

Gadgets for car thefts available online for \$280

Number of vehicles stolen here down, but researcher says break-ins are global problem

Danson Cheong

Car owners beware. Your vehicle can be broken into with gadgets that cost only about US\$200 (S\$280) and are easily found online.

A specialist in automotive security said car thieves are getting bolder and more sophisticated, employing an arsenal of gadgets to steal vehicles or the valuables in them.

These range from radio jammers that prevent the remote control from locking a car, to devices that plug into the car's onboard computers to reprogram ignition keys, said Mr Philipp Mundhenk.

Mr Mundhenk, a research associate at the TUM Create research centre here, warned that even as car manufacturers strove to make their vehicles more secure, thieves were constantly trying to find loopholes.

"It's exactly like an arms race," Mr Mundhenk, who is studying automotive security for his PhD thesis at the centre's embedded systems group, told The Straits Times.

His remarks come after two cases of car theft in Johor Baru were reported earlier this week. Both involved Hondas and took place over the Golden Jubilee weekend.

Overall, though, motor vehicle thefts involving Singapore-registered vehicles have declined over the past 4½ years.

According to figures from the General Insurance Association (GIA), 134 vehicles were stolen in the first half of this year – fewer than half of the 330 for the whole of last year.

In 2011, 417 vehicles were stolen – mostly motorcycles.

GIA added that its data does not show whether specific makes or models were being targeted.

But even as the Singapore theft numbers plunge, Mr Mundhenk said he has noticed that reports of car break-ins are getting "more and more common" worldwide from the beginning of last year.

"It might be because devices to break car security are more readily available online," he said.

Indeed, he showed The Straits Times one website that sold a remote control signal duplicator that claimed to be able to "receive, copy car remote-control signals, then command the car", for only about US\$200.

One such device could have been used to unlock Singaporean Nolan Khoo's Honda Civic on Monday at



While the shock of losing his car in Johor Baru earlier this week is fading, Mr Nolan Khoo (left) still has no news of its whereabouts. The car could have been driven away after being broken into with one of the devices available online (below). PHOTOS: KUA CHEE SIONG, ADKAUTO DIAGNOSTIC.COM

HOME: AUTO KEY PROGRAMMER: 433MHz 315MHz ROLLING CODE REMOTE CONTROL DETECTOR DUPLICATOR

433MHz 315MHz Rolling Code Remote Control Detector Duplicator

Item No.: G075
History: 14 sold
Weight: 0.5kg

Buy it Now: \$195.50
Quantity: 1
\$195.50 x 1 = \$195.50

Add To Cart

City Range Unit Price per unit Discount Product 11/140
1 \$195.50 No

Johor Baru's Tebrau City mall.

On Tuesday, Mr Khoo, 32, an assistant manager at a logistics firm, posted on Facebook a video of the incident, captured on a CCTV camera from a nearby store. It showed the car being stolen in only 10 seconds.

Once thieves get into the car, they can access the onboard diagnostic port – which is usually located under the steering wheel, said Mr Mundhenk.

Thieves or would-be attackers can manipulate the car's computer systems through that port.

"If you have access to that, you have control over everything in the car," he said, adding that the thief could use a device to reprogram any key to start the engine, or even disable the brakes.

"Cars are basically computers on wheels; a high-end car can have up to 100 electronic control units

(onboard computers)."

Experts advised motorists to take precautions such as using steering-wheel clamps – although even these are not a guarantee.

"Any hurdle will buy you time, and make it less likely for your car to be a victim of an attack," said Mr Mundhenk.

GIA's executive director, Mr Derek Teo, also advised drivers to avoid leaving vehicles unattended in deserted or poorly lit areas.

"(Drivers) should not leave vehicle keys with strangers, even parking valets. They should park their vehicles in a position that leaves tow trucks no leeway to tow their vehicles away," said Mr Teo.

Meanwhile, Mr Khoo told The Straits Times that while the shock of losing his car is fading, he still had no news of its whereabouts.

"I haven't heard anything from the Johor police, but I have advised my friends to be alert when going to JB for shopping," he said.

dansonc@sph.com.sg

Claims may take up to half a year

It can take three to six months to get reimbursed following the theft of one's vehicle.

The General Insurance Association said the length of time depended on several factors, its executive director Derek Teo told The Straits Times.

These included the circumstances in which the loss occurred, police reports and whether there is a police investigation, and the scale of investigation undertaken by the insurer.

Mr Teo said: "Compensation is in the form of cash reimbursement on market value at the time of loss."