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Many violations found at grocery stores in Boston

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The Boston supermarket with the most violations — 127 — was the Whole Foods on Cambridge Street, near Beacon Hill.

By Sacha Pfeiffer and Matt Rocheleau

GLOBE STAFF APRIL 06, 2016

Your grocery store may not be as pristine as you think.

A Globe review of Boston food safety inspection data found that supermarkets are equal-opportunity offenders, with hundreds of violations, big and small, scattered across stores and neighborhoods of all kinds.

Three years of citation records from the city's Inspectional Services Department show a wide variety of problems, from minor ones such as cluttered storage areas and ice buildup in freezers to critical ones like employees not washing up before handling food. And there were nearly 50 citations issued for evidence of rodents, flies, or cockroaches.

Of the stores open during the entire three-year period, every one had at least a dozen violations.

The Boston supermarket with the most violations — 127 — was the Whole Foods on Cambridge Street, near Beacon Hill, a high-end brand in what is generally considered a well-to-do, white-collar area. But not all citations are created equal, so sheer quantity may not be an indicator of an especially problematic store.

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Store *	Address	Neighborhood	Date	Comments
Save-A-Lot	323 M L King Bl	Roxbury	3/21/2016	Clean all shelves throughout retail area
Save-A-Lot	323 M L King Bl	Roxbury	3/21/2016	Provide a hand wash sign, paper towels, and soap dispenser at hand wash sink in produce prep room

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Check grocery stores in your area

The Globe reviewed three years of inspection records for 42 stores identified as “full-range grocers.”

Case in point: The majority of violations (108) at the Cambridge Street Whole Foods involved relatively minor problems, including dirty shelves and improperly stored mops. None of them involved mice or rats. It was last week’s discovery of mice in a Roxbury Stop & Shop that brought new attention to the issue of supermarket cleanliness.

Interpreting the violation data requires some context. For example, larger grocery stores, as well as chains with more locations, often have a higher chance of being hit with citations simply because their size creates more opportunities for missteps. That’s especially true among stores like Whole Foods that sell large quantities of self-service prepared foods.

A Whole Foods spokeswoman, in a statement, said the chain is “dedicated to maintaining the highest quality standards for the products we sell and the stores we operate.”

The lesson for shoppers, according to food safety advocate Darin Detwiler, who teaches food regulatory policy at Northeastern University, is this: “Just because it’s got a big name like Whole Foods or Market Basket or Stop & Shop does not mean that it doesn’t have a record of problems,” requiring consumers to always be on the alert for problematic conditions.

The Globe reviewed three years of inspection records for 42 stores identified by the Boston Redevelopment Authority as “full-range grocers” with at least 7,000 square feet of space. ISD said it automatically inspects all supermarkets twice a year and additionally in response to customer complaints.



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The city's top inspection official, ISD Commissioner William Christopher, insists his department has tried to identify trends in supermarket violations that would enable inspectors to be more proactive but has found none. Instead, he's concluded, individual store management is a key factor.

"I wish there were a trend, because that way I could target our resources, but there really isn't," Christopher said. "Unfortunately, I think it has to do with people. You have different managers in different stores, and different types of supermarkets with different management hierarchies. It's more that the larger-volume stores . . . need to be monitored at a greater level."

That's reflected in the violation data, which show that chains with the greatest number of large stores have the highest number of citations. The biggest offender is the chain that jointly owns Shaw's and Star Market, whose nine stores in Boston racked up the most violations: 460. Stop & Shop, which also has nine stores, ranked second highest, with 353 violations. Whole Foods ranked next with six stores and 294 violations.



JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

A worker cleaned outside the Roxbury Stop & Shop on Blue Hill Avenue after code violations shut it down.

In statements to the Globe, those chains said they work closely with health officials to maintain high-quality standards and take inspection data seriously.

Supermarkets with salad bars and self-service prepared foods are additionally vulnerable to violations since those items can easily become cross-contaminated or exposed to germs if shoppers sample foods with their fingers.

Stores with large numbers of customers are also especially susceptible. If hundreds of shoppers open and close a freezer door on a hot day, for example, that could result in a drop in refrigeration temperature that could put the store in violation of code.

“Those inspection sheets have a lengthy and cumbersome list of things that have to be followed, and I think retailers do the best job they can,” said Chris Flynn, president of the Massachusetts Food Association, a trade group for the state’s supermarket and grocery industry.

Christopher has characterized last Monday’s shutdown of the Stop & Shop at 460 Blue Hill Ave. as “an anomaly,” and said he cannot recall another time in the city’s history when a grocery store was shuttered for health reasons; closures are more likely to occur because of burst pipes.

The city’s inspection data show that there have been 13 violations involving mice or rats at supermarkets in the past three years. But Christopher said those were not always categorized as the most critical violations, even as they were likely to prompt inspectors to elevate their levels of scrutiny.

In addition to the Blue Hill Avenue store, the Stop & Shop outpost on Centre Street in Jamaica Plain had one rodent violation. The C-Mart in the South End and the America’s Food Basket in Mattapan had two. The Ming’s supermarket in the South End had three rodent infractions.

How could grocery stores be cited for vermin-related problems but not shut down? Christopher said that “a lot depends on where we find them, the intensity of what we found, the store’s pest control plan. Are they up to speed and things like that? If it’s a small thing, we’re not going to overreact.”

He described the Blue Hill Avenue store’s mouse problems as unusually bad, prompting the closure. The store opened about 48 hours later, following a thorough cleaning and reinspection. Christopher

said the closure caused a small spike in customer complaints about supermarkets, but he attributes that to heightened awareness of problems, not an indication that grocery stores are committing more infractions.

A Stop & Shop spokesman said it takes all violations seriously. “While we were disappointed with the results of the inspection at our store in Roxbury last week, our store teams acted quickly to address the concerns and to reopen the store,” spokesman Philip Tracey said in a statement.

Christopher said ISD has received reports of grocery stores citywide initiating cleaning campaigns as a result of the Stop & Shop closure.

Supermarket staffs, he said, need to be better educated in how to reduce potential violations, such as by not storing boxes against walls where vermin or trash could accumulate unnoticed behind them and by paying extra scrutiny to the bakery and dog food section of supermarkets, which are more likely to attract rodents.

He also encourages shoppers to call ISD or the city’s non-emergency 311 help line with concerns.

“Let us know,” Christopher said. “The more we know, the more we can do.”

On their twice-yearly visits, inspectors look not just for health violations, but also building maintenance issues and problems with scales and scanners that may not be weighing or pricing items correctly.

The most common type of violation was improper maintenance of walls, ceilings, and floors. That may seem largely cosmetic, but there is a health issue: They are required to be impermeable to prevent mold or leaks from developing. Also high on the list was “food protection,” such as requiring that salad bars have sneeze guards.

“There are all sorts of violations, and they’re not all the same, kind of like the difference between felonies and misdemeanors,” said Eric Nusbaum, founder of Wheelwright Consultants, a Greenfield restaurant and food safety management consulting firm. “It’s very complicated, and these are snapshots, so you have stores with good days and bad days.”

Of the Blue Hill Avenue Stop & Shop’s rodent problem, Nusbaum said: “When you have something critical like that, somebody has dropped the ball, and those are balls that have been dropped for a

long time. You don't have a big infestation overnight.”

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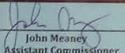
Date: 3/28/16
Name of Premises Closed: Stop and Shop
Address of Premises Closed: 460 Blue Hill Ave, Boston
Name of Permit Holder: Stop and Shop
Address of Permit Holder: 1385 Hancock St. Quincy MA

The Boston Inspectional Services Department, Health Division, acting as an agent for the Boston Public Health Commission, has determined that an imminent health hazard exists which requires the immediate suspension of operations per 105 CMR 590.000; Massachusetts Sanitary Code, Article X, Section 590.01, Minimum Standard for Food Establishment Operations.

The suspension shall remain in effect until the conditions cited in this order are corrected and confirmed by the Health Division.

Notice of a Right to a Hearing
Upon receiving this order you have a right to a hearing, if requested, in writing within ten (10) days. A hearing will be scheduled within three (3) business days upon receipt of the hearing request.

VIOLATION(S) NOTED
1. Improper food storage

 John Meaney
Assistant Commissioner

William "Buddy" Christopher Jr.
Commissioner

ANY PERSON WHO FAILS TO COMPLY WITH THIS POSTED ORDER AND/OR REMOVES THIS POSTING WITHOUT CITY OF BOSTON PERMISSION MAY BE FINED UP TO \$500 FOR EACH OFFENSE.

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DAVID L RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

A Stop & Shop on Blue Hill Ave. in Roxbury was briefly closed by health inspectors last month.

Patrick Garvin of the Globe staff contributed to this report. Sacha Pfeiffer can be reached at pfeiffer@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter at [@SachaPfeiffer](https://twitter.com/SachaPfeiffer). Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com.

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