

A click away from a mugging

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The Australian

SEPTEMBER 20, 2004

THE computer has replaced the gun as the ideal weapon as criminals turn increasingly to the internet as a tool for separating Joe Public from his money, crime-fighters warned at an international conference here. Cyber-attacks on the unwary "are becoming more and more frequent and more and more serious," Andy Letherby of Britain's National Hi-Tech Crime Unit told a gathering of 200 experts at a Council of Europe conference on "The Challenge of Cybercrime" that ended in Strasbourg on Friday.

The border-free virtual world with its easy anonymity, instantaneous communications, relative lack of material evidence and hundreds of millions of potential victims has become favoured terrain for organised crime, experts warned.

As an example Letherby cited a protection racket organised against Russian bookmakers following a recent cyber-attack.

Subsequently, "the blackmailers sent demands by email via chat-rooms for \$US10,000 (\$14,360) a month as a 'protection' fee," he said.

"Not just the police but also the public needs to be educated on cybercrime," Letherby commented.

One of the most common scams at the moment is to send individuals with online bank accounts an official-seeming request for confidential details, which in fact enables crooks to siphon money off the account.

Cyber-threats range from spam to paedophilia and include viruses, computer hacking, theft of bank and credit card details, deactivation of sales services, identity theft, fraud, money laundering, computer blackmail and incitement to racial hatred.

A statistically tiny proportion of responses to the thousands of solicitations that they send out may be enough to reap a handsome reward for cyber-criminals.

The most outlandish requests, as in the well-known cases of the seemingly thousands of African "businessmen" who ask for help in transferring funds to Europe, can find a willing victim, specialists noted.

"It is much easier and less risky for a crook to steal money via internet than to carry out a hold-up," Letherby said.

"The nature of crime is changing, and our investigations must also change" to meet the ever more ingenious scams being dreamed up by crime rings, said Bernhard Otupal, head of Interpol's financial and hi-tech crime division at Lyon, France.

As with other forms of crime, "police investigators have to be on the look-out for mistakes" by the criminal and track him down via his connections in various countries, he said.

Cybercrime "is an international threat that calls for an international response," Christopher Painter, deputy chief of the computer crime and intellectual property section of the US Department of Justice, said, calling for international cooperation.

The Council of Europe's Convention on Cybercrime which came into force on July 1 requires signatory countries to pass appropriate legislation and work closely with other members.

So far 30 countries have signed the convention which aims to align international law on cybercrime, but only eight have actually implemented it in national law.

There were an estimated 600 million internet users in 2002, twice the number there were in 1999, according to a Council of Europe report.

Internet crime has been estimated at causing between 150 billion euros and 200 billion euros (\$262.3 billion - \$349.8 billion) in damage in 2003.

Agence France-Presse

This report appears on australianIT.com.au.