New Efforts to Curb Cellphone Theft

TERRY COLLINS, Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Disturbed by the nationwide epidemic of cellphone robberies and thefts, law enforcement officials across the country are looking to the wireless industry to help find a cure.

In San Francisco, where half the robberies were phone-related last year, District Attorney George Gascon is calling on major companies in nearby Silicon Valley to create new technology such as a "kill switch" to permanently and quickly disable stolen smart phones, making them worthless to thieves.

The prosecutor said he's recently had two discussions with Apple, maker of the popular iPhone, and has talked informally with Google, creator of the Android, the world's most popular operating smartphone platform. And, he also wants to meet with Samsung, the global smartphone market leader.

"We know that the technology can be developed to prevent this. This is more about social responsibility than economic gain," Gascon said.

The stakes are huge in the battle to combat cellphone theft. Nearly 175 million cellphones — mostly smartphones— have been sold in the U.S. in the past year and account for $69 billion in sales, according to IDC, a Massachusetts-based research firm.

And, now almost one out of three robberies nationwide involves the theft of a mobile phone, reports the Federal Communications Commission, which is coordinating formation this fall of a highly-anticipated national database system to track cellphones reported stolen.

The FCC is also working with officials in Mexico to crack down on the trafficking of stolen mobile phones that make it across the border.

San Francisco's district attorney is not the only high-ranking big-city law official seeking solutions.

In Washington D.C, where than 40 percent of its robberies in 2012 involved cellphones, police Chief Cathy Lanier said new federal laws are necessary to require all wireless providers to participate in the national stolen phones database, which is now done by choice.

"This is a voluntary agreement and the decision makers, heads of these (wireless) companies may transition over time and may not be in the same position five years from now." Lanier said in an email. "Something needs to be put in place to protect consumers."

On the theory that an inoperable phone is as useless as a "brick," Lanier and Mayor Vincent Gray also have urged residents who have their phones stolen to call their carriers and ask that the device be "bricked," or disconnected remotely to prevent resale on the black market.

In New York City, police have created a smartphone squad and partnered with Apple to track down stolen iPhones using the device's tracking number. For example, when an iPhone is stolen, Apple can report to police where the phone is located, even if it's been switched to a different carrier.

Police said the city's overall crime rate last year increased three percent mostly due to the more than 15,000 thefts of Apple-related products — a majority of them iPhones — said Paul Browne, a police spokesman.

"We would've had a one percent decrease in overall crime if you subtracted the Apple thefts," said Browne, adding that police have coined the phenomenon, "Apple-picking."

"We're trying to protect the orchard, so to speak," Browne said.

He added that police often use officers as decoys using their own iPhones to catch would-be robbers and stings to catch those who sell them on the black market. About 75 percent of the stolen devices stay within the city's five boroughs and some have been tracked down as far as the Dominican Republic.

In addition, New York Police Commissioner Ray Kelly has been working with U.S. Sen. Charles Schumer, D-New York, the FCC and CTIA, a trade group for wireless providers, on the national stolen phone database, along with six of the largest wireless companies.

Computer security expert Darren Hayes said law enforcement agencies, major corporations and the wireless industry have responded slowly to the spike in mobile phone thefts, leaving individuals as well as businesses vulnerable.

"Smartphones have become such an extension of our lives with all of our personal information on them and criminals recognizing its mass appeal," said Hayes, a professor and computer information systems program chair at Pace University in New York. "Professionally, there are some corporate network administrators who can control their company servers from their smartphone. While it's convenient, it could also put them at risk and could be the biggest source of data loss if they are stolen.

"We could see a potential nightmare emerging," Hayes said.

Jamie Hastings, a CTIA vice president, said the national stolen phone database is a step in the right direction and deserves a chance.

"To suggest that our members don't care about their consumers is completely inaccurate," Hastings said. "Our members are now focusing their energies on the

database and achieving the start-up goal by November. The important thing at this stage is to allow our members to execute the plan that all of the stakeholders agreed upon."

The national database will be similar to a global database devised by GSMA, a wireless trade group based in the United Kingdom. Nearly 100 wireless companies across 43 countries participate in the overseas database for reported stolen mobile phones, said Claire Cranton, a GSMA spokeswoman in London.

But Gascon said a national network to track stolen phones comes up short and he is adamant that a kill switch is the best strategy to render a phone useless.

In March, he met with Apple's government liaison officer Michael Foulkes to talk about creating a kill switch technology. He described the encounter as "disappointing" but said a subsequent phone conversation with Apple's general counsel Bruce Sewell last month led to plans for talks that would include Apple's technical people.

Representatives of the tech giant did not respond to requests for comment.

"For me, a technical solution is probably better than just a criminal solution," Gascon said. "We can always create more laws, but look at how long it already takes to prosecute somebody at the expense of the taxpayers?

"If a phone can be inoperable at the flick of a switch, then a database will become moot."

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