

## The scourge of stolen bikes in Britain



### An experiment in Liverpool shows how the police can tackle bike theft

The Merseyside police force is the first in England and Wales to experiment with routine stops of cyclists. It has carried out more than 4,000 checks in the past year. But its example is likely to spread. Bike theft is a blight in many British cities. Around 200,000 bikes were reported stolen in England and Wales last year; the real number is much higher because many thefts go unreported, and bikes taken in burglaries are usually not separately recorded as bike thefts. Very few are ever recovered. In London more than 90% of bike thefts in 2022 went unsolved, leading some politicians to complain that it has been “effectively decriminalised”.

This is not just a pain for their owners. Stolen bikes and e-bikes have also become the getaway vehicle of choice for thieves, according to the Merseyside police. In one way or another, some 80% of acquisitive crime in Liverpool involves a nicked bike.

That is bad for cities, which have built thousands of miles of cycle lanes in recent years. The likelihood of having a bike stolen still puts many would-be riders off. Others give up after having one or two bikes stolen.

It is also corrosive of trust in the police. The “broken-windows theory”—coined by two American criminologists in the 1980s—held that visible signs of crime often lead to more serious wrongdoing. As bikes have grown more popular, their stripped carcasses have become one of the more obvious signs that low-level crime is permitted. Cyclists complain that, even when they find their stolen bike on a second-hand website, the police won’t help.

Part of the problem is simply that police are stretched. Community policing has been pared back, making brazen street theft less risky. For those officers tasked with investigating crimes, the loss of a treasured two-wheeler can be a long way down the list. As home security has made burglary harder and more people have taken to getting around on flashy rides, bikes have become an attractive target.

The Merseyside example shows how things can be turned around comparatively quickly. Between July 2023 and July 2024 the pilot project saw reported thefts fall by 46% compared with the previous year. Pippa Wilcox, the constable in charge, explains that as well as stopping suspicious riders the police have helped to get thousands of bikes across the city marked, either by retailers or through events at schools and workplaces. The aim is to make stolen bikes “too hot to handle”.

Linking bike theft to other crimes has helped win the support of her colleagues. Officers have a phone app that lets them search a database of marked bikes. They like the fact that when they are searching someone’s property on suspicion of drug offences, they can also try and bust them for bike theft. Returning bikes to surprised owners, sometimes aided by social media, has boosted local confidence in policing, says Ms Wilcox. Merseyside’s approach is being recommended to other forces.

Two regulatory changes would help. The first is creating a requirement for manufacturers and retailers to mark new bikes. The French government did that in 2021; three years on, around a third of all bikes are marked. The second is to put more pressure on online platforms such as Gumtree and Facebook to ensure they are not marketplaces for stolen goods, by for example requiring sellers to include security-marking codes. Bike thieves may be enjoying a smooth ride at the moment. It could be punctured rather easily.

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