

Surge in car thefts as electronic keys make them too easy to steal

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Thieves lengthen the radio signal produced by the fob so it appears to be within range of the car RICK WILKING/REUTERS

A surge in “keyless” car thefts has driven motor insurance claims to their highest level in seven years.

Insurers settled 16,000 theft claims in the first three months of this year, or one every eight minutes.

Analysis by the Association of British Insurers (ABI) showed that payouts for stolen cars or thefts from vehicles had risen 14 per cent in 12 months to the highest quarterly total since 2012.

The conclusions will add to concerns that new vehicles are vulnerable to high-tech criminals and that manufacturers are failing to install basic security systems.

Most new cars are opened and started using a fob rather than a key. Thieves can use relay boxes — one near the car and another close to the house where the fob is usually kept — which can lengthen the radio signal produced by the fob

to make it appear to be within range of the car. The thieves can then open the doors and start the engine.

Earlier this year a study by Thatcham Research, an automotive safety group, warned that half of new models could be opened and started using the keyless theft system.

The study said some carmakers had addressed the weakness by switching to more secure wireless technology that could not be hacked. In certain cases, manufacturers also used key fobs fitted with an accelerometer, which detects vibrations, so they “go to sleep” when left idle and do not transmit a signal.

However, many companies were said to be too slow to introduce the technology, even though keyless thefts have been carried out by criminals for years.

Laurenz Gerger, the ABI’s motor insurance policy adviser, said: “The continued growth in car crime must be reversed. Car security needs to keep pace with the ingenuity of car criminals.

“The rising number of theft claims paid by insurers in part reflects the vulnerability of some cars to keyless relay theft. Action by manufacturers to tackle this high-tech vulnerability, allied with owners taking some simple, inexpensive precautions, will help put the brakes on this unwelcome trend.”

According to the ABI, there were 16,000 claims for stolen vehicles or thefts from a vehicle in the first quarter of this year, 2,000 more than the same period last year. The cost of payouts for thefts was £108 million, up 22 per cent in 12 months.

Motor manufacturers have been under pressure to improve car security. In response, industry bosses have called for action to stop the sale of relay devices used in crimes. Mike Hawes, from the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, said recently that car theft was an “ongoing battle”.

“Technology can only do so much and that is why we call for action to prevent the open sale of devices used by criminals,” he said.

The ABI study showed that the cost of repairing vehicles over the first three months of this year was £1.2 billion, the highest quarterly figure on record. This is said to be linked to more sophisticated vehicle design and technology, which costs far more to repair.

The ABI said that the cost of a single headlamp for one popular model has risen more than 400 per cent from £163 in 2012 to £840. Average replacement windscreens for another popular model soared from £147 to £468.

The UK's most-stolen cars

- 1. BMW X5**
- 2. Mercedes-Benz C-class**
- 3. BMW 3 Series**
- 4. Mercedes-Benz E-class**
- 5. BMW 5 Series**
- 6. Range Rover Vogue**
- 7. Land Rover Discovery**
- 8. Range Rover Sport**
- 9. Mercedes-Benz S-Class**
- 10. Mercedes-Benz GLE**

Source: Tracker car security