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In reply please quote:

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MEDIA RELEASE

The problem of mobile phone theft

Mobile phone theft has become a major crime problem in New South Wales over the last three years, with recorded theft rates for mobile phones rising during this period from 19,433 to 39,891, an increase of more than 100 per cent.

Mobile phone thieves are also now resorting to serious offences, such as robbery, in order to obtain mobile phones. Unarmed robberies committed to obtain a mobile phone have risen by 275 per cent over the last three years.

These findings emerged from a special study of mobile phone theft by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

While robberies committed to obtain mobile phones have risen rapidly, most mobile phones are stolen from a motor vehicle or during the course of a break and enter. These two offence categories accounted for about half of all mobile phone thefts over the last three years.

The highest rates of mobile phone theft are to be found in the Sydney and South Sydney Local Government Areas (LGAs). However mobile phone theft is increasing most rapidly in the Manly, Auburn, Willoughby, Botany Bay, Randwick and Parramatta LGAs.

According to the Bureau report, a major cause of mobile phone theft is the failure of mobile phone carriers to disable phones that are reported lost or stolen.

At present a mobile phone thief only has to replace the SIM card of a stolen mobile phone to use it with minimal risk of detection. SIM cards can be purchased inexpensively from any mobile phone service provider.

This criminal opportunity would be blocked if mobile phone carriers denied service to any user of a mobile phone known to be lost or stolen. This could be achieved using the IMEI number, a unique number which identifies a mobile phone every time it is used.

According to the Bureau report, police efforts to identify and apprehend mobile phone thieves also need to be made more efficient.

At present, even if police know the IMEI number of a lost or stolen mobile phone, they cannot tell which carrier supplies service to that phone. In order to identify the user of a mobile phone, they must therefore submit the IMEI number to each of the five mobile phone carriers.

This means that if one thousand phones are stolen from a mobile phone retailer, the police are required at present to fill out five thousand separate forms to obtain the relevant identification details. A simpler system would make the identification and prosecution of mobile phone thieves easier.

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Commenting on the findings, the Director of the Bureau, Dr Don Weatherburn, said that the spread of mobile phones had created new opportunities and incentives for crime which need to be blocked as soon as possible.

‘The value of mobile phones in conducting other criminal activities, such as drug trafficking, makes them a highly sought after commodity among offenders. The demand for mobile phones among offenders is also placing upward pressure on other forms of crime, such as robbery, break and enter and stealing from a motor vehicle.’

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