HONOLULU-- It was high-tech robbery -- the theft and sale of

long-distance telephone service.

Seventeen people in 13 states were arrested Monday. The charge:

conspiracy to commit access device fraud and wire fraud.

The victims: U.S. Sprint, MCI Corp., Allnet Corp.,ITT, Tri-Tel

Communications.

Their loss: a reported $125 million in the past year.

Steve Ramsay of the Secret Service said those charged sold access codes

for $80 to $150 a month.

An access code -- a telephone credit card number-- allows callers to

use long-distance phone lines. Calls were billed to that card number.

The distributors often sold one code to hundreds, maybe thousands of

people, Ramsey said. Charged to one number in four days: $73,592.

According to Assistant U.S. Attorney Robert Godbey: Computers were

programmed to call the companies' long distance networks, then enter a

creditcard number to pay for the call.

If the number was rejected, the computer kept dialing until one was

accepted. The successful number then was sold.

Whoever was assinged the number, got the bill.

"It was the miracle of technology, the computer took a simple chore and

did it over and over and over," he said.

The Secret Service caught them by setting up their own distributorship

of illegal numbers -- a "sting operation" -- and "making controlled

diliveries," Ramsey said.