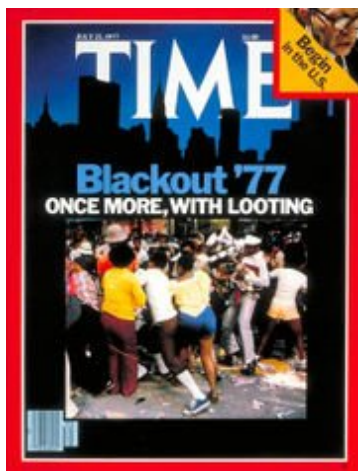


# Oh what a time in thee old town !

## New York City blackout of 1977

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*TIME*, July 25, 1977

*"New York Blackout" redirects here. For the song "New York Blackout" by Soul Asylum, see [Candy from a Stranger](#).*

The **New York City Blackout of 1977** was a [blackout](#) that affected [New York City](#) on [July 13](#) - [July 14](#), [1977](#).

Unlike other blackouts that affected the region, namely the [Northeast Blackout of 1965](#) and the [2003 North America blackout](#), the 1977 blackout was localized to New York City and the immediate surroundings resulted in city-wide looting and other disorder, including [arson](#).

### Cause

The events leading up to the blackout started at 8:37 p.m. EDT on [July 13](#) with a lightning strike at Buchanan South, a [substation](#) on the [Hudson River](#), tripping two [circuit breakers](#) in Westchester County. The Buchanan South substation converted the 345,000 volts of [electricity](#) from [Indian Point](#) to lower voltage for commercial use. A loose locking nut combined with a tardy upgrade cycle ensured that the breaker was not able to reclose and allow power to flow again.

A second lightning strike caused the loss of two 345,000 volt transmission lines (and subsequent reclose of only one of the lines) and the loss of power from a 900MW nuclear plant at Indian Point. As a result of the strikes, two other major transmission lines became loaded over their normal limits. As per procedure, [Con Edison](#) tried to start fast-start generation at 8:45PM EDT - however, no one was manning the station, and

the remote start failed.

At 8:55PM EDT there was another lightning strike, which took out two additional critical transmission lines. As before, only one of the lines was automatically returned to service. This outage of lines from the [Sprain Brook](#) substation caused the remaining lines to exceed the long-term operating limits of their capacity. After this last failure, Con Edison had to manually reduce the loading on another local generator at their East River facility, due to problems at the plant. This exacerbated an already dire situation.

At 9:14PM EDT, over thirty minutes from the initial event, Con Edison initiated a 5% system-wide voltage reduction to try to reduce NYC load and the transfers from upstate. The results were not satisfactory, and the power was then reduced by 8%. At 9:19 PM EDT the final major interconnection to Upstate NY at Leeds substation tripped due to a thermal overload which caused a 345KV conductor to sag into a tree. This trip caused the 138 kV links with [Long Island](#) to overload, and a major [interconnection](#) with PSEG in [New Jersey](#) began to load even higher than previously reported. At 9:22PM EDT, [LILCO](#) opened its 345,000 volt interconnection to Con Edison in an effort to save its own system.

At 9:24 pm EDT the Con Edison operator tried and failed to manually shed load. Five minutes later, at 9:29 PM EDT, the Linden 345,000 volt [interconnection](#) with New Jersey tripped, and the Con Edison system began to automatically isolate itself from the outside world.

[Con Ed](#), the power provider for New York City and some of [Westchester County](#), could not generate enough power within the city, and the three [power lines](#) that supplemented the city's power were overtaxed. Just after 9:27 PM EDT, the biggest generator in New York City, Ravenswood 3 (also known as *Big Allis*), shut down. With it went all of New York City. (Mahler 2005)

By 9:36 PM EDT the entire Con Edison power system shut down, almost exactly an hour after the first lightning strike. By 10:26 PM EDT operators started a restoration procedure. Power was not restored until late the following day.

As a result of the 1977 blackout, the operating entities in New York fully investigated the blackout, its related causes, and the operator actions. They implemented significant changes, which are still in effect today, to guard against a similar occurrence. Despite these safeguards, there was [a blackout in August 2003](#), although this was caused by a power system failure as far away as [Eastlake, Ohio](#)

## Effects

The blackout came at a low point in the [city's history](#), with New York facing a severe financial crisis, and commentators contrasted the event with the good-natured *Where were you when the lights went out?* atmosphere of 1965. Some pointed to the financial crisis as a root cause of the disorder, others noted the hot July weather. Still others noted that the 1977 blackout came after businesses had closed and their owners went home, while in 1965 the blackout occurred during the day and owners stayed to protect their property.

[Looting](#) and [vandalism](#) were widespread, hitting thirty-one [neighborhoods](#), including every poor neighborhood in the city. Among the hardest hit were [Crown Heights](#) where seventy-five stores on a five-block stretch were looted, and [Bushwick](#) where arson was rampant with some 25 fires still burning the next morning. At one point two blocks of Manhattan's Broadway were on fire. Thirty-five blocks of Broadway were

destroyed: 134 stores looted, 45 of them set ablaze.

In all, 1,616 stores were damaged in looting and rioting. 1,037 fires were responded to, including 14 multiple-alarm fires. In the largest mass arrest in city history, 3,776 people were arrested. Many had to be stuffed into overcrowded cells, precinct basements and other makeshift holding pens. A Congressional study estimated that the cost of damages amounted to a little over US\$300 million.

[Shea Stadium](#) went dark at approximately 9:30 p.m., in the bottom of the sixth inning, with Lenny Randle at bat. The [New York Mets](#) were losing 2-1 against the [Chicago Cubs](#). [Jane Jarvis](#), Shea's Organist and "Queen of Melody", played [Jingle Bells](#) and [White Christmas](#). The game was completed on [September 16](#), with the Cubs winning 5-2.

By 1:45 p.m. the next day, service was restored to half of Consolidated Edison's customers, mostly in [Staten Island](#) and [Queens](#). It was not until 10:39 p.m. on [July 14](#) that the entire city's power was back online.

## Aftermath

Mayor [Abe Beame](#) accused Con Ed of "gross negligence" but would eventually feel the effect himself. He finished third in the [Democratic](#) primary to [Ed Koch](#) and [Mario Cuomo](#). Koch would go on to win the mayoral election.

## Trivia

- [Superman: The Movie](#) was being filmed in New York at the time of the blackout. According to director [Richard Donner](#), cinematographer [Geoffrey Unsworth](#) mistakenly believed that he had caused the blackout by plugging a powerful spotlight into a lamppost.
- It is widely rumored that the birth rate in New York City went up 35% nine months following the blackout in 1977 (suggesting that people had [sexual intercourse](#) during the blackout), but this has not been proven and remains an [urban legend](#) (but was nevertheless featured on [VH1's I Love the 70s](#) episode for 1977).

## Cultural references

- In 1977, [The Trammps](#) released the song "The Night the Lights Went Out" to commemorate the electrical blackout.
- In a what-if [alternate history](#) issue of [Conan the Barbarian](#) by [Marvel Comics](#), the blackout is connected to a brief [time travel](#) visit of Conan to our times. [Peter Parker](#) also makes a cameo.
- According to [Men in Black](#) (1997), the blackout was caused by a super bouncing energy ball, and the blackout was a practical joke by ["The Great Attractor."](#)
- [Raymond Stantz](#) knocks out New York City's power while investigating a river of slime in [Ghostbusters II](#) (1989).
- Coupled with [Son of Sam](#) hysteria, the effects of the blackout on [New York City](#) are a key theme of the 1999 [Spike Lee](#) film [Summer of](#)

*Sam.*

- Rapper [Pharoahe Monch](#)'s 2006 music video "Push" is set in the night of the blackout.
- The *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* novel *Blackout* by [Keith R.A. DeCandido](#) takes place during the '77 blackout.
- In an episode of "Phenomenon: The Lost Archives" (documenting the works of [Nikola Tesla](#)), it was suggested that a Soviet radio tower, broadcasting "noise" which had been labelled the "[Russian Woodpecker](#)" by the [CIA](#), coincidentally ceased after a year of continual transmission prior to the blackout.

## See also

- [Northeast Blackout of 1965](#)
- [Northeast Blackout of 2003](#)

## [\[edit\]](#) References

- Goodman, James (2003) *Blackout* New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux
- Mahler, Jonathan (2005) *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Bronx is Burning* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux

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