

MONEY

What to do if your phone is stolen

Been a victim of mobile theft? Here's how to minimise the risk to your finances and data, say *George Nixon* and *Louise Eccles*

Some 22 mobile phones are stolen every hour. The average comes from the Office for National Statistics, which recorded 196,000 thefts across England and Wales in the year to March 2023.

Last week The Sunday Times revealed that many phones stolen on the streets of the UK end up being sold on a market in Shenzhen, southern China. Losing your phone is not just inconvenient, it puts your personal data and finances at risk. Here's what you need to know.

PROTECT YOURSELF

There are steps you can take to limit the pain of losing a phone.

Dial *#06# to find out your phone's unique International Mobile Station Equipment Identity (IMEI) and note it down so that you can give it to your phone company if your phone is stolen and they can block its use.

Your phone will have a Find My Phone feature – turn this on so that you will be able to log in to your phone account from a different device to see where it is being used and to mark it as lost.

You could also reset the phone so that it goes back to the factory settings, wiping out any personal information so that the thief cannot use it.

Ensure that your phone is always properly backed up so that if you lose it you can still access your data, including photos, messages, contacts and apps. Your phone will usually back up automatically when you are connected to the internet, but you can check this in the settings menu. You can also manually back up at any time.

The big phone manufacturers such as Apple, Google and Samsung offer cloud storage linked to your online account. Apple offers 5 gigabytes of storage free and after that it is 99p a month for 50 gigabytes through its iCloud+ service. Google gives you 15 gigabytes of storage, then it is £1.59 a month for up to 100

gigabytes. Use strong passwords and store them in a password manager, which will mean you need to remember only one password that gives you access to all the rest. Do not write passwords down anywhere, especially not in your phone's Notes app.



How strong is your password?



How do you back up your phone?

the police – particularly if you plan to make an insurance claim.

Go online to access your phone account and mark it as lost or stolen. This will lock the phone and mean that you can change the PIN, disable notifications and suspend any cards in your phone's wallet. You can even add a message and emergency contact that will display on the phone's screen to show that it has been stolen. Then you should change the password on your phone account.

You could do a factory reset of the device from your online account, which will wipe all its data and remove the

phone from your account, but you may not want to do this straight away. Some insurance policies may require you to keep the Find My Phone feature active on the phone until the claim is fully processed.

You can disable your WhatsApp account online at whatsapp.com, which will stop someone from using WhatsApp on your phone.

Change the passwords on any apps you held on your phone, including social media or shopping accounts.

If you have used the same or similar passwords for multiple accounts then once one is compromised everything else is at risk.

Once your device is secure it is time to protect your bank account. About 53 per cent of adults use mobile banking, according to UK Finance, a trade association, so stealing a phone is a common way for a thief to gain access to your bank account and take your money.

A record £45.5 million was lost to

unauthorised mobile banking fraud in 2023, UK Finance said, up 33 per cent from 2022, with 20,032 cases reported. You may be more at risk if you do not use biometric authentication (fingerprint or facial recognition) to access banking apps on your phone.

Call your bank's fraud helpline to let it know that your phone has been stolen and that your account may be compromised. You can then cancel and replace any debit or credit cards and change your passwords. Your bank can suspend your mobile banking app until you have a new phone.

WHAT ABOUT INSURANCE?

Don't assume that your home insurance will cover a lost phone. Some policies will pay out if your phone is stolen from your house, but not if you are out and about. Just 57 of 311 home contents policies covered loss, theft or damage to phones away from home as standard, according to the ratings firm Defaqto.

For more protection you can buy an add-on to your home insurance or a separate gadget policy from insurers such as Aviva, Direct Line and LV.

Weigh up the benefits, though. If you have a brand-new phone and are worried about the cost of replacing it, then gadget cover may be worthwhile, but the cost of it may not add up if you have an older model.

It costs about £75 a year to insure a new Samsung Galaxy S24 or iPhone 15 with 128 GB of storage, each worth about £800, according to the consumer website GoCompare. Get a policy with a high enough cover limit, or specify the device as a high-value item on your home insurance.

These policies pay out in about 93 per cent of claims, according to the Financial Conduct Authority, the City regulator.

Your claim may be rejected, though, if your insurer thinks that you have been negligent, for example if you left your phone unattended for some time in a public place.

196,000

The number of phone thefts recorded in the year to March 2023

AFTER THE THEFT

Contact your mobile network immediately to give it your IMEI number and get your phone blocked. Report the theft to