

Vodafone customers cut off after break-in cripples mobile service

Criminals knocked out a large part of the Vodafone mobile phone network yesterday after stealing vital equipment.

Millions of calls were blocked after the gang, wielding sledgehammers, smashed their way into a building that is effectively a telephone exchange for the firm's mobile network in the south of England.

They broke into the building on an industrial estate in Basingstoke, Hampshire, around 1am yesterday.

Vodafone's system was immediately silenced across a large section of southern England either side of the M4 corridor, from Oxford in the north to Salisbury in the south.

But customers in Cornwall, Devon, Somerset and Yorkshire also reported problems.

Initial reports on the internet claimed that between three and seven million customers lost services. But Vodafone, which has 19million customers in Britain, said it was no more than several hundred thousand.



The system failure on calls lasted for 11 hours until around noon while problems with voicemail and web access continued until later.

The stolen computers are thought to be the size of a small wardrobe. They cover two aspects of the link between handsets and the network.

Sources close to the police investigation said the computers are so specialised that they would have little resale value on the high street.

They ruled out suspicions that thieves looking for copper were responsible.

Rather, they suggested the equipment was likely to have been stolen to order to be exported to Eastern Europe or, perhaps, the Third World.

Another possibility is that the gang wrongly believed the computers held personal account details and phone numbers, which could be useful for ID fraud.

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A source said: 'They have taken very specialist telecoms equipment. The people involved seemed to know what they wanted. It is not the sort of stuff that would turn up on eBay.'

Analysts said the incident highlights the vulnerability of Britain's communications system to criminals, including cyber terrorists.

Patrick Donegan, of research firm Heavy Reading, said: 'Vodafone UK is one of the world's leading operators. If this can happen to them, you have to figure it can happen to anyone.'

The internet and Twitter were filled with complaints from angry customers about a lack of information from Vodafone. They also said it showed how reliant the nation has become on mobile phones.

Vodafone said there had been 'no impact on the privacy of customers' data', but promised to review its security.