My e-bike was stolen in Seattle. Here's what happened next

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As of Nov. 9 of this year, there were 2,431 police reports of a stolen bicycle or e-bike in Seattle. My Giant Fastroad E+ Pro was among them.

Which got me thinking: Who steals these bikes? Where do they go? Are they sold online, or transported out of town?

Personal loss aside, the rampant nature of bike theft has policy ramifications.

In October — the month my bike was ripped off — Seattle opened a $72 million road improvement along East Marginal Way that included major bike upgrades. Although the Seattle Department of Transportation said it could not break out the specific costs for designated bike lanes and stoplights, one has to assume it was a major investment and part of the 172 miles of bicycle facilities in the city.

Seattle wants very badly to be a bike-friendly city. But if people can't keep their transportation secure with locks and other precautions, the smoothest, safest lanes in the world won't be enough to persuade sizable numbers of commuters to pedal to work or anywhere else.

Let me tell you my story, one of thousands.

In May of 2020, I had a neurological episode and was diagnosed with a type of epilepsy. After presenting the completely-out-of-the-blue news, my neurologist added one more thing: I was legally prohibited from driving a car for six months. Starting immediately.

That led to the panicked purchase of a pedal-assist electric bike. Cost: $3,500, plus lock and taxes, pushing it higher still.

I had biked for decades, commuting to work at several stops along my career. But this e-bike was something else. With saddlebags for notebooks and a laptop, it could get me anywhere without breaking a sweat.

It was stolen in the middle of a sunny day along the Seattle waterfront, where I had secured it to a rack in the new park. Someone cut through the lock with a circular saw.

Considering the cost of the bike, this was a felony. So I called the King County Prosecutor's Office to ask how they file charges on bike theft.

Police occasionally came across stolen bikes, but usually while investigating stolen cars or RVs, said Susan Harrison, head of the economic crimes unit in the prosecuting attorney's office.

Prosecuting bike theft presented a lot of challenges. Possession of stolen property was difficult to prove because the government would have to show that the person with the bike knew it was stolen. Trafficking stolen property was a little easier if the person was selling the bike for an absurdly low price or couldn't answer basic questions about it.

Bottom line: Bike theft is an easy crime to commit and tough to bring to justice.

"Bikes are a very popular target because they are so portable. And there's no anti-theft device that you're not able to defeat. It's easy to get away fairly quickly," said Harrison.

In her experience, there was no organized bike ring at work in the Seattle area.

"I've not seen that level of sophistication," she said. "Most of the time, they're being used locally. And it could be that they're traded for drugs or sold far below their value."

Upon hearing that my bike was stolen on the waterfront, Harrison guessed that it was likely somewhere south of downtown. She told me I ought to check out the RVs and tent encampments in Sodo.

Like almost every other crime, Seattle bike theft jumped significantly during the pandemic.

There were 1,590 reports of stolen bikes in 2019, and 2,899 a year later. Since then, the numbers have gone up and down, but always above 2,000 annually. It is generally accepted that the vast majority of thefts go unreported.

Besides buying a strong lock (two U-locks are recommended for cities), bike folks advise doing something I was previously unaware of: Registering the serial number with Bike Index, a San Francisco-based nonprofit bike registry that partners with Seattle police, the University of Washington and many local bike shops.

By registering the bike, cops and others who may come across it can check its ownership status.

There are also a host of local social media sites to post photos and descriptions of stolen bikes. Many volunteers keep an eye out online. And there are success stories of the Seattle Police Department coming across bikes and tracking down the legitimate owners.

But the stats are not heartening.

In the week my e-bike was stolen, Bike Index listed 33 others taken in Seattle. Three bikes were marked as found during this period.

And as I discovered, Bike Index is known to thieves as well.

I checked out the Sodo encampments. Among the tattered tents, decrepit RVs and human misery, there were many, many bikes. Trek, Specialized, Rad Power Bikes. Electric cargo bikes.

A few days later, I walked the area with Andrea Suarez of We Heart Seattle, a local nonprofit that picks up encampment litter and offers resources to those on the street.

Suarez warmly greeted a guy she knew from previous interactions. He was hanging around a tent, a $3,000 Aventon e-bike resting in the mud. Let's call him "Red."

Red was a drug user. He lived in a tiny home village and kept some of his stuff in Sodo. And he stole bikes.

First thing he does is register the serial number with Bike Index.

"If you buy a $5,000 bike and don't register it and someone steals it, all someone has to do is register it on Bike Index and there's nothing you can do about it. It's their bike," he said.

(This is not true, especially if the true owner has a receipt with serial number).

If Red discovers a bike is already registered, he said he will "give it to somebody for like $10 and have it be their problem."

If Red registers a bike in his name, he will ride it for a while and eventually sell or trade it.

Some stolen bikes and bike parts are posted on internet marketplaces such as Facebook, OfferUp and Craigslist. But that comes with unwanted risks.

"There are cops all over that. They run stings all the time," he said. "They will act like they're a buyer. Or even some owners will be on there and they'll meet you with a bunch of cops and you're f—ed."

So what do people like him do with stolen bikes, I asked.

"Ride it, sell it. It's a never-ending f—ing circle," said Red. "Everybody's bike that has been stolen in Seattle is somewhere in the Greater Seattle area, being tossed around."

In the scope of life, what's a stolen bike? According to Seattle police statistics, there have been 5,282 reports of motor vehicle theft this year, as of Dec. 3.

Cops are stretched too thin. Property crimes always fall to the lowest priority.

But still. There seems to be something very wrong with a city that pours millions of dollars into cycling infrastructure but where combating bike theft isn't much of a priority.

"Expand the bike network to meet the needs of everyone, no matter their age or ability," reads one goal of the Seattle Transportation Plan.

Maybe add another: "Ensure police and others in law enforcement have the resources and strategy to reduce bicycle theft, respond effectively when it occurs, and hold accountable those responsible."

Because here's the thing: The resale market for stolen bikes may be on people's radar, but they are still being taken, flooding the underground economy. One after the other, after the other.

In the end, I went to a shop and bought a used e-bike to get to work. This time, I put a transponder on it so I could track the bike if it was stolen. On the street, I keep my eyes peeled for my old ride, and sometimes I think I see it in passing, like a ghost or someone playing a trick on me.

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