

When It Comes to Bike Theft, Austin Is Tops

Stop, Thief!

BY ROB D'AMICO

November 26, 1999: The pain and anguish is real. You're a victim. Someone has victimized you. They've violated your space, taken your possession. And the worst part? It's your bike. Something about bike theft makes it a particularly insidious crime. It's not like burglars made off with your toaster oven, or even your CD player. That stinks, sure. But your bike is your friend, your steed, your road companion. You've formed a personal relationship with it by straddling it each day. Even if it's a clunker and you look forward to a new one, it's just not the same without old "Sparky."

"I came home and it was gone -- gone," says Thomas Vo, an engineer and avid mountain biker. "I put it on the balcony, a second-story balcony, when I left town. I didn't think anybody could get up there." For Vo, it was much more than the \$800 or so that he was out. "Oh, it's one of the worst feelings," he says. "Because you get so attached to your bike. You go through withdrawals, because you can't ride. You feel like something is missing. It's like losing a pet."

Michael Bluejay, another avid cyclist who runs a popular Web site for bike enthusiasts, speaks more calmly about the problem, since he's faced it four times. "But I've only had one stolen in the last 10 years, so I'm getting a lot better," he says.

In some ways, bike theft solidifies a community of individuals, since just about everybody you talk to who rides a bike regularly has either had one stolen or knows someone who has.

So the local biking community must be pretty close-knit with regard to theft, since the latest statistics have thrown Austin into the top 10



UT Police Sgt. Donna Maga
photo by Bruce Dye

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U.S. cities for stolen bikes.

Kryptonite -- the country's leading manufacturer of bicycle locks -- recently announced its top 10 list for most stolen bikes, and Austin came in No. 8. The company bases its list on police reports and its own claims from customers wanting to cash in on lock guarantees (see below).

Austin Police Department records show 1,075 thefts in 1998, and 958 to date this year. The University of Texas has no figures tabulated yet for this year, but the UT Police Department recorded 144 thefts in 1998 and 105 in 1997. Now, take those numbers and multiply by five for a rough estimate of how many bikes are actually stolen, since authorities say maybe only one in five victims takes the time to report the crime. "The problem has really gotten out of hand," says Sgt. Donna Maga, the UT police officer in charge of investigating bike theft.

Maga says thefts tend to come in waves, and right now it seems like a tsunami; she's seen more theft recently than at any point in her year and a half of tracking stolen bikes. "October was the worst month ever," she says.

I Was Only Gone

for a Second

Authorities and bicycle shop owners say the overwhelming majority of bikes are stolen when the owner doesn't bother to lock them up, usually when they only plan to go into a store for a couple of minutes.

"I had my bike stolen from Dobie Mall," recalls Daniel Connelly. "I had taken it into the mall and, stupidly, left it parked unlocked in a common area before going into a shop, just for a second. The shopkeeper started talking bikes with me, however, and the seconds stretched on longer than I expected. When I left, it was gone. I know -- ultra-stupid."



photo by Bruce Dye

Owners may feel stupid for not locking bikes up, but it's tempting to just leave them momentarily, since it takes time to hassle with finding a safe place to lock the bike, only

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to have to unlock it after a quick errand.

Second on the list of vulnerable bikes are those locked up with chains and cables. "The problem here is that we have so many bikes, high-dollar bikes, and these kids are not getting good locks," says UT's Maga. "The thieves, they're going after cheap locks, not cheap bikes."

With a pair of bolt cutters or other sharp cutters, thieves can get through chains and cables fairly easily. Just ask Greg Wooten, who isn't facing separation anxiety from his run-in with crime, but instead faces the rather painful task of paying back almost \$900 to a friend. He borrowed the friend's bike and left it locked to a city bike rack with a cable lock. It was broad daylight, downtown on Sixth Street. Wooten says he's seen his share of friends get their mounts stolen in the past, but that after eight years of using the same cable, he figured nothing would happen to him. "Don't get a cable lock, whatever you do," says Wooten.

Maga says bikes locked with cables are the first target when a thief checks out a long row of locked bikes "It's the time period. It takes one snip." She doesn't quite understand why someone with a \$500 bike won't invest \$50 in a good lock, since bikes secured with u-locks are fairly safe. Most experts agree that u-locks are all you really need to prevent theft -- most of the time. They are penetrable -- especially cheaper locks with a wider "u" -- since thieves can pry out the post with crowbars or car jacks, or break the locking mechanism with drills. Bluejay once saw a surveillance camera video showing a "street person" wedging open a u-lock with a 2x4 board. Also, hacksaws can cut through some u-locks in about 10 minutes, and rumor has it that thieves are using liquid nitrogen to freeze metal on the locks, then bust them open. Regardless of the method of getting through the u-locks, however, it usually takes more time and effort, making thieves think twice about going after them. "I've rarely known anyone who's had their bike stolen with even the cheapest u-lock," Bluejay says.

Even the best lock won't help if you don't know how to use it. Many beginning cyclists fail to lock the frame and only lock a wheel. If the bike has a quick release bar on the front tire, a thief can be off in no time, leaving you to find a lonely wheel secured to a pole.

Another common scenario is locking bikes to poles with signs on top. Thieves can easily undo the bolts, take off the sign, then slide the bike and lock up over the pole. Of course, there are the aforementioned apartment balcony thefts, and finally, there's the break-in. Vo lost a second bike when someone smashed the windows of his truck and pulled it out.

Trying to "hide" bikes in sheds also is a joke, Bluejay says. He tells of an instance when he left a junky old bike outside his house unlocked for a year without anyone messing with it. After deciding to put it in his shed behind his house on Cedar Street, it was gone in two weeks.



First Stop: Pawn Shop

You've returned to where you left it and it's gone. So after a brief period of muttered cussing, the inevitable question is, "What kind of ass would take my bike?" When talking to authorities, pawn shop owners, and even victims, the blame eventually falls on "crackheads," or just druggies in general. "The ones that we know about are usually supporting drug habits," says Sgt. William Van Horn, a UTPD officer who routinely catches bike thieves in the act. More often than not, though, bike thieves don't get caught, and even if they do, they're seldom prosecuted.

Michael Bluejay
photo by Bruce Dye

Van Horn's co-worker, Maga, says the average thief can make about \$100 to \$150 per bike, usually by selling it to a pawn shop. "If you steal one or two bikes a day, that's a good salary," she says. The thief usually rushes straight to a pawn shop, gets a "loan" on the bike, and takes off with the cash. Since the bike most likely hasn't been reported yet, the thief is in the clear -- at least in the short run.

Pawn shops are required by law to get a driver's license number for each transaction and to turn over the records on each loan to the police, often in the form of computerized lists. The police then try and match the description of the bike pawned to those that have been reported stolen. Some bikes have serial numbers or even driver's license numbers engraved on them, which adds a distinctive identifier.

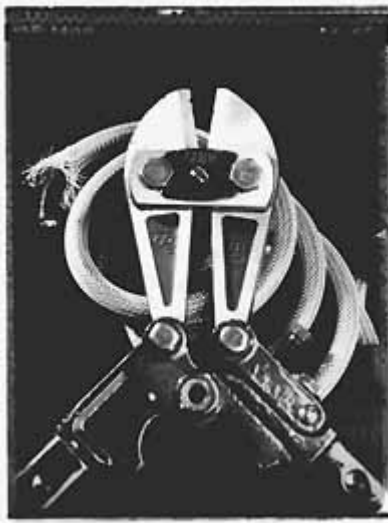
"After you've done this a long time, you can pretty much tell when it's stolen," says Brandon Chilcutt, who works at the Doc Holliday's pawn shop on North Lamar. "If a crackhead with holes in his shoes comes in with a Canondale, you know it's stolen." (Canondales are particularly expensive bikes.) But Chilcutt says craftier thieves will have friends help out, give fake IDs, or just risk getting caught. "They don't care if they give a valid ID if [they're] addicted to drugs." Chilcutt says that if the police do find that a bike at the pawn shop has been

stolen, the shop loses whatever money was given out on the loan. So of course, it's in the shops' best interest not to do business with bike thieves.

UTPD's Maga says she spends most of her time going to pawn shops trying to find missing bikes. "Pawn shops hate to see me coming, because they know they've probably gotten a stolen bike." UTPD will blackball people who have been found to repeatedly steal bikes by giving lists of offenders to pawn shops and telling them not to take any merchandise from them. "If people pawn more than one bike, that also raises a red flag," she says.

At some point these thieves get discouraged by intense police efforts to patrol pawn shops, and they end up selling the bikes on the street to someone for a measly few dollars. Van Horn says more people than you think will take advantage of a street sale. "Oh, 90% of the public will question it and say, 'Well, I'm a good citizen.' But they also love a good deal."

He says UTPD catches about 60 people a year in the act of stealing bikes, sometimes with stolen bikes actually in their possession. Unfortunately, if the bike is not registered with police, officers often have no way of proving the person has actually stolen it.



In most cases the police take the bike and whatever else the suspect has that looks like a tool of their trade -- most often bolt cutters -- then tell them to get lost. It's frustrating, Van Horn says, because "the thieves go and tell each other, 'Yeah, this is great, all they do is kick you off campus.'"

Tools of the trade: bolt cutters

photo by Bruce Dye

Bike theft is classified legally as theft. Possible penalties depend on the value of the stolen item, but the crime is almost always a misdemeanor, punishable by a maximum of six months in jail. But police say that most people in possession of stolen bikes are never prosecuted, since it's usually impossible to prove they actually took them.

Gone for Good?

The realization that it's gone sinks in. You scan the landscape,

hoping to catch a glimpse of someone pedaling leisurely on your bike so that you can chase them down with a T.J. Hooker sprint and tackle them. But most often you're left wondering what to do next. Unfortunately, most people decide to blow the incident off, forget it ever happened. Authorities don't keep statistics on recovered bikes, but anecdotal evidence suggests that you have a fairly good chance of getting your bike back if it's marked in some distinctive way.

Vo, for instance, got lucky, and police recovered his second stolen bike. They matched the serial number he gave them with a number sent in from a pawn shop, and he had his bike back within three weeks of the car break-in. (Police couldn't prove that the person with the loan ticket on Vo's bike had actually stolen it -- he claimed he bought it from someone else -- so the ticket holder went free.)

Serial numbers don't always do the trick, though. "Most bike owners don't even know their serial number," Van Horn says. And even if serial numbers are recorded, they only come in handy on those occasions when the pawn shop turns them in properly and police take the time to match them. So Van Horn stresses that the best way to mark your bike is with your driver's license number. If you ever ride on campus, register the number with the UT Police, he says. (It's even against the law to ride an unregistered bike on the UT campus, although the law is not enforced.) "The only ones we ever recover are the ones that are registered," he says.

Maga agrees. "I can't tell you how many times we've stopped someone who just stole a bike and we don't know whose it is because it's not registered." UTPD sells about 70 to 100 recovered bikes each year at auctions after being unable to locate owners. With a license number, police can simply punch it into the computer to locate the owner.

Many bike enthusiasts, however, are uncomfortable with the prospect of going to the police for anything, since many have an antagonistic relationship with the law. For years, bicyclists have claimed that police overenforce traffic laws on bicyclists and harass them with frivolous citations. In fact, many riders refuse to register their vehicles with UT police or put their driver's license number on their frames, because the numbers are a surefire way to identify them. Local bike Web sites



Tomas Vo chained his bike to

explaining how to get out of traffic violations note that you can always lie about your identity, as long as you don't have your license number on your bike.

this balcony and lost it to a thief.
photo by Bruce Dye

But aside from breaking the law by failing to give your true identity, there doesn't seem to be much logic behind not engraving your license number on your bike. Maga maintains that UT's registration system is intended only for getting stolen bikes back to owners. And to get a citation, a rider would "have to commit a traffic violation in the first place," she adds.

Much of the mistrust of police grew out of the more radical ranks of bicycle enthusiasts, such as the freeform Critical Mass riders -- dozens of riders who used to gather on Friday afternoons to ride down major thoroughfares. Their rides -- whether purposely or not -- congested traffic to the point that they had major run-ins with Austin police and motorists.

Still, even among bicyclists who don't ride the streets that often, there's a prevalent attitude that the police don't like bikes. "I don't think police care about bicyclists too much," Wooten says. "Because they think you're some stupid hippie."

Vo also says he felt like the police recovery on his second bike was "luck," and that they didn't seem to put much emphasis on getting it back. Maga, however, says she takes bike investigation seriously, since she knows how close people get to their bikes. She spends about 90% of her time investigating bike theft and actually visits pawn shops in person to make sure that what is getting reported as bought is what is there. "I don't take what pawn shops say as being gospel."

In addition to both serial numbers and driver's license numbers, little cosmetic items and accessories can make all the difference in the world, says Vytis Vardys, co-owner of Ozone Bike Department on Guadalupe Street. Ozone buys and sells used bikes, so they are constantly on the lookout to make sure the bikes they're buying are legal. Vardys' partner, Andrew Dugas, has a reputation for being able to spot bikes that are somebody else's. "I'd say he's probably recovered 60 or 70 bikes by now. He has an amazing capacity for remembering weird-ass shit," Vardys says of his partner. Whether it's a special grip, seat, custom component, or just a sticker here and there, Dugas is a master at remembering who is supposed to sit on the bike, he says. "We've gotten our own bikes stolen, and Andrew will see some kid on them riding around and he'll say, "Hey, that's not your bike,"" Vardys says.

Ozone also has the same requirement as pawn shops, to take

down the driver's license information from sellers. On some occasions, a seller will suddenly back off when asked for their ID. "Sometimes by the time police get here they're gone," Vardys says. "Other times they'll just hang around and wait to get arrested."

He says a lot of times the thieves are simply "Dragworms," street people looking to make some easy money. But regardless of who is doing the taking, he says it's obvious that theft will continue. "Bikes are a commodity that has wheels. They're ready to roll." ■

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