

Revealed: car industry was warned keyless vehicles vulnerable to theft a decade ago

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The car industry ignored warnings more than a decade ago that keyless technology on modern vehicles risked a surge in vehicle thefts, an investigation by the Observer can reveal. Legal and computer researchers claimed keyless entry and vehicle software would be “subverted” because of inadequate security. The industry was warned of research that car owners could “expect to find their cars stolen in the future without any sign of entry.” An increase in vehicle crime with keyless entry has contributed to record prices for car insurance, with some drivers now facing quotes of £2,000 a year or more to insure their car. Car theft in England and Wales in the year to March 2023 was at its highest level for more than a decade. The Observer has found:

- A device disguised as a games console - known as an “emulator” - is being exploited by thieves to steal vehicles within 20 seconds by mimicking the electronic key. It is being targeted at Hyundai and Kia models.
- “Smart” equipment is on sale online for up to £5,000, allowing thieves to hack into a vehicle’s computer system and programme a new key.
- Police facing a spate of keyless car thefts in many neighbourhoods are closing some cases in less than 24 hours even when CCTV footage is available. The motoring lawyer Nick Freeman said: “The motoring industry has been negligent because they were warned when this new technology was beginning to emerge. It’s a catastrophic situation where people cannot insure their cars or face ridiculously high premiums.”

Jaguar Land Rover announced a £10m investment last November to upgrade security for commonly stolen models for cars built between 2018 and 2022. The Observer investigation reveals other vehicles with similar security loopholes, with Hyundai confirming this weekend it is working “as a priority” to prevent an attack on its cars by criminals “using devices to illegally override smart key locking systems”. A report by researchers in 2011 by researchers at the University of California and the University of Washington warned it was possible to implement an attack on the software of modern cars, directing “the car’s compromised telematics unit to unlock the doors [and] start the engine.” An article by Stephen Mason, a barrister specialising in electronic evidence and communication interception, in *Computer Law and Security Review* in April 2012 warned keyless systems could be “successfully undermined” and unless manufacturers improve the design cars would be stolen without forced entry. Mason said: “There has been insouciance and ignorance by the motoring industry, not wanting to pay the price for proper security. We now have modern cars with the latest technology and the owners have to put on old-fashioned steering locks to protect them from being stolen.” The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT) denies the industry has failed on security, but it says it has been in an “arms race” with criminals. Mike Hawes, SMMT Chief Executive, said: “Car makers continuously introduce new technology to stay one step ahead of criminals. This investment has helped drive down vehicle theft dramatically over the past 30 years.

“While manufacturers continue to enhance security systems, technological innovation alone cannot prevent all theft. That’s why the sector is working closely with the police, insurance industry and other security stakeholders.” The Home Office says overall vehicle crime, which includes theft from a vehicle, is going down. A spokesperson said: “We expect police to take vehicle crime seriously which is why we welcomed the commitment made by police in August last year to follow up on all reasonable lines of enquiry. “We have made great progress in tackling vehicle crime, which is down 39% since 2010. New measures in the Criminal Justice Bill will ban electronic devices used in vehicle theft.”