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The Laptop Computer Thieves Like Best

Survey Tracks The Most Frequently Stolen Brands

Oct. 25, 1999

By David Noack



NEW YORK (APBnews.com) -- Laptops are the computer preference of thieves -- Compaq's over Apple's -- and although they're swiped from almost anywhere, airports are the most probable, according to a National Computer Exchange (NACOMEX) report.

The Stolen Computer Registry, an unscientific survey conducted by the New York-based exchange, uncovered what types of computers are pilfered and their probable locations.

Launched in 1990, it acts as clearinghouse for information on stolen computers and serial numbers. The database includes thousands of computers listed as stolen by insurance agencies, law enforcement, corporations and private citizens.

The current survey, the third conducted by NACOMEX, covers the years 1997-98.

Most thefts at airports

Overall, stealing computers and software is big business, estimated to cost \$5 billion annually, according to recent studies by the American Electronics Association and the International Electronics Security Group.

Robert Zises, executive director of the

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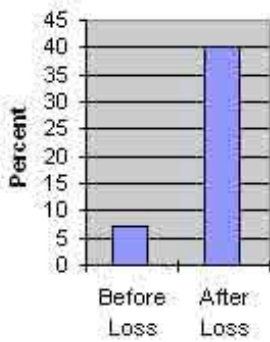
Stolen Computer Registry, said the survey canvassed four groups involved with computer theft: security personnel, insurance officials, computer dealers and even theft victims.

Computers, mainly laptops, are most likely to be stolen at airports, then at work, in cars, in hotel rooms and at home.

In compiling the survey, computer components such as hard drives and modems were left out. Only major items, like laptops, desktops and printers, were included.

Two types of thieves

Computer Owners Using Anti-Theft Devices



Portables, which include laptops, notebooks and hand-held devices such as Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), represent 51 percent of all computers stolen in the 1997-98 period, compared with desktop systems representing 34 percent of all computer theft and printers accounting for 14 percent of missing equipment.

Computers are stolen by two types of thieves: "the professional who is breaking into a university or hijacking a truck, and has targeted top-of-the-line technology, and the drug addict and opportunist thief for the purpose of pawning the equipment in order to buy drugs," Zises said.

"Thieves target laptops more often because they get more value when trying to pawn the stolen item, and they are easier to steal."

Less than 7 percent of computer users had used the anti-theft devices. But after their computers were stolen, anti-theft device use between them shot up to 40 percent.

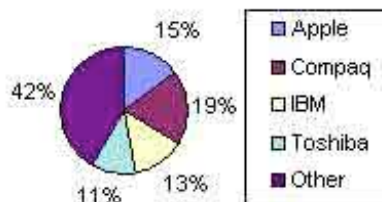
Among desktop computers, Apples were stolen at a rate 2 1/2 times greater than IBM and more than five times the rate of Compaq's, the survey shows.

Apples found in insecure places

Zises attributes the high rate of Apple thefts to the fact that many of them are in schools or universities, and these organizations do not have the level of security that exists in corporations.

But among laptops, Compaq took the lead with 19 percent, edging out Apple with 15 percent, followed by IBM at 13 percent and Toshiba at 11 percent.

Theft of Portables by Maker, 1997-1998



When it comes to printers, Hewlett-Packard is taken 3 1/2 times more often than its nearest competitor, which is again Apple, with IBM and Okidata trailing.

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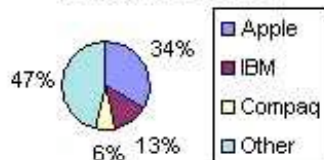


Zises said that information about a computer is not entered into the registry until after one is stolen, and the recovery rate for a pilfered machine is approaching 1 percent.

"Computers not recovered have most likely been purchased by an individual or dealer who preferred not to look too closely because of the cheap price. The professional thieves are likely to break a system down to its components and thereby make it virtually unrecoverable," Zises said.

Some stolen systems aren't registered

Theft of Desktops by Brand, 1997-1998



He said that corporations and computer users don't register stolen computers with the central registry for a number of reasons, ranging from companies not wanting to publicize that computers are being taken to people not knowing that the database exists.

With colleges and universities taking a big hit when it comes to computer theft, steps are being taken to help combat the problem. The Harvard University Police Department announced in March a new crime prevention program called Security Tracking Office Property (STOP), in which students, faculty and staff can register their notebook computer with the department, which will then attach an anti-theft plaque onto the computer's casing. The plaque will help police track stolen laptops and also serves to lower their black-market value. The procedure costs \$10.

Small percentage returned to owners

Police said between Jan. 1 -- when the program started -- and March, 18, computers worth nearly \$44,000 were stolen from Harvard's buildings and grounds.

Nationwide, FBI statistics show that between 6 percent and 7 percent of stolen computers are returned to their owners.

Harvard has contracted with the Stamford, Conn.-based STOP Inc., whose clients include Raytheon Corp., Ford Motor Co. and General Electric. STOP provides the police with the anti-theft plaques, which, when cemented to the shells of computers, leave a permanent mark through a chemical indentation process. The 2-by-3-inch plaque contains a metallic bar code and a five-digit registration number.

David Noack is an APBnews.com staff writer (david.noack@apbnews.com).

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