



## Smartphone Thefts and Robberies Growing Trends and Promising Practices

San Francisco, California—a woman’s casual phone call ends when a thief snatches her iPhone and takes off.<sup>1</sup>

Stamford, Connecticut—a woman is walking in front of a church, talking on her iPhone, when a criminal on a bike sneaks up behind her, grabs it, and takes off.<sup>2</sup>

New York, New York—a thief stabs a man five times in the face and once in the neck and back before getting away with his iPhone.<sup>3</sup>

Atlanta, Georgia—a thief follows a woman into a store and snatches her iPhone right from her hands.<sup>4</sup>

New York, New York—a South Korean immigrant and aspiring chef, who has just completed his shift in an upscale Manhattan restaurant, is shot and killed for his iPhone just steps from his home.<sup>5</sup>



DATA: FCC, NYPD, CHICAGO TRIBUNE, LOS ANGELES TIMES, ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH  
GRAPHIC BY BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK

## **Consumer Costs and Crime Data**

These types of thefts and robberies are occurring every day across America, and law enforcement is striving to find innovative ways to combat this growing crime. In a story for the *Today* show on NBC, Stamford, Connecticut, Police Captain Rick Conklin said that “Apple picking” (slang term for iPhone thefts or robberies) is “a trend that’s actually gaining speed and growing very rapidly.”<sup>6</sup> Every day, criminals snatch phones on crowded streets, inside restaurants, and on subways, reselling them on the Internet, on street corners, and inside local convenience stores.<sup>7</sup> It is estimated that stolen and lost cell phones will cost American consumers approximately \$30 billion this year.<sup>8</sup>

The New York Police Department’s Deputy Commissioner for Operations recently noted that while the murder rate in the city continues to fall, robbery rates—in particular, those involving electronics—have continued to rise.<sup>9</sup> In 2012, 25 percent of all robberies in New York City involved an Apple device.<sup>10</sup>

In San Francisco, “Crime on Muni (San Francisco’s Municipal Railroad) is down 30 percent over last year, but larceny, a category that includes thefts of smartphones, iPads, and iPods, is up 20 percent.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, an estimated half of all robberies in San Francisco are cell phone-related.<sup>12</sup>

The Boston Regional Intelligence Center reported that iPhone thefts in the greater Boston area increased by more than 207 percent between 2010 and 2012.<sup>13</sup>

The rise in smartphone thefts correlates with an increase in ownership and availability on the market. According to the 2013 Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project report, 56 percent of American adults own smartphones. This is the first year that smartphone owners have outnumbered traditional cellphone owners since this research began.<sup>14</sup> At the end of 2012, an eMarketer study estimated the number of smartphone users in the United States to be more than 121 million and forecast that number to reach more than 207 million by the end of 2017.<sup>15</sup>

## **Risk and Reward**

In 1999, Ronald V. Clark developed the idea of “hot products” to describe the consumer goods that are most attractive to thieves.<sup>16</sup> Clark introduced the acronym CRAVED to define the attributes of hot products:

- **C**oncealable – easily hidden in pockets, purses, knapsacks.
- **R**emovable – moved and carried away with ease.
- **A**vailable – they are ubiquitous.
- **V**aluable – vast local and international market for “used” items.
- **E**njoyable – they are cool; for many, possession denotes status.
- **D**isposable – easily converted to cash.

Cell phones and smartphones fall neatly within the characteristics of a hot product.

This risk associated with smartphone robberies is increasing for consumers as the reward is growing for criminals. “Thieves nowadays don’t care about the money in your wallet,” noted a spokesman for the San Francisco Police Department.<sup>17</sup> Law enforcement found that during the course of many robberies, criminals were passing up other valuables for phones.<sup>18</sup>

People are not just having their cell phones taken; often, assaults occur in conjunction with the robbery. Devices are being taken at knifepoint or gunpoint, and since weapons are being used, it is often a felony offense.<sup>19</sup>

At a Hamilton, New Jersey, AT&T store, masked men committed armed robbery, taking more than \$15,000 in new iPhones.<sup>20</sup>

According to an article published in November 2012, the top ten cities for smartphone theft and loss (determined by the number of reported stolen smartphone cases per capita) are:<sup>21</sup>



Adler, Bess, 32\_50\_stoleniphone04\_i. 2009, Photograph, New York City, *The Brooklyn Paper*, December 18, 2009, Web, March 20, 2013

- |                 |              |
|-----------------|--------------|
| 1. Philadelphia | 6. Detroit   |
| 2. Seattle      | 7. Cleveland |
| 3. Oakland      | 8. Baltimore |
| 4. Long Beach   | 9. New York  |
| 5. Newark       | 10. Boston   |

A stolen iPhone equates to cash for thieves. In the United States, used iPhones can sell for \$50 to \$400,<sup>22</sup> and overseas, a stolen iPhone can be sold for as much as \$2,000.<sup>23</sup>

While many of these thefts may be common criminal activity, in some cases, they may be much more. In 2009, the FBI arrested suspected Hezbollah operatives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, who purchased stolen electronics (including smartphones) for resale in foreign countries in an effort to finance weapons purchases.<sup>24</sup>

Reselling used smartphones is becoming more convenient and creating opportunities for stolen smartphones to be exchanged for cash or, in some cases, store credit. Retail stores such as Best Buy and Apple have exchange programs where used smartphones can be returned for credit towards an upgraded phone or in-store credit. These programs require the owner to provide personal information, including a fingerprint, when participating. Other third-party resellers use kiosks or mail-in programs to provide a convenient location to sell a used cell phone or smartphone for cash. These resellers ask the owner to volunteer personal information in

accordance with state and local laws. Some local communities, such as Prince George's County, Maryland, require a secondhand dealer or pawn dealer's license in order for these types of third-party resellers to operate.<sup>25</sup>

### **Initiatives and Practices**

Several agencies are implementing measures to combat this growing criminal enterprise, such as:

- Law enforcement agencies have been successful in apprehending “Apple pickers” by using decoy officers on mass transit routes or bait cars with Apple products in plain sight.<sup>26</sup>
- The FCC entered into a public-private partnership to develop a tool for consumers that provides smartphone users with security steps customized by a mobile operating system. The smartphone Security Checker is available at <http://www.fcc.gov/smartphone-security>.<sup>27</sup>
- In Washington, DC, the Metropolitan Police Department has started a campaign for victims of stolen smartphones to “brick it.” A “bricked” phone is one that has been reported stolen by the victim to the wireless carrier, which then remotely renders the phone inactive, deleting all information on the device and blacklisting the electronic serial number (ESN).<sup>28</sup>
- In San Francisco, police launched a transit ad campaign called “Be Smart With Your Smartphone.”<sup>29</sup>
- Since early 2012, the New York City Police Department has been training officers on how to use the “Find My iPhone” application to locate stolen phones and possibly apprehend thieves.<sup>30</sup>
- CTIA–The Wireless Association® provides consumer information through its “Before You Lose It” education campaign to help users deter smartphone thefts and protect their personal information.<sup>31</sup>
- The Baltimore Police Department developed *Ten Core Concepts for Successful Wireless Investigations*<sup>32</sup> on which to structure an investigative technology team. [Appendix 1](#) is based on the concepts established by the Baltimore Police Department.



Agencies can incorporate the hot products and CRAVED concepts to tailor prevention, apprehension, and market-reduction programs when developing strategies to address cell phone and smartphone thefts.

Longer-term federal initiatives include persuading the cell phone industry to install an option for customers to require a password to disable their mobile device permanently.

### **Tips for the Public**

In addition to these agency initiatives, security experts are encouraging smartphone owners to do their part to secure devices and the data stored on their smartphones, including:<sup>33</sup>

- Enable auto lock.
- Have a mobile tracking app installed (i.e., Find My iPhone). In instances of theft or robbery, the Baltimore Police Department recommends that this function should not be activated by the victim alone but by law enforcement officers, who will accompany the victim to the location reported by the device.
- Erase your personal data remotely.
- Lock sensitive applications.
- Back up your smartphone's data.

Additional safety measures include the following:<sup>34</sup>

- Keep expensive items hidden.
- Be street-smart.
- Buy specific electronic device insurance.

### **Considerations for the Chief Executive**<sup>35</sup>

Should an agency decide to develop a policy to address the use of software and/or hardware designed to track lost or stolen cellular devices, it may be helpful to consider the following elements:

- Establish the goal of the program.
- Balance the interest of public safety and individual privacy.
  - Federal, state, and local privacy and civil liberties laws.
- Identify the circumstances to determine whether tracking will be authorized.

- Outline the process to initiate tracking.
- Designate personnel to operate the tracking mechanism.
- Determine the necessity of a search warrant.
- Outline a time limit for tracking a device.
- Establish an audit trail.
- Document steps for handling devices that are recovered.

<sup>1</sup> Rossen, Jeff and Avni Patel, “‘Apple Picking’ Thieves Snatch iPhones,” *Rossen Reports*, Today News, February 20, 2013, Web, March 18, 2013, <<http://todaynews.today.com/news/2013/02/20/16963883-rossen-reports-apple-picking-thieves-snatch-iphones?lite>>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, Gerry, “Apple Picking: How the iPhone Became an Object Worth Killing For,” *The Huffington Post*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, March 6, 2013, Web, March 18, 2013, <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/06/apple-picking-stolen-iphones\\_n\\_2818488.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/06/apple-picking-stolen-iphones_n_2818488.html)>.

<sup>4</sup> Rossen, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Rossen, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> “Thefts of Cell Phones Rise Rapidly Nationwide,” *USA Today*, Associated Press, October 20, 2012, Web, March 18, 2013, <<http://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2012/10/20/thefts-of-cell-phones-rise-rapidly-nationwide/1646767/>>.

<sup>9</sup> Bilch, John, “Theft of Smart Devices: New York City Experience,” PowerPoint presentation, Law Enforcement Forecasting Group (LEFG) meeting, Washington, DC, February 19–20, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Cabanatuan, Michael, “Wise Up, Phone-Focused Muni Riders,” *City Insider*, SFGate, March 13, 2012, Web, March 18, 2013, <<http://blog.sfgate.com/cityinsider/2012/03/13/wise-up-phone-focused-muni-riders/>>.

<sup>12</sup> “Thefts of Cell Phones Rise Rapidly Nationwide,” *USA Today*, Associated Press, October 20, 2012, Web, March 18, 2013, <<http://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2012/10/20/thefts-of-cell-phones-rise-rapidly-nationwide/1646767/>>.

<sup>13</sup> *Cell Phone Robberies 2006–2013*, Spreadsheet, Boston, MA: Boston Regional Intelligence Center, 2013, Print.

<sup>14</sup> Smith, Aaron, “Smartphone Ownership 2013,” *Pew Internet*, June 5, 2013, Web, September 5, 2013, <<http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/Smartphone-Ownership-2013.aspx>>.

<sup>15</sup> eMarketer, *Forecast: number of smartphone users in the U.S. 2010-2017*, Statista: The Statistics Portal, 2013, Web, September 5, 2013, <<http://www.statista.com/statistics/201182/forecast-of-smartphone-users-in-the-us/>>.

<sup>16</sup> Clark, Ronald V., “Hot Products: Understanding, Anticipating and Reducing Demand for Stolen Goods,” United Kingdom, Home Office, Policing and Reducing Crime Unit, *Police Research Series*, 1999, Web, May 8, 2013, <<http://tna.europarchive.org/20071206133532/homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/prgpdfs/fprs112.pdf>>.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Brehm, James, “Apple Picking . . . and the Epidemic of Smartphone Theft,” Web log post, The Pulse of the Market, Compass Intelligence, Strategy Acceleration Experts, May 25, 2012, Web, March 18, 2013, <<http://blog.compassintelligence.com/post/2012/05/25/Apple-Pickingand-the-Epidemic-of-Smartphone-Theft.aspx>>.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> Goodkind, Nicole, “The Top 10 Cities for Smartphone Theft and Loss,” *CNBC*, Yahoo Finance, November 8, 2012, Web, March 18, 2013, <[http://www.cnb.com/id/49751093/The\\_Top\\_10\\_Cities\\_for\\_Smartphone\\_Theft\\_and\\_Loss](http://www.cnb.com/id/49751093/The_Top_10_Cities_for_Smartphone_Theft_and_Loss)>.

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<sup>22</sup> Yatri, “141 Arrested by NYPD in Stolen iPhone, iPad Sting Operation,” *iPhone Hacks*, December 20, 2011, Web, April 12, 2013, <<http://www.iphonhacks.com/2011/12/141-arrested-by-nypd-in-stolen-iphone-ipad-sting-operation.html>>.

<sup>23</sup> “U.S. Couple Made \$4 Million From Stolen Smartphones,” India TV, Associated Press, March 13, 2013, Web, March 18, 2013, <<http://www.indiatvnews.com/crime/news/us-couple-made-million-from-stolen-smartphones--2877.html>>.

<sup>24</sup> Office of Public Affairs, U.S. Department of Justice, “Arrests Made in Case Involving Conspiracy to Procure Weapons, Including Anti-Aircraft Missiles,” U.S. Department of Justice, November 23, 2009, Web, March 18, 2013, <<http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2009/November/09-nsd-1270.html>>.

<sup>25</sup> Prince George’s County Code Section 5-234, Secondhand Dealer and Pawn Dealer’s and Employee Licenses, Web, September 5, 2013, <<http://lis.princegeorgescountymd.gov/lis/default.asp?File=&Type=SearchCode>>.

<sup>26</sup> Mahoney, Daniel J., “Smartphone Device Crime Response,” Message to Hilary Rios, March 17, 2013, E-mail.

<sup>27</sup> Usdan, Jordan and Kevin Almasy, “FCC and Public-Private Partners Launch Smartphone Security Checker to Help Consumers Protect Mobile Devices This Holiday Season,” Web log post, *Official FCC Blog*, Federal Communications Commission, December 17, 2012, Web, March 18, 2013, <<http://www.fcc.gov/blog/fcc-and-public-private-partners-launch-smartphone-security-checker-help-consumers-protect-mobil>>.

<sup>28</sup> “Stolen Smart Phone? Brick It!” Metropolitan Police Department, District of Columbia, n.d., Web, March 18, 2013, <<http://mpdc.dc.gov/page/stolen-smart-phone-brick-it>>.

<sup>29</sup> Farr, Christina, “My Stolen iPhone Could End Up in Your Stocking This Christmas,” *Security*, VentureBeat, December 10, 2012, Web, March 18, 2013, <<http://venturebeat.com/2012/12/10/smartphone-theft/>>.

<sup>30</sup> Saul, Josh, “NYPD’s iTheft Buster,” *New York Post*, February 13, 2012, Web, September 5, 2013, <<http://nypost.com/2012/02/13/nypds-ithief-buster/>>.

<sup>31</sup> CTIA—The Wireless Association®, “Before It’s Gone: Steps to Deter Smartphone Thefts & Protect Personal Info,” n.d., Web, April 12, 2013, <[http://www.ctia.org/consumer\\_info/safety/index.cfm/AID/12084](http://www.ctia.org/consumer_info/safety/index.cfm/AID/12084)>.

<sup>32</sup> Medaris, Michael, “Baltimore Cell Phone Unit Material,” Message to Doug Bodrero, April 4, 2013, E-mail.

<sup>33</sup> “Top 5 Ways to Protect Your Smartphone Data in Case of Loss or Theft,” Web log post, *Helpful How-To’s*, Support.com, June 7, 2011, Web, March 18, 2013, <<http://www.support.com/blog/post/top-5-ways-protect-your-smartphone-data-case-loss-or-theft>>.

<sup>34</sup> Farr, op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> Philadelphia Police Department, *Police for the Use of Cellular Phone Location Program* (2013).

## Appendix 1

### Ten Core Concepts for Successful Wireless Investigations

#### Operational

- *Proactive approach* — Cell phones and smartphones are everywhere and can provide vital information in almost every investigation. Locating and securing cell phones must be done in a quick, practical, and safe manner.
- *“Gotta get it when it’s on”* — As the cell phone and smartphone market has developed, mobile devices have become more portable, powerful, and disposable. As long as the device is powered on, it can be located.
- *Safety in numbers* — Officer safety is always a priority in every law enforcement function. Remember that training and sufficient backup are essential components in every encounter, no matter how routine it may appear.
- *Getting patrol dialed in* — Every squad has a unique set of skills and knowledge to perform its assigned duties; cell phone recovery is no different.
- *Critical what is done at the scene* — The wealth of information that is available on a cell phone or a smartphone can make or break an investigation. Ensure that all policies and procedures are followed to maximize the inclusion of evidence.

#### Administrative

- *Education and training* — Preparation is the key to success for every function of law enforcement. Cell phone and smartphone technology advances quickly; continual education and training are essential.
- *Electronic surveillance costs* — Budget limitations must be included in any cost-benefit analysis. Does the benefit of recovering a cell phone or a smartphone offset the cost of recovery activity? What role does public perception play in the equation?
- *Talent of team members* — The character and skill of each individual affects the strength of the team. Leverage talent to foster success.
- *Background of mixed disciplines* — Varied personal experiences and backgrounds provide unique and individualized perspectives on shared missions. Diversity is an asset.
- *Practical application of equipment in law enforcement* — Modern law enforcement combines advancing technology with “tried and true” methods of good old-fashioned police work. Cooperation and communication, both within the law enforcement community and with the public, are the cornerstones of success.