

WORD OF THE MONTH

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bikie

- **noun**: a member of a gang of motorcyclists.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

In recent months, the Queensland government of Campbell Newman has introduced legislation to curtail the activities of outlaw motorcycle gangs. The members of such gangs are usually referred to in Australia as **bikies**. The word **bikie** is Australian, and is first recorded in 1967. It derives from *motorbike*.

Early evidence for **bikie** suggests that a **bikie** might be someone who belonged to any type of motorcycle gang or club. **Bikies** were often associated with youth culture in the early evidence, as in this account of a 1973 Billy Thorpe concert:

The faithful were disguised in different shapes and hues. Teenies, groovers, **bikies**, and freaks crowded front areas, some chanting 'Thorpie' or 'We want Billy' intermittently. (*Canberra Times*, 14 March 1973)

The association of **bikies** with criminal activities was quick to develop, with many early newspaper reports of **bikies** being involved in brawls and assaults.

Some people rejected the association of motorcycle riding with criminality and youth rebellion. A 1970 letter to the editor commented:

There is regrettably still some opprobrium attached to the activity of motorcycling, with the image of the 'long-haired **bikies**' generated largely by the fund-raising activities of the Hollywood film industry, rather than by personal observation. (*Canberra Times*, 4 July 1970)

For the most part, **bikies** have continued to be associated with gangs that have operated on the fringes of legality. In Australia, those who ride motorcycles or belong to more legitimate social motorcycle clubs are more likely to be known as *bikers*. However, in the United States and Britain, *biker* is likely to be the dominant term for a member of a motorcycle gang.

Bikies continue to be the subject of much press coverage, as authorities debate the best way to deal with the activities of the worst of the outlaw gangs, such as the Finks and the Bandidos. However, the introduction of some legislation has raised concerns about possible infringements of civil rights:

Since the states' 'war on **bikies**' began in earnest in the 2000s, the High Court has found a significant proportion of anti-**bikie** measures unconstitutional because they compromised the independence and impartiality of the state judiciary or the judicial process. (Gabrielle Appleby, *The Conversation*, 21 October 2013)

Bikie is likely to continue to be a much-used Australian English term as long as such gangs continue to exist.

Bikie is included in our Oxford dictionaries and in the *Australian National Dictionary*.



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