

Prosecutors Scrutinize Security on Smartphones

New York and San Francisco prosecutors test new security features from Apple and Samsung smartphones.

By **Victor Li** [All Articles](#)

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Image provided by Samsung



iPhone 5
Image: Apple Inc.

Smartphones are more than just mobile internet and telecommunications devices that also function as media players and gaming devices. They're also targets for robbers and muggers. The Federal Communications Commission, for example, **reports** that 30 to 40 percent of all robberies nationwide involve the taking of a cellphone or smartphone.

Two prosecutors, New York State Attorney General Eric Schneiderman and San Francisco District Attorney George Gascón have decided to tackle the issue head-on, announcing the "**Save Our Smartphones**" (S.O.S.) Initiative last month with the goal of reducing smartphone-related robberies. On Thursday, they gathered a group of state and federal security experts in San Francisco to **test** the latest security features from two of the largest smartphone manufacturers, Apple Inc. and Samsung.

"The epidemic of violent street crime involving the theft and resale of mobile devices is a real and growing threat in communities all across America," said Schneiderman in the June press release announcing the initiative. "According to reports, roughly 113 smartphones are stolen or lost each minute in the U.S., with too many of those thefts turning violent." Schneiderman and Gascón, who serve as co-chairs of the Initiative, also cited a **study from Lookout Inc.** projecting

that lost and stolen cell phones cost consumers over \$30 billion in 2012. Other members of the initiative include various city and state prosecutors, elected officials, law enforcement personnel, and members of academia.

One of the Initiative's main proposals involves a proposed "kill switch" security feature that would render a stolen smartphone inoperable. According to June press release, Schneiderman and Gascón met with Apple, Samsung, Google, and Microsoft last month, encouraging the companies to add a feature so thieves could not reactivate stolen smartphones — thereby removing an economic incentive for thieves seeking to steal smartphones to resell them on the black market.

During the Thursday demonstration, Apple demonstrated its Activation Lock, an anti-theft feature for its latest iOS 7 operating system that was **unveiled**. The Activation Lock would be an additional feature added on to the existing "Find My Phone" application available on iPhones. If an iPhone is stolen, a thief must have a user's original Apple ID and password in order to disable the "Find My Phone" tracking utility, wipe the memory, or reactivate it.



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Samsung, meanwhile, has offered a pay service for its Galaxy smartphones. In May, Samsung **announced** a partnership with Absolute Software, the makers of LoJack for Laptops. The LoJack security app will be built into the Galaxy S4, but users must pay \$29.99 a year to use it. The app allows the company's team of professionals track and recover a stolen phone, and also offers remote locking and deleting so users can protect their smartphone data.

According to the press release, Schneiderman and Gascón invited experts to test the security features to see if they would hold up following a theft. Spokespersons for both the New York State Attorney General and the San Francisco District Attorney declined to comment on the results of the demonstration. "We will reserve judgment on the specific capabilities until they're available to the general public," says Stephanie Ong Stillman, a spokesperson for Gascón. "The clearest indication will be whether or not they have an impact on theft every day in our neighborhoods." Stillman also thanked Apple and Samsung for their cooperation, noting Google and Microsoft had yet to follow suit.

Apple did not respond to a request for comment. Samsung, meanwhile, issued a **statement** expressing gratitude to Gascón. "We plan to take what we learn from the tests to explore opportunities for further enhancements to our solution," said Lily Kim, a spokesperson for Samsung in an email.

If all else fails, users can wait until October when the FCC anticipates that a global database will be in place so smartphone providers, including the four largest companies, AT&T, Sprint, T-Mobile, and Verizon, can block a stolen device from being used again.

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