

## Minors, Motorbikes, and Mayhem: the Bronx's Young Motorcycle Riders

In a McDonald's parking lot, amidst the honking sounds of a drive-through and the sights of oily, soggy french fries and burger wrappers littered the floor, a group of bikers overpower the rattles of the 1 train on 238th Street. Teenagers are racing and speeding under the train tracks on their white, red, and blue motorcycles, which are covered with stickers of flames, Dominican flags, numbers, and taramps.

Bikers come here to show off their skills, popping wheelies and revving their engines. Suddenly, the laughter fizzles out whenever a New York Police Department van drives past.

Motorcyclists can be found across the Bronx's many neighborhoods. A cultural phenomenon in the Dominican community, teenagers typically start riding as young as seven years old. As new immigrants to the United States, this cultural pastime has become a skill, as they rely on their motorcycles for an economic pathway to gig jobs like food delivery.

The Bronx Bulletin has also found after interviewing 30 Bronx riders that the police have escalated confiscating bikes and detaining riders. Police have been cracking down on gig workers of all ages for various reasons, including allegedly "loitering" when standing on a sidewalk waiting for delivery orders to be ready for pick-up, not wearing helmets, running stop signs, popping wheelies, not having a license; and not having a registered vehicle; and standing on bikes. In some cases, police have used force on riders.

***"I started riding at the age of 11. It's only dangerous if you drive dangerously."***

Almost all 30 riders interviewed started riding bikes in the Dominican Republic as pre-teens and carried on that tradition once immigrating to the Bronx.

Anthony Williams, 11, and his friends have been riding bikes since they were young. "I just saw a lot of people with it, and I wanted to try it out," said Williams. "It's only dangerous if you are driving dangerously."

Although it is illegal for anyone under [16](#) to ride motorbikes in New York City, Williams, and his friends all started riding motorbikes in the Dominican Republic when they were around seven years old. "I got hurt once. My eyes were all purple, and my legs, but it was fine," said Williams.

Another rider, Marcos Brea, 25, said immigrating from the Dominican Republic and leaving more relaxed laws behind doesn't mean riders will give it up.

“It’s so prevalent in the Dominican culture to start young because it’s a thing we do. We just kind of go along with it; one person does it, then other people do it; that’s why they call it culture,” said Brea, who started riding bikes at 15.

Jonel Grullon, 16, started riding his bike at 13 and uses his dad’s Uber Eats account to earn extra cash. Grullon said his dad taught him how to ride.

### ***.The Economics of Motorcycles and Gig Work***

William Colon, 29, started riding motorcycles at the age of 12 in the Dominican Republic, which he said is the easiest and most affordable mode of transportation there.

“It is a poor country, and when you’re working it’s more affordable to get a motorcycle than a car because the money you make is not enough,” Colon said.

The poverty rate in the Dominican Republic is as high as [40.4%](#), according to the World Food Programme. The annual salary of a store cashier is [\\$2,348](#), and that of a physician is [\\$18,715](#), according to Teleport, a platform that gathers data and builds software for the public to help them make informed decisions on countries they can move to.

It is a sentiment that Brea, the 25-year-old rider, agrees with. “A lot of us migrate here because what we make here in a week we make in a month there or sometimes even in two months, and there’s no healthcare like Obama care,” said Brea.

According to Encuentra, the Dominican Republic's most popular online marketplace, used cars can cost between \$16,500 for an Audi and \$20,500 for a Ford. Meanwhile, used motorcycles on Facebook Marketplace can cost as low as \$60.

Along with their affordability, motorcycles can also quickly shift into gig economy jobs like food and grocery deliveries. Alex De Ruyter, an economist at Birmingham City University School, said that gig jobs supported by platforms embedded in digital technology make it efficient for workers, students, and people who just need an extra form of income.

“Unregulated work is easy. It offers volatile income and insecurity of tenure or growth. This is especially true if you cannot prove legal status. It gives platforms and institutions more power,” said Ruyter.

However, the working conditions in an unregulated gig economy make it so those without a legal status do not have power and face unregulated working conditions with no stable income or healthcare, Ruyter explained.

“If gig work is your main form of income into your 30s and you have a family, you are getting a raw deal, you are trapped, and you will essentially never be able to achieve the American dream,” said Ruyter.

Colon, Brea, and 16-year-old Joniel Gullon's source of income is delivering food orders from Uber Eats. All three make around \$100-\$150 a day.

### ***The NYPD Crackdown of Motorcycle Riders***

Lately, riders told The Bronx Bulletin that local police are cracking down on their ownership and use of motorcycles through constant stopping, detaining, and ticketing of bikers.

According to the 30 Bronx riders interviewed, the police have escalated confiscating bikes and detaining riders.

According to NYC Open Data, in 2023, the NYPD issued 2,978 tickets to motorbike, electric bike, All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs), and electric scooter riders in the Bronx for loitering, not wearing helmets, and not having permits.

2022 Retired NYPD Police Officer Twariq Alam, 26, told The Bronx Bulletin that the public is concerned about the quality of life with motorcycles and ATVs. Alam said that residents find riders' activity “reckless” and used at all hours of the day.

“In my experience, most of these bikes that are used to commit crime were stolen. People steal the bikes and then scratch off the VIN numbers so they can't be identified or recovered. It's the department's job to listen to the community,” Alam told The Bronx Bulletin.

Alam also said that these bikes are being used as getaway vehicles for robberies and homicide and the difficulty of tracking suspects in vehicle pursuits with bulky police vehicles.

Alam said he supports a crackdown on illegal bikes. He is confident, he added, that the department supports those working with bikes, not those doing illegal activities. “The police department is reactionary; they analyze crime after the fact and create policy based on that,” he said.

On [April 14](#), the chief of NYPD's Patrol Services Bureau, John Chell, said in a press conference that public safety is not just about reducing crime and that people like himself are sick of ATVs as they disregard the law. The press conference confirmed their campaign of Community Response officers across all boroughs. They focus on quality of life and are responsible for making sure these bikers follow the law. One of the tactics they discuss in the press conference is boxing in riders. This crackdown goes back to 2022, when the NYPD [tweeted](#) in early August

that officers were addressing illegal usage of dirt bikes and ATVs and targeting gang activity to advocate for criminal justice reform and engage with the youth.

The NYPD has an electric bike and mobility [chart](#) that was handed out at a press conference in August last year; at this time, the 52nd precinct had [confiscated](#) 186 motorbikes. This mobility chart informed Bronx Community Response Officers about the different types of motorcycles and bikes to aid in confiscating them.

“They tend to try to hit you and stop you. When they do, they attack, push, and kick you. In the Dominican Republic, the police don’t stop you at all. The police are very rough here and attack you, and take your bike and do not give it back,” Colon, the 29-year-old, told The Bronx Bulletin.

Colon also said that police confiscated his friend’s bike in September.

Brea said the police stopped him for standing on the sidewalk or not wearing his helmet at least twice a week since the Summer of 2023. On average, Gullon and his friends said police pull them over at least six and up to even ten times a week.

All the riders expressed frustration about frequently getting tickets for standing on the sidewalk and aggression when stopped.

“My bike got confiscated twice. Our bikes are 2,000 dollars, and we have to have extra money to buy another bike,” said Brea. “Those of us who are immigrants, we are scared when the police stop us, so we do not stop.”

According to 15-year-old Gullon, he was doing food delivery in Yonkers in September when three police cars stopped him. He said they then grabbed him when he was trying to straighten his bike. They dropped him to the floor, handcuffed him, hurt his wrist, and threw his bike on the floor.

“Why are 15 cops and three cop cars called for one rider, who is underage?” he said of the time when he was ticketed.

The Bronx Bulletin has visited police precincts and reached out to the DCPI via call and text up to seven times to get information about this incident and the number of motorcycle confiscations and stops in 2022 and 2023. The Bronx Bulletin is still waiting for a comment.

Gullon has gotten three tickets in the last two months: two for being on the sidewalk and one for a missing screw on his license plate.

“People should be more empathetic, and police should be more cautious about the fact that we are young riders trying to make ends meet. It is scary when they stop us. We fear being hurt,” said Gullon.

At 4 p.m. on October 11, police stopped an Uber Eats delivery person who had his food bag on 238th Street, and on October 9, 2023, police stopped another rider, according to Williams and videos of these scenes. Different groups of riders stayed across the street in fear, recording on their phones.

“Dominicans are not the only ones who ride. Americans have bikes too, but police are passive with American riders and target Dominican riders,” Colon said. “Riding bikes to make ends meet is a hard job. the way the cops are going about things could end a life.” Colon.









