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Motorcycle Theft Victimization in Oyo Town, Nigeria: A Qualitative Analysis

Usman Adekunle Ojedokun¹ & Emmanuel Abiodun Ogundipe²

University of Ibadan, Nigeria

Abstract

The frequent occurrence of motorcycle theft has become a major cause for concern for many commercial motorcyclists and private motorcycle owners in Nigeria. However, little empirical information exists on this form of crime. Against this background, this qualitative study examined the patterns of motorcycle theft and experiences of victimised commercial motorcyclists in Oyo town. Routine activity theory was utilised as theoretical framework. Data were generated through key-informant interview and focus group discussion methods. Snowball sampling technique was utilised for the selection of nine victims of motorcycle theft, while 35 FGD participants were purposively chosen. Findings showed that the high-cost of motorcycles, ineffective policing, and unregulated inter-city conveyance of motorcycles by truck drivers were the major factors promoting motorcycle theft. Also, different self-induced and environmental factors were responsible for the exposure of commercial motorcyclists in Oyo town to victimisation. Commercial motorcyclists are urged to take all necessary precautions against any situation that can make them susceptible to motorcycle theft victimisation.

Keywords: Motorcycle Theft, Victimization, Commercial Motorcyclists, Crime, Oyo, Nigeria.

Introduction

Motorcycle theft constitutes a major form of property crime in Nigeria. Its frequent occurrence has become a major cause for concern for many commercial motorcyclists and private motorcycle owners (Vanguard, 2012; The Punch, 2014; Leadership, 2015; Ifeanyi, 2004). Although the use of motorcycles for private, governmental and commercial purposes has been on the increase in Nigeria over the years (Arosanyin, 2007), however, the status of motorcycles as suitable targets for thieves is a relatively recent phenomenon. The proliferation of motorcycles and their use in transportation in Nigeria which began in the 1980s was triggered by the unfriendly socio-economic policies which manifested in high rate of urban unemployment and poverty (Smith, 2011). According to Gbadamosi (2006), a total of 289, 390 motorcycles were registered in 2003, while 288,474 were registered in 2004.

¹ Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria. Email: uaojedokun@gmail.com

² Graduate Student, Department of Sociology, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria. Email: abiolaemma2014@gmail.com

Motorcycles have become a major player in both urban and inter-village transportations in Nigeria (Arosanyin, 2006). However, stolen motorcycles are usually difficult to track because many were unregistered by their owners (Arosanyin, 2007). Consequently, different group of criminal gangs specialising in motorcycle theft have emerged. For example, on April 5, 2015, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad of the Osun State Police Command arrested a 5-man robbery gang that specialised in snatching motorcycles from their owners (Malik, 2015). Also, a commercial motorcycle operator was stabbed to death by two motorcycle snatchers along Saint John's Catholic Church, Minna in Niger State on October 22, 2015 (Nnadozie, 2015).

Criminal victimization has serious consequences for the citizens and society (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2005). In a study conducted by Sidebottom (2012) on victims of bicycle (bike) theft in the United Kingdom, it was discovered that not only did many of the victims of cycle theft suffer multiple victimisations, but the risk of cycle theft also appeared to be contagious. Eck and Weisburd (1995) observed that a disproportionately high level of crime is likely in places that present opportunities for crime. Similarly, Ikoh (2011) contends that offenders either seek out attractive targets with low security or seize opportunities while engaging in routine non-criminal activities. Gyong (2010) laments that many crime victims in Nigeria typically do not report their loss to the Police because the distance to the police station may be too great or due to the belief that reporting to the Police may expose them to further harassment from the criminal or his friends.

The report of the Institute of Highway Engineers (2014) indicates that the theft of a motorcycle is often opportunistic, and usually occurs in public places in Great Britain. The dynamics of motorcycle theft, according to Sheridan (2002), are quite distinct from the theft of other passenger vehicles. They are attractive to thieves because of their relative low weight and high value (Institute of Highway Engineers, 2014). While discussing the same problem, Phongphu and Srichandr, (2011) contend that motorcycle thieves in Thailand have many techniques through which they steal motorcycles without spending much time. Furthermore, in a study conducted in Australia, Sheridan (2002) reported that motorcycles manufactured by Honda and Yamaha accounted for over half of reported thefts, while the Harley Davidson brand recorded a particularly low recovery rate of 15% and BMW recorded a high rate of recovery at 62%.

The incidence of motorcycle theft impacts the victims in multiple ways. Indeed, its occurrence has physical, social, and economic costs on the victims. Many commercial motorcyclists have been rendered jobless as a result of the loss of their source of livelihood, motorcycle, to thieves. Also, the physical attack that sometimes accompanies motorcycle theft has a tendency of resulting in grievous injury or loss of life. Apart from these, the persistent cases of motorcycle theft signify a state of insecurity and an indictment on the efficiency of the formal agents of social control, particularly the Police. In addition, the incidence of motorcycle theft has not commanded much scholarly attention in Nigeria. Hence, this study was conceived to fill this identified lacuna. Therefore, its central objective was to examine the patterns of motorcycle theft and experiences of victimised commercial motorcyclists in Oyo town, Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Routine activity theory was employed for theoretical guidance. This theory was developed by Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson in 1979. It opines that the volume of criminal offence is related to the nature of everyday patterns of social interaction. As the pattern of social interaction changes, so does the number of crimes (Williams III & McShane, 1999). The core assumption of the theory is that criminal activity is organised around routine activities of a population in which crime is likely to occur as a result of the interplay of these three principal elements: a motivated offender, a suitable target and the absence of a capable guardian. According to the theory, when a motivated offender and suitable target come together in the absence of a capable guardian, criminal opportunity occurs. Target suitability refers to qualities such as the value of a person or property, access to them and resistance capability, while capable guardians may either be formal or informal third parties with a capacity for intervention (Cohen & Felson, 1979). The motivated offender refers to individuals that are motivated or have the inclination to perpetrate crime. This element is considered a constant, meaning that motivated offenders will always be available to take advantage of opportunities that arise. Indeed, the convergence in time and space of a suitable target with no guardianship is sufficient to produce crime without any change to structural conditions to motivate offenders (Cohen & Felson, 1979). The frequent occurrence of motorcycle theft in Oyo town and some other communities in Nigeria is as a result of the convergence of these three principal elements: motorcycles (suitable targets), motorcycle thieves (motivated offenders) and motorcycle owners (incapable guardians).

Methodology

This study was conducted in Oyo town, Nigeria. The present day Oyo town, which metamorphosed from the ancient Oyo Empire founded in the mid 17th century, is a partially urbanized medium city (Jiboye & Ogunshakin, 2010). Oyo is among the historical towns in South-West Nigeria. The 2006 census conducted by the National Population Commission estimated the number of the inhabitants of the town to about 368,194 (NPC, 2006). Oyo was purposively selected for this study because incidents of motorcycle theft have become common in the town in the last few years (The Nation, 2008). Also, commercial motorcyclists, using their motorcycles for public transportation within the town, constituted the study population. They were considered very important for this study because apart from the fact that they are motorcycle owners, their occupation (using motorcycle for public transportation) also enable them to have access to first hand information on the problem of motorcycle theft in their community.

The study was exploratory and cross-sectional in design. Data were generated through the combination of key informant interview and focus group discussion methods. All the major districts in Oyo town where commercial motorcyclists usually converge to carry passengers were visited. The areas covered included: *Aroromi, Cele, Eleekara, Isokun, and Owode*. The snowball sampling technique was employed for the selection of seven key informants (commercial motorcyclists whose motorcycle had been stolen in the past), while 35 commercial motorcyclists who participated in the focus group discussion were purposively chosen. Five sessions of focus group discussion comprising seven participants each were held. Data elicited were analysed through content analysis and ethnographic summaries, using narrative techniques of reporting. Furthermore, it is important to point out that findings of this study may not be generalizable to all crimes bordering on

motorcycle theft because the number of respondents is not large. Nonetheless, the qualitative and exploratory nature of the study made it possible to gain significant insights and generate rich data on the subject matter.

Results and Discussion

A thematic presentation of the major findings established in this study was done in this section. The results were systematically arranged in order to ensure clarity and logic of the discourse.

1. Patterns of Motorcycle Theft in Oyo Town

To ensure an adequate understanding of the general patterns of motorcycle theft in Oyo town, the frequency of motorcycle theft, the period of the year when incidents of motorcycle theft are commonly experienced, as well as the locations where motorcycle thieves usually perpetrate their criminal act were investigated. The general consensus from the responses of nearly all the respondents sampled was that motorcycle theft is a crime that is neither time-bound nor space-bound. In one of the focus group discussion sessions conducted, a participant stated thus:

Motorcycle theft is an all-year round issue in this Oyo town. They (thieves) steal motorcycles anytime they see opportunity. Since they know the right market where they can sell their stolen goods, they can steal at anytime and sell it successfully. These thieves conduct their activities like everyday transaction in a legitimate market. In fact, a motorcycle belonging to someone very close to me has been stolen this morning (December, 24, 2015). It happened overnight. Two motorcycles were stolen from the same house. In fact between November, 2014 and now (December, 2015), five motorcycles, including mine had been stole in my neighbourhood (Commercial Motorcyclist/38years/KII/Cele Area).

Similarly, one of the key informants interviewed described the situation this way:

Things have changed. Before it (motorcycle theft) used to be rampant towards the end of year, between September and December, but now, it is generally stolen anytime. Since there has not been any tangible solution to the problem, it has become very pervasive. Motorcycle theft is common in Oyo town. My own motorcycle was stolen sometime in November, 2014 from inside my apartment where it was parked the night before. It was when we woke up in the morning that we discovered that the motorcycle had been moved away from where it was parked in the passage (Commercial Motorcyclist/34years/KII/Owode Area).

Another respondent who had lost two motorcycles to theft narrated his experience this way:

My first motorcycle was stolen at Opapa area. I just completed its payment because I got it on instalment. It was only after two weeks that I made the full payment that it was stolen. Initially, people thought its theft was probably arranged by the man who sold it to me, but I was convinced that he could not have been the one. He is a very old man. Similarly, my second motorcycle which I got through a self-help cooperative that I belong-to was barely used for two weeks before it was stolen. I had registered it and collected a plate number. It

happened one early Friday morning, I just finished cleaning it, I went inside my house to dress-up. Before I came out of my room, it had been stolen. This was despite the fact that I locked it. The first motorcycle was stolen overnight (Commercial Motorcyclist/45years/KII/Isokun Area).

From these narratives, it is clear that motorcycle theft is a common form of crime in Oyo town. Also, the lack of effective solution in addressing this form of crime has changed the pattern of its occurrence from its initial seasonal status to everyday crime. Thieves now engage in motorcycle theft whenever there is an opportunity at any period of the day all year round. These findings validate a major tenet of routine activity theory that when a motivated offender and suitable target come together in the absence of a capable guardian, criminal opportunity occurs. In addition, these findings support the submissions of Ikoh (2011) that in the process of crime perpetration, offenders often either seek out attractive targets with low security or seize the opportunities to commit crime while engaging in routine non-criminal activities. Equally, this finding is in tandem with the result of Sidebottom's (2012) study on victims of bicycle theft where respondents were reported to have suffered multiple victimisations.

2. Factors Promoting Motorcycle Theft in Oyo Town

Information was also sought from the respondents on the factors promoting motorcycle theft in Oyo town. This was done as a way of gaining an insight into the reasons behind the increase in the incidence of motorcycle theft in the town. Respondents adduced cases of motorcycle theft to these factors: high-cost of motorcycles, ineffective policing, and unregulated conveyance of motorcycles by truck drivers. A respondent said:

God should help us in Nigeria. This kind of problem was not common when people like us were younger. Then, my father and some of our neighbours usually parked their Suzuki motorcycles outside overnight and nobody would tamper with them. Before, when motorcycles were sold for between ₦ 50, 000 and ₦ 60,000 (\$178.57 and \$214.28), their theft was not as rampant, but now that their prices have gone up for between ₦ 110, 000 and ₦ 130, 000 (\$392.85 and \$464.28), it has become a highly sought after, but expensive commodity for most people (Commercial Motorcyclists/46years/FGD/Owode Area).

Another FGD participant corroborated thus:

At Alaaka (a popular area in Oyo town), motorcycles whose origins are fishy are usually loaded onto the trucks and conveyed to the northern part of the country. Police officers at checkpoints do not usually check big trucks conveying motorcycles to the north. They do not usually request for those motorcycles' particulars (Commercial Motorcyclist/34years/FGD/Owode Area).

Also, a key-informant had this to say:

Most times, motorcycles stolen from here (Oyo town) are usually taken to some other parts of the country using large trucks. It is common for us to see trucks carrying more than 50 fairly used motorcycles to the northern part of the country. Police officers on the highways hardly question truck drivers in regards to origin of the motorcycles they are conveying. These drivers usually behave as if they are

above the laws. It seems the Police cannot control them. In this town, it is a widely known fact that once a stolen motorcycle is successfully taken to Alaaka, such can never be recovered. It is from this location at Alaaka that they would be taken to northern part of the country (Commercial Motorcyclist/37years/KII/Araromi Area).

The above narratives indicate that motorcycle thieves operating in Oyo town has a well-established network that include primary perpetrators, fencers and inter-state truck drivers. Essentially, motorcycles stolen in the town are usually transported to some other parts of Nigeria. Again, the inefficiency of Police personnel in the areas of intelligence gathering and crime surveillance was also brought to the fore in these findings. Apart from the fact that the activities of large truck drivers conveying motorcycle from Oyo town to other parts of the country are often not thoroughly scrutinized, the area of the town (Alaaka) identified by some of the respondents as the departure point of these drivers has not been thoroughly searched by the Police. Ojedokun (2014) has equally lamented the reactive nature of the intelligence gathering effort of personnel of the Nigeria Police Force. Furthermore, the lack of due diligence on the part of some police officers (incapable guardians) indirectly enables the motivated offenders (motorcycle thieves) to steal and dispose-of their targets (motorcycles). Moreover, it can be deduced from the findings that the increasing price of motorcycles in Nigeria is also contributing to the problem of motorcycle theft in the study area.

3. Factors Exposing Commercial Motorcyclists to Victimization

The situational factors predisposing respondents to motorcycle theft were also investigated to understand the ways through which they are exposed to victimisation. The major factors identified by most of the respondents were inadequate parking space, non-registration of motorcycle by some owners, working very late at night, and incessant power (electricity) outage in Oyo town. A typical response that was given by most of the respondents was captured in the statement of a key-informant:

The lack of adequate parking space for motorcycles is aiding their (motorcycle) theft. We do not have secure locations to park, especially in the commercial areas of town. Also, there are no patrol officers that can monitor the safety of parked automobiles. Since most of these motorcycles look alike, an individual with an ulterior motive can just go and take any motorcycle of his choice and ride-off (Commercial Motorcyclist/37years/KII/Araromi Area).

In the words of another respondent:

You see, there are a lot of fake registration papers that were procured at cheap rates by motorcyclists. This practice is increasing the confidence of motorcycle thieves because they are aware that a lot of motorcycles were not officially registered. Hence, they often steal motorcycles and go an extra-length to get them registered legally. Consequently, the rightful owner will not be able to trace such a motorcycle since it was not duly registered in the first place (Commercial Motorcyclist/28years/FGD/Owode Area).

Another respondent said:

Sometimes when an Okada rider works late at night till around 10:00pm or 11:00pm, such a person can easily fall victim to the antics of motorcycle thieves. Some of our people (commercial motorcyclists) usually found additional tips irresistible and consequently take unnecessary risks. An individual may decide to convey a passenger to a secluded location which ordinarily should be ₦ 100.00 in the day for ₦ 500.00 at night. There is a chance that people like these would lose their motorcycles to thieves (Commercial Motorcyclist/33years/FGD/Isokun Area).

It can be deduced from these findings that the exposure of commercial motorcyclists to motorcycle theft is as result of different environmental and self-induced factors. Commercial motorcyclists using unregistered motorcycles and those conveying passengers from one part of the town to another late at night are indirectly aiding their own victimisation by criminals specialising in motorcycle theft. Also, the lack of secured parking spaces and the incessant power (electricity) outage in Oyo town are among the environmental factors responsible for motorcycle theft. Literature has established that inadequate automobile parking spaces and incessant power outage are among the major problems confronting residents of many communities in Nigeria (Asiyanbola & Akinpelu, 2012; Etukudur, Abdulkareem & Ayo, 2015). In addition, the failure of some commercial motorcyclists to change their behaviour in terms of working late at night, parking motorcycles in open spaces and in areas of poor illumination when they have realised the associated risk of such actions indicates the incapability of the guardians as posited in the routine activity theory. Similarly, the report of the Institute of Highway Engineers (2014) indicates that the theft of motorcycles in Great Britain often occur in public places.

4. Strategies Employed by Thieves Involved in Motorcycle Theft in Oyo Town

The strategies that are commonly utilized by thieves involved in motorcycle theft in Oyo town were investigated for the purpose of generating information on their mode of operation. Essentially, findings indicated that motorcycle thieves have devised different strategies through which they are successfully dispossessing people of their motorcycles. While some of these criminals do adopt violent approaches, others often steal motorcycles through non-violent means. A participant in one of the FGDs said:

Something happened in this community not too long ago, a man asked a commercial motorcyclist to take him to a nearby community. Unknown to him, his passenger had an ulterior motive. It was when they got to a secluded location at Awe junction near Technical College that he brought out a giant trap which local hunters usually used to catch big games. He set the trap and slammed it on the man's head. As he (commercial motorcyclist) was struggling with the trap, the thief pushed him off the motorcycle and rode-off (Commercial Motorcyclist/34years/FGD/Owode Area).

Another respondent corroborated further:

It is not a matter of carelessness on the part of motorcycle owners. These people (motorcycle thieves) have perfected their methods in such a way that they can easily compromise factory installed security system on any motorcycle. They have master keys and it hardly takes them (thieves) 2minutes to unlock a motorcycle (Commercial Motorcyclist/37years/FGD/Araromi Area).

Also, another respondent said:

Many of our members' motorcycles have been stolen. For instance, my own motorcycle was stolen while I was asleep in my house. Nobody woke up in the middle of the night when they came to steal it. I locked it and chained its tyres, but they successfully freed it and made away with it. They are so perfect in this type of crime. We just woke up that morning to discover that my motorcycle was missing (Commercial Motorcyclist/32years/KII/Araromi Area).

The implication of these findings is that the thieves involved in motorcycle theft in Oyo town are highly skilled in their chosen form of crime. It can be inferred from these findings that the thieves have devised various methods suitable for stealing motorcycles in different settings. Specifically, while those stealing in secluded locations are often violent in their approach, those engaging in house burglary to perpetrate the crime usually do not adopt violent approach so as not to draw the attention of people in the vicinity. Also, since motorcycles parked at home are not usually adequately monitored, therefore, thieves intending to steal them will hardly experience any form of resistance. These findings also support the submission of Phongphu and Srichandr (2011) that thieves have many techniques through which they steal motorcycles. Similarly, the study of Sidebottom (2012) on cycle theft found that most thefts occurred in the immediate vicinity of the victim's home such as: gardens, sheds and garages.

5. The Brand of Motorcycles Commonly Targeted by Motorcycle Thieves in Oyo Town

Since there are many brands of motorcycles like Boxer Bajaj, Haojue Suzuki, Honda, Jincheng, Yamaha, amongst others in the Nigerian markets, therefore, it was considered important to elicit data on the brands that are commonly targeted by motorcycle thieves in Oyo town. Although most of the respondents submitted that all brand of motorcycles are at the risk of theft, they, nonetheless, claimed that Boxer Bajaj motorcycle is the most frequently targeted. A respondent stated:

It is any brand of motorcycle that comes their (thieves) way that they steal. Even some motorcycles that we think are old are still considered valuable by them. They know that they would still make some money off their (motorcycles) sale. Any amount given to them by the buyer is okay. However, the theft of Boxer Bajaj motorcycles is higher because it is this brand that is now in vogue. Besides, it is the most suitable for commercial activities (Commercial Motorcyclist/43years/FGD/Owode Area).

A participant in another FGD similarly said:

Although there is no brand that they do not steal, however, some are commonly targeted especially those that we use for commercial purposes. Boxer Bajaj is stronger and there is a very high demand for it. Hence it is the most commonly targeted, because there are readily available markets for it (Commercial Motorcyclist/35years/FGD/Cele Area).

From these narratives, it has been clearly established that Boxer Bajaj is the brand of motorcycle that is commonly targeted by thieves engaging in motorcycle theft in Oyo town. This brand of motorcycle is clearly the most favoured because of its current market value. The implication of this is that the owners of Boxer Bajaj motorcycles are at a higher risk of being victimised than people who own other brands of motorcycles. In spite of this fact, however, any brand of motorcycle parked at an unsecured location could become a suitable target for motorcycle thieves. Similarly, a study conducted by Sheridan (2002) in Australia indicated that motorcycles manufactured by Honda and Yamaha accounted for over half of motorcycles stolen in Australia.

6. Commercial Motorcyclists' Willingness to Report Cases of Motorcycle Theft to the Police

Due to many reasons, victims of crime in Nigeria are often reluctant to involve personnel of the Nigeria Police Force in criminal matters (Ayodele & Aderinto, 2014; Gyong, 2010). Therefore, the willingness of commercial motorcyclists in Oyo town to involve police officers in cases of motorcycle theft was considered. Most of the respondents submitted that the unpleasant experiences of some of their members, who went to the Police to report the theft of their motorcycle, are discouraging other victims from taking similar steps. One of the key-informants said:

At times when one goes out to the Police to report the theft of a motorcycle, one would leave their station more dejected because policemen would not handle the case professionally. They are fond of saying that there are many cases like that, you better go and look for your motorcycle yourself. Can you imagine that? (Commercial Motorcyclist/37years/KII/Owode Area).

Another respondent put it this way:

We have seen cases where victims of motorcycle theft that reported to the Police were locked-up in the cell for 2 or 3 days. My brother whose motorcycle was stolen spent 3days in Police cell before he was released. They thought he was lying because he had not completed the instalment payment for the motorcycle (Commercial Motorcyclist/40years/FGD/Cele Area).

The problems of unprofessionalism usually displayed by some police officers in the line of duty, as well as the historical communication gap between the Police and the citizens of Nigeria clearly played out in these findings. The unpleasant experiences that some of the commercial motorcyclists had in their encounter with the Police are playing pivotal role in the decision of other victims of motorcycle theft not to report to them. The implication of this situation is that the likelihood of recovering a stolen motorcycle is very slim.

Equally, this finding is in line with the result of Sidebottom's (2012) study on cycle theft which revealed that the estimates on the volume of cycle theft using police recorded crime data undercount the extent of the problem because of the high levels of underreporting.

Conclusion

The focus of this paper has been on the pattern of motorcycle theft and experiences of commercial motorcyclists in Oyo town, South-West Nigeria. Motorcycle theft has become a pervasive problem in Oyo town. Commercial motorcyclists in the town are exposed to criminal victimization in a number of ways. To address this problem, the following recommendations need to be seriously considered:

First, commercial motorcyclists operating in Oyo town need to avoid working very late and/or carrying passengers to secluded locations during night hours. This step can go a long way in combating the problem because it was established in the study that some thieves usually target commercial motorcyclists working at night.

Second, commercial motorcyclists should ensure that their motorcycles are duly registered with government established vehicle registration/licencing department because the probability of recovering a registered stolen motorcycle is higher than an unregistered stolen one. It would be very difficult for police officers to recover a stolen motorcycle without genuine particulars.

Also, officials of the Nigeria Police Force should strengthen their surveillance system and intelligence gathering strategies to ensure that the notorious area in Oyo town where criminals and fencers allegedly meet to discuss, transact, and dispose of stolen motorcycles are identified and raided periodically. Similarly, police officers conducting stop and search assignment on vehicles plying the major highways in Nigeria should be more thorough in their surveillance to prevent large truck drivers from using their vehicles to convey stolen motorcycles from one part of the country to another.

Furthermore, there is a need for attitudinal change on the part of some officials of the Nigeria Police Force in their encounter with victims of crime. Good Police-citizens relation will not only increase public confidence in the Police, but will automatically encourage the reportage of crimes. This will no doubt aid the consolidation of the philosophy of community policing and the overall performance of the Police in tracking of criminals and aiding the recovery of stolen goods.

In addition, the Federal Government of Nigeria should do all within its power to ensure stable supply of electricity in the country. Also, government should take necessary steps to ensure that prices of motorcycles are reasonably reduced to make them affordable for Nigerians desiring to own them. This suggestion becomes logical because if people have the ability to purchase motorcycles in the legitimate markets, the criminal profitability of motorcycle theft would be substantially reduced. Finally, the Oyo State Governor and other State Governors in Nigeria should provide adequate/secure parking spaces for motorcyclists and other vehicle owners where they can safely keep their vehicles whenever such a need arises.

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