

Sounding off Barcelona seeks to curb noisy streets

By Ashifa Kassam MADRID

Barcelona's streets and squares have long been home to a cacophony of restaurant patios, buskers and throngs of residents and tourists. Now the city is on a mission to find out just how noisy these spaces can get, with the installation of sound level monitors in 11 areas.

"It's an absolute priority," said Eloi Badia, the Barcelona city councillor who oversees ecological transition. "Noise pollution - with all of its sleep disorders, pathologies and stress - is one of the most important public health issues we have in the city, second only to air pollution."

A recent study by Barcelona's public health agency found that about 57% of people in the city are regularly exposed to noise levels that exceed those recommended by the World Health Organization. The figure dwarfs the estimates across Europe, where one in five are exposed to harmful noise.

210,000

Number of people suffering serious emotional, psychological or social effects due to noise in Barcelona

▼ A protest against noise at night in Barcelona

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Sound meters are to be installed in all the areas where residents regularly complain of noise. From there officials will start listening. Acceptable decibel limits vary from area to area, based on factors such as the width of the street or the distribution of buildings.

"If the limits are exceeded during two consecutive weekends, the area will be confirmed as acoustically stressed," Badia said. "In that case the district will have to present an action plan that can be worked on with neighbours, restaurants and others to try to mitigate the damage."

Potential measures could include limiting outdoor dining hours or curbing the hours that local stores sell alcohol. Residents whose areas are deemed "acoustically stressed" will also be able to access grants to help them insulate windows and soundproof their homes.

The initiative builds on a network of sound level meters already set up in the city, which had allowed officials to take sporadic action to address soaring noise levels, such as clearing out a plaza. With the recognition of specific acoustically stressed areas, officials hope to pave the way for lasting solutions. "Our goal is to have a much quieter, more peaceful and friendly city," Badia said.

The initiative is part of a broader set of measures - from traffic calming to the reduction of noise at work sites - to be rolled out in Barcelona in the coming years. Many are aimed at quelling traffic noise, which ranks as the city's primary source of noise pollution.

Issues have also long flared up around the city's nightlife. Last week more than 30 associations took to the streets to protest under the banner of "Silence ... Noise kills!"

Among those who planned to attend was Jordi Badia, who lives on a street with one of Barcelona's highest concentrations of restaurant terraces. "We have 114 residential buildings and 116 licensed terraces," he told *El Periódico*.

Noise levels have rocketed in recent months, fuelled by the proliferation of outdoor seating during the pandemic, Badia said. "There are stretches where it is brutal. It's not just the terraces and the people, we have bars that close at three in the morning. When people leave at three in the morning, you can just imagine how it is."

ASHIFA KASSAM IS A MULTIMEDIA JOURNALIST BASED IN SPAIN