

# 'Like a vacuum cleaner running all day': noisy nightlife making Spanish streets 'uninhabitable'

Tensions between residents and revellers have reached boiling point after loosening of serving restrictions during Covid

[Ashifa Kassam](#)



Customers enjoying Ponzano street's vibrant nightlife. But residents are unhappy about noise from the 60 bars and restaurants. Photograph: Denis Doyle/The Observer

The sun has barely set when the music starts thumping on Madrid's [Calle Ponzano](#). As queues start to form outside the already heaving bars, the party spills out on to the pavement, leaving customers jostling for space with an ever-growing cacophony of smokers and passersby.

Lost in the fray is the brightly lettered message – pleading with punters to keep the noise down – from banners that flap from balconies above. It is a last ditch effort by those who have found themselves living on the frontline of a battle playing out across Spain as exhausted neighbours

## [face off against raucous drinkers.](#)

"It's absolutely crazy here," said Pilar Rodríguez of the El Organillo neighbours' association, which represents hundreds of residents. Like most others, she moved in years ago when Calle Ponzano was like any other, and watched in dismay as about 60 tapas bars, restaurants and nightclubs sprouted up within a 500-metre stretch.

These days, there are venues on the street that stay open until 5.30am. "So at 6am, people tumble out on to the street," said Rodríguez. "They're screaming, looking for taxis, calling up friends and singing Happy Birthday to each other. It's a spectacle, a Dantesque spectacle."

Earlier this month she and other bleary-eyed neighbours across [Spain](#) gained an unexpected ally: the country's ombudsman, who called on municipalities to do more to tackle the boisterous brouhaha that unfolds regularly in city centres across Spain.

"Each year the ombudsman receives hundreds of complaints about noise and nuisance coming from hospitality establishments," Ángel Gabilondo, the ombudsman, wrote in his annual report. "In fact, it's the most frequent and reiterated reason for complaints when it comes to the urban environment."

While Spain's vibrant nightlife has long caused friction with those looking for a little peace and quiet, the ombudsman noted that tensions had swelled in the wake of pandemic-era measures that had made it easier for bars and restaurants to serve food and drink on outdoor terraces.

What initially seemed like a perfect compromise – saving [jobs in the hospitality industry](#) while doubling down on the country's cherished culture of savouring tapas, beers and coffee in the sunshine – had unwittingly sharpened a long simmering conflict.

It had also left local councils grappling with a new set of issues. "Noise pollution can also violate other constitutional rights: the right to health, to an adequate environment and decent housing," the ombudsman noted. Failure to address concerns over noise could result in urban centres becoming "uninhabitable".

Ángel Gabilondo, Spain's ombudsman.

His report made special mention of Madrid, [Barcelona](#) and the northern city of Bilbao. But posters begging people to keep quiet have popped up in city centres across Spain. In the coastal city of Alicante, officials are contemplating legislation that would allow them to temporarily shut some bars earlier, while Valencia recently passed regulations setting out a minimum distance between venues.

Efforts to tone down the party, however, have often run into stiff opposition from an industry that has found the terraces a life-saver in the face of rising costs and labour

Ángel Gabilondo, Spain's ombudsman, says noise pollution violates constitutional rights. Photograph: NurPhoto/Getty Images

shortages.

"The numbers speak for themselves," said Emilio Gallego of the Spanish Hospitality Industry Association. "Spaniards like bars, they like terraces, we like going out for a beer and enjoying the weather."

Most terraces, bars and restaurants coexist peacefully with neighbours, he said. "In Madrid there are thousands and thousands of streets and dozens of neighbourhoods and in the majority of places, there have been no problems."

To explain why tensions had flared in some places, he offered up his own theory: "We also believe that this has to do with the way Spaniards speak – we're loud, we have a high tone of voice. Obviously this doesn't help."

Bars and restaurants are subject to "strict municipal ordinances", he said, including limits on noise levels, hours by which terraces must close and restrictions on where new restaurants can be opened.

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How effective these regulations are remains an open question. Gabilondo, citing recent legislation passed in Madrid, said the rules were welcome but stressed that they needed to be enforced. "There's no point in establishing a closing time if these hours are not complied with," the ombudsman said. "The measures that protect the rights of citizens can only be effective if the administration carries out controls and sanctions unlawful conduct." Officials in Madrid did not respond to a request for comment.

The ombudsman's message is echoed in Barcelona, where last year the city [installed sound-level](#) monitors in 11 areas, describing it as the first step in taming the city's raucous terraces, buskers and throngs of residents and tourists.

"We've got neighbourhoods where the noise levels average about 70 or 75 decibels," said Miquel Prats of Xarxa Veïnal del Raval, a residents' association in Raval. The figure far exceeds the [55 decibel threshold](#) at which noise becomes harmful to human health, according to the World Health Organization.

The solution, in his view, is twofold, starting with stricter enforcement of the regulations. "For example, the soundproofing of some locales or cracking down on those who leave street-facing windows open."

The city of Barcelona said tackling noise at night remains a priority and that it continues to assess the effectiveness of measures.

The second facet was longer-term, digging into the idea of what – and who – streets are designed for, said Prats. "We need to avoid creating these monoculture streets that are made up of just bars or just terraces," he said, pointing to Barcelona's Calle d'Enric Granados, where the 114 residential buildings are outnumbered by 116 terraces.

While he welcomed recent efforts to curtail opening hours, the problem persists.

"It's still intense – we're exposed to an incredible amount of noise," he said. "To give you an idea, 70 decibels is like having a vacuum cleaner running in your room all day."