

# Bicycle Theft, The Dutch Experience

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## Holland- a nation of cyclists

Holland is the number one cycling nation. The land is absolutely ideal for recreational trips for one thing, but, in the increasingly overcrowded and built-up urban areas, the bicycle is above all a practical means of transport. The widespread use of the bicycle is inherent in the Dutch culture. Nowhere else in the world boasts as many cycle paths and bicycle parking facilities as The Netherlands.

One of the greatest sources of worry and aggravation are the enormous amount of bicycle thefts that take place every year. Here are some facts and figures:

total number of bicycles	:	16.000.000 (1 per inhabitant!)
annual sales figures of new bicycles	:	1.300.000
number stolen annually (of which 150.000 are reported to police)	:	min. 700.000
average price of bicycle	:	450 Euro
number of insured bicycles	:	1.600.000 (estimate)
insurance company losses	:	min. 25 million Euro ( estimate)
total (material) damage	:	>> 50 million Euro ( estimate)

## Bicycle theft

The widespread scale on which bicycles are stolen, and the manner in which they are openly sold on for relatively small amounts of money, point to the fact that this phenomenon appears to have become an accepted part of society. The following quote below from a university magazine provides quite an apt example.

"I automatically assume that my bike will get stolen after a few months", says Rosanne B. resignedly. She is about to start her Psychology studies this year. She got her bike from a teacher in secondary school. Friends of hers that have been living in Utrecht for a while now, have already warned her that owning a bike in Utrecht is only a temporary pleasure, and when you lose it, you can always steal one back or buy an old heap from a junkie for next to nothing.

'Everyone' knows that he or she is buying a stolen bike ('fencing'), and yet they carry on doing it. There is little or no priority at all in tackling this problem as far as the police are concerned, and the members of the public hardly ever report bicycle thefts. It is precisely because of this moral slide that politicians want to get a firm grip on the situation, and deal with the problems thoroughly and effectively. Besides the theft of bicycles, there are also related matters that demand attention, such as reckless riding, poor illumination, and the general mechanical state of the bicycles themselves. The point can also be made that bicycle theft can lead to committing crimes of a more serious nature.

## A profile of bicycle thieves in The Netherlands

We get a good overall idea of the issue by taking a close look at the perpetrating group. This will provide general clues as to how to tackle the problem.

1. *Incidental thieves*  
This particular group steals one or several bicycles in their entire lives. The bicycles stolen are general city bikes.
2. *Opportunistic thieves*  
These thieves steal bicycles for their own personal use, and pick out bikes that are fitted with a simple lock. The bicycles are used up until they break down or get stolen in turn, and they then go out and attempt to steal another.
3. *Professional thieves*  
The professional thief mainly steals expensive and trendy bikes. The stolen bicycles (which are sometimes pre-ordered) are then dropped off at those dealing in stolen goods or circulate via a 'network' of family and friends. The thief isn't perturbed by any installed lock or security method ('he can pick any lock anyway') but is mainly concerned with the quality of the bicycle.
4. *Addicts*  
This (large) group of thieves have made stealing bicycles their 'profession', and it is often their greatest source of income. Many addicts are even specialised in picking or breaking certain locks, and are often quicker at breaking open a lock than the owner is at opening it with a key.

## How to handle the problem

Because this is such a widespread problem that has rooted itself within Dutch society, there is not one simple measure that can eliminate the problem. Steps will have to be taken on various fronts. Theft by incidental and opportunistic thieves can be acted upon for the most part by installing improved security measures. In order to counteract the activities of professional thieves and addicts in addition to that, the following measures have been put forward.

- *Alter the behaviour of the public* by pointing out matters such as (improving) bicycle security; buying a stolen bicycle is to receive stolen goods and therefore breaking the law, and stealing a bike cannot be justified in any way whatsoever; ...
- *a visible police and supervisory presence* to carry out routine checks, detection, and a clampdown on thieves and 'fencers.
- improved *security* on the streets (manned bike storage facilities, illumination...)
- improvement of *satisfactory identification* and registration of the bicycle to facilitate checks, detection, and possible return of stolen bicycles.

## Earlier initiatives

Bicycle theft is a problem that has existed for many years. One of the best means of defence is obviously the level of security applied to the bicycle itself. The branch puts a lot of time and effort into improving the locks in order to be one step ahead of the thieves. The ART Organisation (a combination of the ANWB, RAI and insurance companies) has issued tough requirements for locks, which will have to pass an approval and certification process.

One of the problems in dealing with bicycle theft is the lack of any form of unequivocal identification and registration for bicycles (compared to for instance the numberplating of cars). This makes it virtually impossible to determine whether or not the bicycle is stolen, and returning it to its rightful owner is equally impossible. Earlier initiatives in this particular area have thus far failed. An important contribution to the failure of the National Bicycle Registration was the upkeep of the (enormous) amount of registrations. Postcode engraving wasn't a great success either, simply because a bicycle tends to change hands quite often during its lifetime, so that the engraved postcode no longer relates to its current owner.

## The Dutch approach

Mid 1999, the Dutch Home Office and Associates of the Kingdom (BZK) presented the Integral Safety Programme (IVP). The basis of the programme is the important task that rests with social organisations and industry to make The Netherlands a safer place. Integral prevention and tackling the issue of safety can only take place if these parties co-operate with the State, counties, councils, and with the police, fire brigade and the department of justice.

One of the sections of the IVP is dealing with bicycle theft. The minister has stated that (local) government, police and departments of justice have to make clear-cut agreements to reduce the number of bicycle thefts, in conjunction with partners such as the Bovag, RAI, insurance companies, ANWB and ENFB. At the beginning of 2000, BZK assembled all the parties involved, which resulted in a project. The project has four main focal points:

- Communication
- Supervision
- Councils (storage areas, safe 'parking')
- Bicycle identification

## Identification by means of Tags

The problem cited earlier was that the police are seldom able to identify a bicycle, and therefore determine whether or not it was stolen. Unequivocal identification of a bicycle is essential in order for police and/or supervisory bodies to carry out a routine check on whether or not a bicycle has been stolen.

The so-called *Tags* have been chosen as a means of identification. A tag is a small computer chip containing a unique code, which can be built into a bicycle, taking into consideration that it should not be in a very accessible place, and can only be removed with resulting visible damage. The police are in the possession of scanners that can read out this code. A national register of thefts can be swiftly consulted to check whether or not the bicycle was stolen. Besides the tag itself, the bicycle will also be provided with a few visible characteristics which make it apparent that the bicycle is carrying a tag. This in itself will act as a deterrent, make the bicycle a lot less appealing to steal, and, if it is stolen, will enable the police to retrieve it.

The Netherlands already possesses the necessary infrastructure for affixing, registering and handling applications for tags in (mobile) objects.

The infrastructure runs parallel with the information exchange started for car registration between public (RDW/police) and private (insurance companies) registration. A start has been made to install a maintenance body for the tag registration systems, and the necessary procedures and control mechanisms have been developed. Every police district has been fitted with a limited number of scanners. A vast amount of experience with the identification method has already been gained through its use in scooters, and, to a lesser degree, in motorcycles.

In order to implement the identification measure successfully, a few prior conditions will have to be adhered to.

- bulk tagging: manufacturers place tags in all new bikes (min.requirement);
- tags are incorporated into insurance policy requirements by bicycle insurers;
- bicycle traders and consumer groups will actively promote the installing of tags;
- police and supervisory bodies will actively partake in detection and checks;
- the Home Office will issue guidelines pertaining to (incl. High fines) bicycle theft;
- limited mechanical conditions, such as affixing tags to the bicycle.

### **Now or never**

1. Bicycle theft is a widespread social problem;
2. Politicians have identified the problem, and there is sufficient support for dealing with the issues.
3. The national infrastructure and necessary experience are present and available in order to provide adequate identification by means of tags in bicycles
4. Theft can only be tackled if everyone contributes:
  - Police / supervising bodies
  - Public Prosecutor (guidelines for tackling theft / 'fencing')
  - Insurance companies
  - Manufacturers (building tags into bicycles)
  - Traders (post-manufactural tagging, promotion)