure that was the only damage they did.

“They were like high-schoolers. Very young kids,” he said. “And they were just going around breaking things.”

As Downtown Crossing and the Back Bay cleaned up Monday morning after Sunday night’s rash of looting and violence, business owners in both neighborhoods were coming to terms with the latest blow in what had already been a brutal spring.

Up Washington Street and on the warren of roads that connect it to Boston Common, and along the tonier boulevards of Boylston and Newbury streets, store owners and work crews were sweeping up glass, installing plywood boards, and taking stock of what — if anything — had been stolen in the chaos that followed Sunday’s largely peaceful protests of recent police brutality around the country.

They were also trying to determine what it meant for reopening after more than two months of being largely shut down to help stop the spread of the coronavirus.

Many businesses had already suffered enormous losses this spring, said Jon Hurst, president of the Retailers Association of Massachusetts. This will only make things worse.

“It’s just horrible what we’re seeing. What’s next, you know?” he said. “It’s all very frustrating that as we’re hopefully on the doorstep of reopening, that some of these stores are further set back.”

The damage was sporadic.

In Downtown Crossing, where some people clashed with police after the protests, a wide range of businesses had broken windows, and stately churches were scarred with graffiti. Along Boylston and Newbury streets, the targets were mostly clothing and jewelry stores, from the person-size holes in the glass doors of H&M to the smashed windows of Cartier near the Public Garden.

In some places, looters appeared to be especially choosy. At the Prudential Center, carpenters were boarding up the entire front entrance of Saks Fifth Avenue, where TV footage on Sunday night showed extensive looting, while other stores nearby had less damage. Some looters apparently made it inside the mall itself, but damaged only one store: the popular jacket retailer Canada Goose, where workers were covering a broken window Monday. Throughout the city, retailers who survived unscathed chose to board up their storefronts to protect against future violence.

Theft is a fact of life in retail, Hurst said, noting that Massachusetts retailers lose about \$1 billion worth of merchandise annually in targeted thefts. It typically happens in less dramatic fashion, he said, but stealing popular goods that can be sold on the black market is a relatively low-risk, high-reward endeavor.

"A lot of that is aimed at the retail sector," he said.

Sunday night, the looting also extended to restaurants, especially those with bars visible from the street.

Parsons was watching the protests and their aftermath Sunday night and turned off his TV around midnight, hopeful his restaurant would be safe. On Monday morning, his phone was alive with calls and texts telling him rocks had been thrown through the plate glass windows and the place had been looted. Parsons had just begun planning to reopen, with outdoor seating on his patio.

"As if things weren't complicated enough," he said. "They pilfered all the alcohol, threw bottles of wine and chairs, and broke all the mirrors. They just kind of destroyed the place."

On Boylston Street near Copley Square, the front windows of Clarendon Wine had been smashed; normally full racks of wine and liquor appeared half-empty Monday morning.

Levine said the looting was a further blow to her family's store, which has struggled without its usual flow of foot traffic from office workers, college students, and construction workers through Copley Square since the COVID-19 outbreak, she said. The family had recently closed the store to try and assess their future.

"We took a break to try to figure out what to do," she said. "And this happened."

Far newer businesses are trying to figure out their next moves, too.

Elmokri and his brothers had just opened Cafe Bonjour, a breakfast cafe on Temple Street, in December. Business had been great until the coronavirus hit, he said, and even since then they've adapted with deliveries and with supplying food for workers at nearby hospitals. When he saw the violence flaring in Downtown Crossing Sunday night, Elmokri

raced to his restaurant and arrived to see kids smashing the front window. After they left he stood guard, on the restaurant's black-and-white tile floor, for four hours.

“If I wasn't here, this would've been much worse,” he said as a crew boarded up the gaping front window. “As if COVID wasn't bad enough, now we've got this.”

Business leaders in both Downtown Crossing and the Back Bay said small retailers and restaurants have been struggling in recent months during the shutdowns as they try to sort through the long-term implications of a virus that could change much about how cities like Boston function.

Sunday night's violence won't help, said Rosemarie Sansone, chief executive of the Downtown Boston Business Improvement District. But, she said, no one she has talked to is planning on going anywhere.

“The responses I've gotten from people are ‘How can we help?’ ‘How can we rebuild?’ ” she said. “This too will pass. We're a great city.”

There were pockets of looting in the early morning hours in [other parts of the city, as well](#).

On Tremont Street in the South End, looters broke through the windows and ransacked Giorgiana's Market, causing an estimated \$50,000 in damages, said its owner, Anna Varounis. Frenchie restaurant had its sign and windows smashed, as did Laced, a sneaker boutique on Massachusetts Avenue. Like a number of other damaged businesses, [Laced said in an Instagram post](#) that it supported the peaceful protests, if not what happened afterward.

“This is not about Laced or any of the other properties damaged,” the company posted. “It is about the loss of life which

is irreplaceable and precious.”

In the Fields Corner section of Dorchester, Christopher Bray said three people shattered the front door of his Dareales clothing store and “just ransacked the place” around 4 a.m. A few blocks down the street, the glass had been kicked in on the door of the EbLens streetwear store. Inside, stacks of empty hangers lay in a pile on top of shards of glass.

As he swept up glass on the threshold, Bray expressed frustration “I feel disappointed,” he said. He opened his business last June, he said, “so my community can see a different example of leadership.”

He was just getting ready to reopen after the shutdown.

“I wanted to be an example of a dream that could come true,” he said.

Others saw their dreams smashed, for reasons that seem hard to comprehend.

On Bromfield Street downtown, two nail salons had massive holes in their glass storefronts Monday morning. Inside one, the mother of the shop’s owner sobbed as she assessed the damage. Many machines, equipment, and other items had been stolen. It was overwhelming, said the woman, who declined to give her name.

“I don’t know,” she said. “They took so much. I don’t even know.”

Neither did the people passing by. One woman stopped to share her condolences, and her confusion.

“Why would they mess with a nail salon?” she said to the woman inside the store. “God. I’m so, so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

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