

With Sensors on Streets, France Takes Aim at ‘Noise From Hell’

The French authorities are installing “sound radars” in some cities to detect and photograph vehicles making excessive noise, which they say is a public health hazard.



Traffic on the Champs-Élysées in Paris. Residents say that motorcycles and modified scooters are among the worst offenders when it comes to noise. Credit...Ludovic Marin/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

By [Emma Bubola](#)

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When France introduced speed cameras 20 years ago, it drastically reduced the number of car accidents and [helped save tens of thousands of lives](#). Now the government is taking aim at another scourge: the earsplitting noise that has been a fact of life for residents of French cities.

New sensors, or “sound radars,” were placed in seven cities last week as an experiment. The sensors can detect and take pictures of vehicles making excessive noise, a problem that officials say has gotten worse in recent years. The hope is to eventually set a noise-pollution limit and fine those motorists exceeding it.

“If the mayor didn’t buy a radar, we would have bought one ourselves,” said Raphael Bianchi, who lives in the Place de la Bastille in Paris. He said his 1-year-old son was constantly awakened by motorcycles roaring outside their apartment: “It’s unbearable — it’s a constant acoustic aggression.”

The initiative follows a mounting intolerance by the French to street noises, particularly motorcycles and souped-up scooters. According to a study by Bruitparif, a state-backed center that monitors noise in the Paris area, a modified scooter crossing Paris at night can wake as many as 10,000 people.

The center has developed a sensor that is being tested in Paris. At the end of the testing period, in 2023, the city plans to start handing out fines of 135 euros, about \$150, to vehicles that break noise-level rules.

The sensor project is part of a broader plan by the city of Paris to tackle noise, which health officials say is a real health risk.

“Noise reduces the life expectancy of Parisians by nine months,” said David Belliard, a deputy mayor in Paris, citing [studies](#) carried out by a regional health agency and Bruitparif. “It’s a matter of public health.”

Other measures include lowering the speed limit and planting forests along Paris’s often clogged ring road. Dan Lert, a deputy mayor in charge of the plan, said that the authorities also wanted to ask emergency vehicles to turn down their sirens at night.



A “sound radar” on a pole in Paris. The authorities hope to eventually fine drivers exceeding noise-pollution limits. Credit...Noemie Olive/Reuters

Mr. Lert said the initiative was also a way to fight inequality, given that most housing projects are built next to loud thoroughfares. “People who live in social housing are the most exposed to noise,” he said.

After air pollution, noise is the second biggest environmental factor causing health problems, the World Health Organization said in a 2011 [report](#), increasing the risk of cardiovascular disorders and high blood pressure.

Fanny Mietlicki, the director of Bruitparif, said the toll taken by loud streets could also be measured financially, in a loss of productivity caused by disturbed sleep and in the devaluation of property along busy streets. The total cost for France, she estimated, was 147 billion euros per year.

Calls to limit noise in cities intensified after the pandemic lockdown, Ms. Mietlicki said.

“People rediscovered calm,” she said. “They could hear birds sing in the city.”

One group called Ras Le Scoot, or Enough with the Scooter, is lobbying against loud motorized scooters and motorcycles. The group said it welcomed the new noise sensors, but said vehicles would just take different routes to avoid them, and they would not stop people from modifying engines to make them louder.

“Toxic masculinity,” said Franck-Olivier Torro, a spokesman for the association, describing the practice.

Yves Ferraro of the Federation of Angry Bikers, a group that protects the rights of motorcycle users, said that “most bikers are well behaved,” but he admitted that there were some who liked to “make a noise from hell” by revving their engines at stop lights. He said that repressing and punishing such behavior was not the way to go.

“If there was some dialogue and education, I think things would go much better,” he said.

Sébastien Kuperberg, who lives on the fourth floor of an elegant building in the east of Paris above an intersection, was skeptical about that approach. When the traffic light downstairs turns green, he said, “We just can’t have a conversation.”

He added that he cannot listen to music, the radio, or TV with his window open, and even when they are closed, the sound of motorcycles accelerating wakes him up at least once a night.

Mr. Kuperberg, who is moving out of his apartment in two weeks largely because of the noise, was happy about the new noise sensors but said the move should be considered just a first step. “I am for the total ban from Paris” of motorcycles, he said. “I just can’t bear to see them anymore.”