

The New Rebel Motorcycle Isn't a Harley. It's an Electric Dirt Bike.

E-motos aren't street-legal, but they are drawing newbies to an industry thirsty for young riders



Joe Sulzbach and his sons, who live in the Houston suburbs, have become fans of e-motos. Arturo Olmos for WSJ

By [John Keilman](#)

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Quick Summary

- E-motos—cheap and fast electric dirt bikes—have become some of the popular motorcycles in the U.S., attracting young riders but raising public safety concerns.
- The e-moto trend has led to increased enforcement, with New York police crushing seized bikes and Illinois enacting legislation for street-legal requirements.
- E-motos are seen as a vital source of new riders for the motorcycle industry, which saw sales drop 8% last year, but face regulatory challenges similar to 1970s dirt bikes.

Meet the bad boy of micromobility.

The e-moto, an electric dirt bike that's cheap, fast and rarely street legal, has become the hottest thing in the two-wheel market. Young riders [are swarming roads](#) from Miami to Salt Lake City, [popping wheelies](#), snarling traffic and running from the police at speeds that can top 50 mph.



To some aficionados, the bikes are an expression of the same rebelliousness that fueled the rise of companies such as Harley-Davidson. To many police and lawmakers, they are a public-safety threat that must be brought under control.

But to the motorcycle business, e-motos are the biggest source of young riders since baby boomers fell for inexpensive Japanese dirt bikes in the 1960s and 1970s. That generation went on to

power the industry for decades.

Today, the median age of U.S. motorcycle owners [hovers around 50](#), with younger people put off by high prices or unfamiliarity with the pastime. Sales of new bikes dropped 8% last year, according to the Motorcycle Industry Council.

That figure, however, doesn't include e-motos. Michael Uhlarik, founder of the consulting firm Motorcycle Global, calculated that one e-moto, the Surron Light Bee, was the most popular motorcycle in the U.S. last year, selling about 16,000 units.

That would mean it outsold Harley's entire line of sport and adventure bikes by itself.

Uhlarik said street-legal bikes with similarly affordable prices and the same sense of fun could change the trajectory of legacy bike manufacturers.

"If it isn't this, then it can't be changed," he said.

A new niche

The e-moto craze began when China-based Surron launched the Light Bee in 2017. Vinto Song, head of Surron America, said the company was trying to fill a niche between gas-powered off-road motorcycles and electric bicycles.

The Light Bee retails for around \$4,500 and claims a top speed of 46 mph. Competitors quickly emerged, with some promising faster speeds at half the price.

Andy Leisner, an e-mobility consultant who was formerly chief executive of the e-moto company Rawrr, estimated that up to 80% of the bikes are bought through e-commerce platforms and delivered straight to the customer's driveway. Few of them ever see dirt, he said.

Though he doesn't condone the bikes' misuse, Leisner said their popularity stems in part from how easy they are to ride. Unlike most gas-powered motorcycles, e-motos have no clutch or gearbox. Acceleration is as simple as twisting the throttle.

The bikes have attracted a wide fan base. Joe Sulzbach, a 45-year-old electrician in the Houston suburbs, grew up with a Harley-riding father but never took much interest in motorcycles himself. That changed in 2024 when he bought his son, then 9, a low-speed dirt bike from [Walmart](#).



Joe Sulzbach and his sons ride e-motos.

He soon upgraded it with a more powerful motor, and today the entire family zips along off-road trails—and sometimes local streets—on e-motos.

"We went from people sitting in the living room looking at our phones to getting out and riding," he said.

E-motos also have a practical appeal, said Bryce Altaffer, a Chicago bike store manager who sells them.

"We have a lot more people just trying to commute with them, and for them, a bigger bike isn't an advantage," he said.

E-motos typically lack safety features required on street bikes, such as rearview mirrors, turn signals and tires approved for road use. That got Chris Chevrier in trouble when police in his Detroit exurb recently ticketed him for riding an unregistered motorcycle.

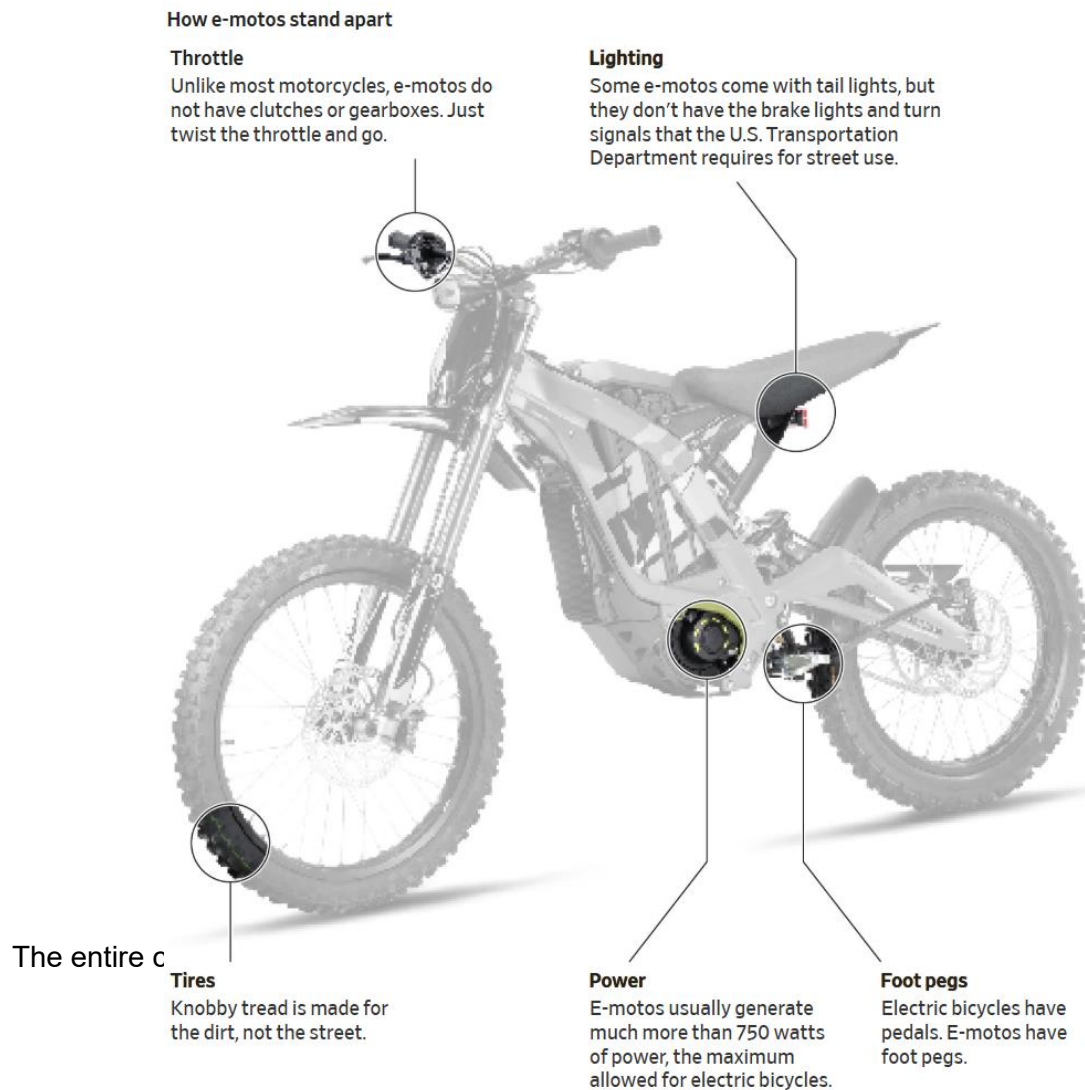
He said he spent more than \$500 to get the necessary safety modifications, along with plates and a license. Because he owns a business selling e-moto parts and accessories, he saw a bright side to tougher enforcement.

“I think I’ll start offering things that will make the bikes street legal,” he said. “That will definitely boost sales a bit.”

Under pressure

The rest of the motorcycle industry is clearly aware of the trend. Zero Motorcycles, known for electric street bikes that cost up to \$23,000, has introduced a \$4,400 option for dirt riding. [LiveWire](#), the electric-bike maker majority-owned by Harley, just acquired a startup whose e-moto has a top speed of 75 mph.

Many e-moto manufacturers say explicitly that the bikes are meant for off-roading only. Song, of Surron America, said his company supports “clear rules that improve safety and provide certainty for riders, manufacturers and law enforcement.”



New York police recently used bulldozers to [crush](#) more than 200 seized dirt bikes and scooters, calling them a menace to public safety. In California, prosecutors brought [involuntary manslaughter charges](#) against the mother of a 14-year-old boy who allegedly struck and killed a man while riding an e-moto. Amazon said it would stop selling bikes in the state that don't comply with California's speed-limit regulations.

The leading evangelist of e-motos, a YouTuber who goes by Sur Ronster, questioned the scene's longevity in a video he shot during a [Los Angeles group ride](#), where fellow riders zoomed onto sidewalks and into oncoming traffic.

"That's just the self-fulfilling prophecy of this entire community, which is inherently illegal," he said. "By participating in the activity, you're hurting the future of the activity." He didn't respond to interview requests.

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The dirt-bike culture of the 1970s eventually faced its own reckoning when misbehavior, noise complaints and safety concerns led to a spate of restrictions. That blocked the pipeline bringing new people into motorcycling, said Christy LaCurelle, president and chief executive of the Motorcycle Industry Council.

"Nobody in the industry back then was able to capitalize on all of those young riders that were out there and try to get them to come along," she said. "And here we are again in a similar scenario."

A pack of e-moto and bicycle riders flood a New York street.

She said she hoped that education, training and the expansion of legal places to ride would prevent an all-out ban on e-motos.

Illinois Secretary of State Alexi Giannoulias, whose office regulates motor vehicles, helped to draft legislation that requires anyone riding one of the bikes on the street to have a driver's license, title, registration and insurance. However, if an e-moto doesn't have a manufacturer's certificate of origin saying it is made for the road—and many don't—it can't be registered.

Giannoulias, who pushed for the law after he said he and his young daughters were almost struck by an e-moto on a sidewalk, said he wasn't trying to snuff out a fledgling form of transportation.

"These micromobility vehicles are quickly transforming how folks get around and are now part of everyday life," Giannoulias said. "But innovation without guard rails puts people at risk."

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