

Introduce 'kill switch' to smartphones to stop mugging epidemic, says Home Secretary

Charles Hymas



Mobile phone theft has rapidly increased, with an average of 214 incidents a day Credit: Metropolitan Police/PA

Smartphone companies should introduce "kill switches" in devices to combat the epidemic of muggings and thefts, Yvette Cooper has said.

The Home Secretary has backed police chiefs' demands that the phone companies have easy-to-use safety features that allow them to be disabled as soon as they are stolen.

Ms Cooper is also looking **to hand police extra powers so that they can more easily enter homes where they suspect stolen phones are being stored** and re-registered, ready for sale on the second-hand market.

The Home Secretary on Thursday chaired a summit of police and phone companies to discuss ways to tackle the surge in mobile phone thefts.

Street crime, including phone snatching and robberies, soared by 43 per cent in the year to September, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Mobile phone theft recorded by the police has more than doubled, hitting 78,000 in the year to March 2024, or 214 per day, up from 31,000 in the previous 12 months. Companies including Apple, Google and Samsung have introduced anti-theft security features where phones can be locked if they are lost or reported stolen.

However, there is evidence that **organised crime gangs are increasingly involved in thefts and can use their own technology to circumvent two-factor authentication and factory reset protections.**



Ms Cooper says mobile phone theft co-ordinated by organised gangs has left the streets feeling unsafe Credit: Lucy North/PA

Asked why phones could not be fully disabled, Ms Cooper said: *"What the tech companies will say is that some of that happens now, and if you've got the safety features switched on then, then that's what happens. "But actually, a lot of us [don't know] which safety features, which are we supposed to switch on, and how do you do it, and so on. So that's why we need the tech companies to keep making progress and to do much more to make sure that there's not an incentive to steal*

phones and they can be switched off straight away."

Sir Mark Rowley, the Met Police Commissioner, has also urged the tech industry to prevent stolen phones from being able to reconnect to cloud services. He added that the unique IMEI ID numbers should be accessible from the lock screen of all smartphones so they can be traced back to their owner if stolen.

Give police 'stronger powers'

Commander Owain Richards led a week-long campaign against phone theft that saw 230 people arrested and 1,000 devices seized. He said: *"We are seeing phone thefts on an industrial scale, fuelled by criminals making millions by being able to easily sell on stolen devices either here or abroad.*

“By intensifying our efforts we’re catching more perpetrators and protecting people from having their phone stolen in the capital. But we need help from partners and industry to do more.

“That is why we’re working with other agencies and Government to tackle the organised criminality driving this trade and calling on tech companies to make stolen phones unusable.”

Ms Cooper said she was also looking to give police “stronger powers” so that they could speed up warrants to carry out raids when they know where stolen phones are being stored. Victims often complain that they hand GPS and location data of where their stolen phones end up over to police – only to be told they are unable to act quickly enough to search the property, allowing the offenders time to escape.

Ms Cooper urged a thorough investigation of all available data and intelligence to enable a comprehensive assessment of the issues and scope of the criminal market, and to develop collaborative solutions.

“Over the last few years, mobile phone thefts have shot up – often driven by organised crime – leaving our streets feeling less safe. That has to change,” she said.