

# Car thefts by ‘mystery device’

---

A piece of technology is enabling crooks to break into keyless autos and start them.

BY MELISSA ETEHAD

Insurance crime investigators are raising alarms over a device that not only lets thieves break into cars that use keyless entry systems but also helps start and steal them.

Investigators from the National Insurance Crime Bureau, a not-for-profit organization, said in an interview they obtained what they called the “mystery device” from a third-party security expert at an overseas company.

So far, the threat here may be mostly theoretical. The crime bureau said it heard of the device being used in Europe and had reports that it had entered the U.S., but said there are no law enforcement reports of a car being stolen using it in the United States.

During a two-week time

period, NICB investigators tested 35 different makes and models of cars using the car-hacking device and were able to start and drive away about half the vehicles.

Among the vulnerable cars were the 2015 Ford Edge, 2016 Chevrolet Impala, 2013 Volkswagen Jetta Hybrid and the 2017 Toyota Camry, NICB Chief Communication Officer Roger Morris said.

The device is actually two sets of equipment. When the victim parks and locks the car, a thief standing not far away holds the first device, which is used to pick up and amplify the electronic signal as it is sent between the car and the key fob. That signal is relayed to a second device, which tricks the car into thinking that the key fob is near the car. That disarms the security system, unlocks the door and authenticates the engine to start.

“We’ve now seen for ourselves that these devices work,” insurance organization President and Chief Executive Joe Wehrle said in a statement. “Maybe they don’t work on all makes and

models, but certainly on enough that car thieves can target and steal them with relative ease.”

Car thefts in the U.S. peaked at 1.66 million vehicles in 1991, then fell 58% to 699,594 in 2013 thanks to law enforcement efforts coupled with advances in car-security technology, according to the organization. In 2015, 707,758 cars were reported stolen in the U.S., a 3.1% increase from 2014.

Peter Yorke, chief executive of tech-security company Voyomotive, said he has seen surveillance footage in various states that appears to show car thieves using hacking technology to gain entry to cars and has spoken to multiple people who have claimed to be victims of this type of technology.

Yorke said dozens of people in San Francisco have had some type of hacking technology used to gain entry to their vehicles.

San Francisco Police Officer Carlos Manfredi said the department was not aware of that.

“I haven’t heard of this

technology, it’s new to me,” Manfredi said. “It’s possible it’s happening but from a police standpoint, we need proof.”

In Long Beach, Police Lt. Joe Gaynor said he has heard about the technology, but his department has never recovered a hacking device that has been used to break into or steal cars.

Yorke said this latest technology is just one of several hacks that enable people to gain entry to a vehicle and start it. He believes the security problem is getting worse and that car manufacturers are going to be hard-pressed to find a fix.

Representatives from Volkswagen declined to comment. Representatives from Toyota, Ford and Chevrolet did not respond to inquiries.

Rich Selsted, 60, a San Francisco-based pharmaceutical executive, said his car has been stolen once and broken into more than twice by people using keyless hacking technology.

---

melissa.etehad  
@latimes.com