

# The Guardian

## Spaniards' lack of sleep isn't a cultural thing – they're in the wrong time zone

*Paul Kelley*

A Franco-era decision to adhere to Central European Time may be to blame for everything from accidents at work to a low birthrate. But that could change

Wed 22 Feb 2017 07:22 EST

Spain's hit TV programme for children, MasterChef Junior, had 3 million young viewers glued to their television until after 1am on a weekday. That drew the criticism of Spanish MPs, who called for the state broadcaster RTVE, to schedule programmes for children to finish no later than 11pm between Sunday and Thursday.

Their parliamentary motion rightly argued that “television viewing habits play a part in our country's lack of nocturnal rest”. As in many modern nations, many people habitually use television, computers or phones late at night: “Children who don't get enough sleep exhibit problems such as irritability, sleepiness and a lack of concentration,” the MPs said.

In the MPs' parliamentary motion, they pointed out that the whole country suffers from sleep deprivation - and that Spaniards in general sleep “an average of an hour less than other Europeans”.

It is no accident that the Spanish are sleeping an hour less. Spain is in the wrong time zone. Madrid is almost directly south of London, so it should be in the same time zone as the UK, yet for over 50 years the country has adhered to Central European Time. In 2013 a Spanish national commission looking at this issue revealed that Spaniards sleep 53 minutes less than the European average, and that this level of sleep loss raised absenteeism, stress, work-related accidents and failure at school.

We often think that the siesta and a supposedly sleepy attitude to life mean Spaniards have time for sleep, and are able to reap the benefits; or that there are cultural reasons for their sleep behaviours. This couldn't be further from the truth. The Spanish work longer hours than almost all their European counterparts. And the reason they might appear to have a sleepy approach to life is that they really are sleepy all day long. Spain has a dysfunctional time system that deprives everyone in Spain of an hour of sleep every day.

In addition, Spanish workers typically work 11-hour days, from 9am to 8pm. With dinner at 9pm and a couple of hours of TV, they tend not to get to bed before midnight. So it's not surprising that the birth rate is plummeting.

In December 2016, Spain's employment minister, Fátima Báñez, announced a push to shorten the working day, to 9am to 6pm. She said that the government would also consider, as part of a series of measures designed to improve work-life balance, reversing the Franco-era decision that put Spain in the wrong time zone. If it succeeds, then Spain will be leading the way in making society's timing both more scientific and more practical.

Spain is not alone in having time zone struggles. Both China and India have a single time zone, deliberately created to bring the population closer together. Beijing Standard Time is set to suit the east of the country. The mismatch is greatest in the westernmost province of Xinjiang, where ethnic divisions lead Uighurs to use a time system that runs two hours later than that used by the Han population. **Another bad time-zone practice - daylight savings time - is still rife globally, as in the UK, and has the same negative effects for half the year that Spain suffers all year long.**

There is nothing unique about Spain's concern with children and adults watching TV and using screen-based technologies at night, leading to sleep disruption.

Siestas are not at fault either, with countries such as Egypt, India, and Mexico having rests during intense heat. In Egypt for example, agricultural workers and their families slept more than families in Cairo, despite having to have midday sleeps, and bed-sharing being widespread. Spain has the chance to transform the country's use of time. Adequate time to sleep will improve the population's health. The quality of life will improve. Sensible working hours will improve productivity and performance. Changing the country's use of time would be essentially free, and could bring huge gains.

. The subheading on this page was amended on 24 February 2017 to better reflect the content of the article.