

Bike thieves given easy ride as police ‘fail to act’

Fewer than one in 50 cases solved as thefts rise after gangs realise it is a ‘low-risk’ crime

By Charles Hymas, Home Affairs Editor, and Dominic Gilbert

POLICE are failing to investigate bicycle thefts even where they may have a suspect, DNA evidence, a witness or CCTV footage, victims have warned.

The chances of a bike theft being solved has halved to one in 50 (1.8 per cent) in four years, with at least two police forces in England and Wales bringing no charges, according to Home Office data.

Crime gangs are also cashing in with multi-bike raids as a lower risk alternative to drug dealing. Bike thefts have risen 13 per cent in four years to nearly 100,000 in 2018-19, according to police figures, fuelled by the increasing demand and value of bicycles which can be worth up to £5,000.

Michael Brooks, an accident and emergency doctor in Cambridge, provided police with a name, address and the DNA of a suspect who had been seen by a local resident stealing his £400 Ridgeback Hybrid from outside a local pharmacy.

The thief was spotted by the witness arriving on a “tatty” BMX bike at the rack where Dr Brooks had locked his bicycle. After stealing it, the thief wheeled it off but left his BMX which Dr Brooks handed over to the police to see if they could get a DNA match. He gave the police the thief’s name and the street where he lived, which the witness who knew him had provided.

However, a week later when Dr Brooks rang the police, he was told the case “had been closed”. He said: “They had got a DNA match from the BMX but had not been round to interview the suspect.”

100,000

The number of bike thefts in England and Wales in 2018-19 – a rise of 13 per cent in four years, according to police figures

It was the first of five bike thefts he had been the victim of, including two last year in successive months from Cambridge North railway station which has racks for up to 1,000 bikes monitored by CCTV cameras.

Both Cambridge Police and British Transport Police said they would not go through the CCTV footage to find the thieves because they had limits of four hours and 14 hours respectively on the amount of time officers can devote to searching through the video tapes for such crimes. Both have also disbanded bike crime units.

When Dr Brooks told Greater Anglia trains, which operates the CCTV, he was prepared to go through the footage himself, it refused because it would breach GDPR data protection laws.

“Cambridge’s conviction rates are less than one per cent. At that rate and at £200 per bike, it is a crime that pays well,” he said. “I speak for a lot of cyclists who feel we are on our own. We don’t dare take the law into our own hands because you would be done for an offence against the person.”

The proportion of bike thieves being charged has fallen from 3.5 per cent in 2015-16 to 1.8 per cent in the latest quarter. Two forces – Wiltshire and Dyfed-Powys – did not prosecute any bike thieves in the three months to September 2019, out of 242 offences. Railway stations serving London’s commuter belt have become the prime target for bike thieves. Across Britain, theft of bicycles from stations increased from 4,500 in 2016-17 to 6,400 last year, a rise of around 42 per cent.

Cambridge North had the second highest rate of thefts per 100,000 passengers at six, behind Barming in Kent at 12 from 2016 to 2019. St Albans City had the largest number of thefts at 262, followed by Bedford at 188 and Fareham with 152.

◆ Have you been the victim of a crime that the police have not investigated?
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