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A fifth of London teenagers have been a victim of gadget theft

Bobbie Johnson, technology correspondent
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Photograph: Gareth Cattermole/Getty Images

One in five teenagers in London has had their mobile phone or MP3 player stolen, according to new research.

With the use of expensive personal electronics on the rise, a survey of 1,000 British teenagers found that one in eight youngsters nationwide had been the victim of a mugger, pickpocket or robber. That number rose to almost one fifth of all 11 to 16-year-olds in the capital, where 18% of those surveyed said they had been the victim of gadget theft in the past three years.

The news comes as the Home Office announces plans to extend the British Crime Survey – the annual study of crime levels in England and Wales – to include 11 to 16-year-olds. Until now only those aged 16 and over have been interviewed about their experiences.

"I want to ensure that young people are offered as much protection from crime as possible, and receive support if they do become victims, while also tackling offending vigorously," said Jacqui Smith, the home secretary.

"Extending the British Crime Survey will help us to understand better how crime affects young people and do even more to prevent it."

The research – which was conducted by the Design Council as part of a project aimed at finding new approaches to reducing gadget crime – produced a series of startling statistics that highlight the problem of hi-tech theft for younger Britons.

£100 of electronics

Two thirds of all those interviewed said they carried at least £100 worth of electronics

with them, including phones, music players and portable games consoles, and 61% said they were concerned or very concerned about theft.

But while teenagers seemed keenly aware of the chances of hi-tech robbery, 42% of those who had been the victims of theft said they did not report the crime to the authorities.

The Design Council will present its research to the home secretary at a meeting this morning, with senior academics and researchers suggesting ways manufacturers could help reduce such crime.

"The industry has to have a reason to want to design out crime. In the past mobile phone companies have actually benefited from crime because lots of people just upgrade their phones," said Lorraine Gamman, director of the Design Against Crime research centre at Central St Martin's College in London.

With hi-tech gadgets increasingly being used to hold valuable personal information, mainstream manufacturers are finally beginning to consider the long-term ways they can help reduce theft. Apple, which makes the iPod and iPhone, said that it already helped owners personalise their gadgets and was considering other ways to help deter criminals.

"Some customers choose to use Apple's free engraving service to engrave their name and email address onto their iPod," a spokeswoman told the Guardian, adding that future versions of the iPod and iPhone would "enable security features such as remote wipe and password policies".

But Professor Gamman – whose group has designed items such as table clips to reduce bag snatching, and racks that make bicycle theft more difficult – said that businesses needed to concentrate on making anti-theft systems appealing to ordinary users.

"People need to know that anti-crime solutions are cost-effective, look sexy and are easy to use," she said. "Maybe companies have to look at what people actually want."

WAYS TO DESIGN OUT CRIME

TEXT BOMBING

Mobile networks can already freeze your mobile phone within 24 hours of it being stolen, provided you know the 15-digit serial number. However, some manufacturers are looking into a system called text bombing, where a theft alert immediately detonates any information on the phone and renders it unusable.

LOWER VALUE

Hi-tech gadgets might be extremely common already, but further lowering of their intrinsic value could make them less appealing to thieves. However, among young people evidence suggests that many thefts are related to bullying rather than simple mugging.

LANYARD

A decidedly low-tech but straightforward solution is to attach your mobile phone or MP3 player to a strap that is either worn around the neck or attached to the body or a bag.

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