



2015 Herman Goldstein Awards

Be S.M.A.R.T. Cellphone Larceny Reduction

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department



Summary:

Scanning	For many years, the Central Patrol Division in the City of Charlotte has struggled with a growing number of theft reports in the uptown residential, business and entertainment districts. In 2005, larcenies accounted for 45% of Central Division's total crimes and in 2015 that number had increased to 67%. The Central Division Commander formed a team to analyze the crime problem and develop a solution.
Analysis	The analysis revealed that cellular phones topped the list of stolen property for 2014 with 399 devices reported as stolen. Hotspots for larcenies were identified within the Central Division, with the focus being the City's uptown Epicentre entertainment district. Bars, nightclubs and restaurants accounted for 44% of the larceny cases.
Response	The team developed a multi-pronged approach that included the Be SMART education campaign and a dual purpose bait phone operation that apprehended offenders and rewarded good Samaritans. These strategies were paired with a vibrant social media campaign. Team members also formed partnerships with local businesses to conduct training for their employees and help recover phones through improved lost and found policies.
Assessment	The Central Division has achieved a 10% reduction in cell phone thefts through the first five months of 2015 when compared to the same period last year. This is in spite of the growth in the uptown area and the increasing percentage of people who own smart phones.

General:

In the last decade, cellphones have become an essential part of people's lives. What was once just a method for emergency calls when away from home is now the primary communication device for millions upon millions of citizens around the country. With the advent of the smartphone, cellular phones have transformed into mobile operating systems that include functions for calls, messaging, internet access, personal and financial information storage, photographs, GPS mapping, and entertainment. The growing reliance on smartphones is never more apparent than when they are lost or stolen. The replacement value of the device is only a fraction of the true loss suffered by the victim. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department (CMPD) has recognized the significance of this crime, and has developed programs to help reduce incidences of theft.

Scanning:

The City of Charlotte, North Carolina, like many other communities, suffers from an ever increasing number of larcenies each year. In Charlotte, this problem is magnified within the CMPD's Central Patrol Division, which is located in the City's uptown residential, business, and entertainment district. Not only are larcenies prolific in the Central Division, but each year they account for a larger and larger percentage of overall crime. In 2005, larcenies accounted for 45% of the Division's total crime and in 2015 that number had increased to 67%. The 2014 year ended with reported larcenies showing an increase of 6% when compared to 2013. The sheer volume of theft cases as well as growing percentage of overall crime is what drew the

attention of the Central Division Command, and provided impetus to find a solution that would help reduce these numbers.

YEAR	Larceny	Part I	%
2005	688	1538	45%
2006	874	1879	47%
2007	879	1730	51%
2008	865	1604	54%
2009	762	1310	58%
2010	702	1202	58%
2011	708	1176	60%
2012	845	1286	66%
2013	905	1356	67%
2014	964	1448	67%

Larcenies include car break-ins, shoplifting cases, thefts from buildings, and “other” thefts. Even though they are serious crimes, these larcenies often do not get the same resources and attention as violent crimes or other more involved property crimes such as burglaries or auto thefts. Officers and supervisors have expressed frustration at dealing with these crimes and have resigned themselves in the past to the perception that “we can’t do anything about it”.

Once they were challenged to take a harder look at the crime problem and to apply the SARA model for problem solving, officers quickly began to recognize some potential leverage points on this issue.

Analysis:

The variances within reported larcenies make looking at related crime trends difficult. The large number of reports, the variety of targeted items, and the disparity in theft locations can make it difficult for officers to identify trends or vulnerabilities that can be addressed through a problem solving project. Officers from the CMPD’s Central Division created a team to analyze larceny trends and identify manageable facets to approach with possible solutions. Team members first looked at high level data to find clusters of incidents and targeted items,

and then drilled down into the information to draw up appropriate responses to deal with each area of concern.

Anecdotally, supervisors had identified cellphones as a leading target for thieves based on their review of cases during the report approval process. Using this information, CMPD Crime Analysts examined larceny related data and found that the data supported this theory.

Top Stolen Property (2014)	Count
Telephone Equipment	399
Credit/Debit Cards	265
Money/Cash	224
Purses/Handbags/Wallets	191
Computer Hardware/Software	117
Jewelry	74
Bicycles	73
Clothes/Fur	53
Consumable Goods/Foodstuffs/Alcoholic Beverage	51

Cellular phones topped the list of stolen property for 2014 with 399 items. Wallets/purses were a distant second with 265 listed on police reports. It is worth noting that this data is based on item listings in police reports, and does not represent individual reports. For

example, if a purse was stolen the property listing would include all items of value inside the purse (phone, wallet, money, credit cards, or car keys, for example). Armed with this information, team members could now focus their attention on cellular phone theft with the belief that if the number of cellphone thefts could be reduced, overall thefts could be reduced within the CMPD's Central Division.

Analysis then focused on determining the concentrations in locations for the thefts. This included categorizing by physical location and property type. Crime Analysts compiled the reports and created a list of larceny locations by location type. Hotspots of larceny activity

were identified, as seen in Figure 1: 2014 Top Larceny Hotspots for Central Division. The information from the Crime Analysts' report revealed that 42% of the phone larceny cases happened in bars, nightclubs, or restaurants. The Central Division has a vibrant nightlife, and is home to more than 180 licensed alcohol establishments, including bars, nightclubs, restaurants, event halls, and hotels that serve alcohol.

Top Locations for Cellphone larcenies (2014)	Count	Percent
Bar/Tavern/Nightclub	124	31%
Restaurant/Diner/Coffee Shop	42	11%
Hotel/Motel	29	7%
Other - Commercial Place	26	7%
Street/Highway	22	6%
Air/Bus/Train Terminal	20	5%
Stadium/Arena	20	5%
Other - Public/Non-Residential	16	4%
School - College or University	12	3%
Apartment/Duplex Private Res	10	3%
Other - Open Area	10	3%

In order to learn more about the crimes at hand, team members read the larceny reports taken at the top 50 theft locations. The locations were grouped by location type and included the following categories:

- Bars, Nightclubs, and Restaurants (190 reports)
- Hotels (80 reports)
- Transportation hubs (61 reports)
- Sports and Civic Arenas (54 reports)
- Residential (57 reports)

The reports were reviewed to gather details about the circumstances in which the items were stolen. Team members discovered a number of trends in the case by case evaluation. Leaving items unattended, for any amount of time, was the greatest contributing factor to these crimes. Some victims reported that the items were taken directly off of their person or from inside bags located near the victim. Beyond that, there were cases where subjects simply could not recall or did not know how or where they lost their items.

Next, the team mapped the high incident locations by address and found a significant cluster of repeat locations near the corner of East Trade Street and College Street. The anchor of the cluster is an entertainment destination called The Epicentre [see Figure 2: City of Charlotte's Epicenter]. The Epicentre is a three story, open air structure that houses more than 35 businesses, most of which are restaurants, bars or night clubs. The Epicentre alone accounted for 13% of the larceny cases in the Central Division in 2014. This location leads Central Division for larceny reports, but many other businesses in the immediate vicinity also experience excessive thefts.

Further analysis included speaking with victims to gather additional details about the specific circumstances around their reported larcenies, and documenting those details for consideration in developing the response. Team members also spoke with local business partners, including bars and restaurants as well as hotels which had bars or hosted nighttime entertainment events. These discussions focused on learning business practices of the establishments, record observations of the crime problem from the perspective of staff and management, and to evaluate locations of repeated victimization to narrow target opportunities. Prior to the launch of this project, officers had opportunity to interview

arrestees of cell phone thefts to determine their motivations and tactics for committing cellphone larcenies. It was determined that the Charlotte Transit Center, which is the hub for public transportation in the City of Charlotte, was a thriving stolen phone marketplace as well. The Transit Center, which sits within the identified hotspot and adjacent to The Epicentre, has an active unit of private police officers and a camera system of exceptional quality. In some cases, it was found that the suspects sold the phones or traded them for marijuana within minutes after stealing the devices. The proximity to The Epicentre and other hot spot locations, combined with the black market for phones and the quick access to transportation away from the crime scene creates significant difficulties in responding to and investigating these crimes.

Through analysis, team members learned about the circumstantial contributions surrounding the problem of cellphone larcenies. The first contributors are the victims themselves. In these crimes, the victims provided an opportunity for the theft by leaving their property unattended, their bags unsecured, or in some other way failed to maintain control of their valuables. The presence of alcohol at more than half of the theft locations cannot be discounted. The more a person drinks, the less they are concerned about the security of their belongings. The second contributor is the suspects. During previous investigations Central Division officers have encountered a variety of categories that thieves align with. Some of them are merely opportunists who happen upon an unattended phone, and others specifically target mobile electronic devices. The final contributors to this problem are the businesses. Restaurants, bars and nightclubs tend to be dimly lit and are set up to afford privacy to groups of patrons. These areas of seclusion are problematic to staff or customers who may be trying to monitor their belongings. The businesses also tread lightly when it comes to providing

education materials to their customers about theft, because they do not want to give the impression that there is a theft problem at their establishment.

The impact of cellphone theft goes well beyond the reporting of Part I offenses to the FBI and the dollar value of the loss. Much of the information contained on mobile devices is sensitive in nature, and can result in identity theft, financial fraud and otherwise compromised privacy. If the victim does not have a data backup method, there can be photographs, videos and other irreplaceable memories stored on the device.

Response:

The overall objective of this project is to reduce cellphone theft, and therefore reduce the overall larceny problem in the Central Division. As a result of the in-depth analysis, the team developed a multi-pronged approach to deal with the various aspects of this crime. Most of the strategies overlap one another in addressing the educational, environmental and enforcement needs identified by the analysis. The response included the following strategies:

- Education campaign through posters and literature that targeted potential victims.
- Education and training for restaurant, bar and nightclub staff to watch for unattended phones.
- Bait phone deployment that apprehended thieves and rewarded good Samaritans. The message was reinforced through social media and traditional media.
- Evaluation and revision of lost and found policies for restaurants, bars, nightclubs and hotels. Partnering with these establishments to recover lost phones.

- Intense case follow up to investigate thefts, determine lost phones from stolen phones, and to cancel reports where phones had been found or returned.

The education campaign associated with the project used the acronym SMART and encouraged those that live, work, and play in the center city to “Be SMART” when it comes to preventing larcenies. One of the team members developed the text and assisted in finding a volunteer to create the imagery. The acronym provided tips to citizens that guarded against all types of larcenies, including car break-ins. Literature was developed around the SMART phrase and was distributed to patrons of uptown establishments, business managers, and citizens during the many events and gatherings that held in Charlotte’s uptown. Thousands of SMART fliers have been distributed by CMPD officers. The SMART infographic [see Figure 3: be SMART poster] was also sent out through the CMPD’s Central Division’s email network that includes residents, employers, parking lot contractors, building managers, security personnel and other interested parties. Finally, the infographic is sent out periodically through the @CMPD_uptown twitter account, and all related messages are tagged with #CMPDbesmart on the CMPD’s social media. A second poster entitled “Leave it and Lose it” [see Figure 4: Leave It and Lose It poster]

S – Secure your items. Never leave your cellphone, purse, or other valuable items unattended.

M – Minimize what can be taken. Take only those items you absolutely need (i.e. cash, credit cards, etc.)

A – Add apps that track, lock and/or erase your smartphone should it be stolen. Examples include Find My iPhone and AndroidLost.

R – Remove items from plain view. If you must leave valuables in the car, place them in the trunk and make sure the vehicle is locked.

T – Think. Larceny is a crime of opportunity. By making small adjustments, you can avoid being an easy target.

was posted inside restrooms at the bars and nightclubs to graphically reinforce the 'Be Smart' message.

The second educational campaign involved training the managers and staff at the establishments in the center city about the rising rate of cellphone larcenies [see Appendix II]. Employees were asked to look for unattended items and secure them or make notifications to patrons about the risks of leaving the purses, wallets or cellphones out in the open without a watchful eye over them. The CMPD team members received mixed responses to these training sessions. Many managers were hesitant about picking up stray devices for fear of being accused of theft, and others were concerned about creating the feeling that patrons were in an unsafe environment. During the process of meeting with the managers and staff members, the CMPD team identified another concern, lost and found policies within local businesses.

While analyzing the offense reports, officers determined that a number of phones were never stolen to begin with, but instead just lost. Complications arose around the fact that some phones that were reported as stolen were actually turned in as lost property to local businesses, and when they went unclaimed, were turned over to employees or the person that "found" them without effort to find the owner. This was compounded by uptown businesses having varied lost and found policies, with many not having policies at all. CMPD team members made policy recommendations with businesses, and formed a partnership wherein team members could retrieve phones that were turned in as lost and work towards reconnecting that phone with its owner. The CMPD was able to clear out several larceny reports using this method. In other cases, thankful citizens were reconnected with lost

property, even though no larceny report was made. While these efforts did not directly contribute to a reduction in crime, they were a great example of exemplary customer service.

A pair of team members was designated as primary investigative officers on all cellphone theft cases. This strategy allowed us to clearly see trends in the thefts, ensured that follow up investigations were timely and exhaustive, and provided a high level of consistency in adherence to UCR reporting guidelines. These two officers were able to reclassify non-theft cases accordingly, reconnect victims with lost phones that were turned into employees of uptown businesses, close out cases where the phone was later recovered or found by the victim and they failed to notify us, and aggressively seek prosecution in cases where we could identify a suspect.

Each of the above listed strategies is innovative in its own right, but the strategy that has really defined this program is the Bait Phone initiative. Through this initiative, the bait device served a dual purpose. By using a bait device from Assisted Patrol that was able to work unattended, allowed the CMPD to reduce the manpower needed to stand watch over the device. If a person picked up the bait cellphone and exited the business with it, officers nearby were notified and the subject was apprehended and charged with the theft. However, if a person picked up the phone and turned it over to business management or a staff member, then that person was identified and rewarded by the CMPD. Prior to deployment of this type of bait device, CMPD team members had secured a collection of gift cards from businesses, particularly those inside The Epicentre, to reward those who turned in phones. These 'good Samaritans' then get their photo taken with a gift card and phone to capture their moment of achievement [see Appendix III]. With permission of the citizen, the photos are tweeted through

@CMPD_uptown congratulating the individual on their good deed. The location of the operation and the company that donated the gift cards are tagged in the message, as well as the citizen if they have social media accounts. By tagging and identifying all of the involved parties, the messages are more likely to get retweeted, saved, and passed around through various social media platforms. The project has drawn a great deal of attention from people on twitter, and has been the subject of a number of traditional media stories [see Appendix IV].

Assessment:

The objective of the program was to reduce larcenies of cellphones in the Central Division, and therefore reduce overall larceny numbers in the same area. The assessment of

	CENTRAL		CITYWIDE	
(Jan. 1-May 20)	Cell Phone Larcenies	All Larcenies	Cell Phone Larcenies	All Larcenies
2014	177	579	1340	7712
2015	160	636	1324	8053
% Change	-9.6%	9.8%	-1.2%	4.4%

the project to date reveals both positive and negative trends. The numbers were

derived from a comparison of January through May in 2015 to the same period in 2014. The efforts of the cellphone larceny reduction project have produced a 10% reduction in cellphone thefts, but the overall numbers of larceny in the uptown area have increased an equal 10%. Overall, the City of Charlotte as a whole has had a 1% decrease in phone thefts, but total amount of larcenies has risen 4%. The increase of total larcenies within Central Division is higher than the rate of increase throughout the entire City, without the reductions in phone related larceny gained by this project, the Central Division would be facing a 13% increase in larcenies.

Education campaigns can be difficult to objectively assess without feedback from the community, however the CMPD has been able to receive citizen feedback through various social media platforms. At the beginning of the Bait Phone initiative, there were numerous news stories in print, on the internet and on television. When we combined these media stories with the tweets by news staffer's and the CMPD's own tweets from @CMPD_uptown and the @CMPD_newsroom, the CMPD team was able to create a presence on social media outlets. Some of the reactions were positive and came in the form of "great idea" and "awesome work" messages, and others were more cautionary "watch out" messages. A few accused the CMPD of entrapment and others were downright vulgar. Good or bad, the important thing was that people were engaged in dialog about the Bait Phone Initiative.

The Central Division conducted 11 bait phone operations in and around Charlotte's uptown area. The team was able to arrest 3 suspects for theft, and rewarded 9 'good Samaritans' in the process. A local news station rode with the plain clothed officers during a recent Bait Phone Initiative operation and was present to document one of the more unique captures. Officers placed a purse in the open with the bait phone visible inside. Shortly after leaving the purse unattended, a thoughtful citizen picked it up and turned it in to security guard standing nearby. Officers were alerted and started monitoring the device. The security guard concealed the phone and took the purse into a bathroom where he was confronted by officers, and eventually arrested for the theft. It was a unique situation that opened the eyes of the team and the management to further complicating issues with people doing the right thing.

There were a few other strategies that helped to reduce that number of cellphone larcenies as well. Officers following up on cases were assigned 128 cases and were able to

unfounded or close out 43 cases based on non-adherence to the UCR definition of a larceny, or recovery of the phones by the victim. It is worth noting that there was a great deal of supervisory scrutiny on cases that were unfounded on merit. The team members were directed to give a wide berth to the UCR guidelines, meaning if there was a reasonable possibility that the phone was, in fact, stolen then the case remained as a larceny. Supervisors regularly audited these reports to ensure they were categorized correctly. These same officers were also able to close 7 cases by arrest and recover 26 stolen devices. They also collected 18 items from partner businesses and returned 6 devices to their owners, even though they were not reported stolen. The remaining 12 devices were turned in as found property. The partnership with the hotels and bar/nightclub establishments on the lost and found process also strengthened relationships and opened up communication channels about other problems in the businesses.

As this program was publicly advertised as a CMPD project, there is no indication that cellphone thefts were displaced to other parts of the jurisdiction. In fact, considering the growing population and growing number of cellphones on the street, the Be Smart program may have had residual positive impacts on the rest of the City considering there was a 1% reduction in cellphone thefts citywide. The project team is looking forward to continued successes with the program since it has only been in place for five months. These initiatives will continue through the foreseeable future. Already the team is looking at new trends and how to further impact larceny in the uptown.

Next Steps:

The Central Division has offered to assist other patrol divisions with their cellphone theft problems by expanding operations to different parts of the city. One area of concern is in the area's public schools. Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools report an enormous number of phone thefts each month. The team has already secured approval from Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and School Law Enforcement to conduct bait operations in the schools. The goal of the program is to not have any arrests, but to secure a few 'good Samaritans' that are rewarded with NBA Charlotte Hornets tickets or NFL Carolina Panthers tickets. The hope would be to create discussion around the Bait Phone Initiative in the schools on social media outlets, and to create discourse over preventing the next larceny.

Furthermore, the CMPD team is looking at the next target item on the property list which is purses and wallets. Many of the initiatives employed on the cellphone thefts can be applied to the theft of purses and wallets, but the team won't be satisfied with simply repackaging current strategies. They have already started the analysis of this new set of offenses and are eager for phase 2 of Be SMART.

Team Members:

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Appendix I: Figures

Figure 1: 2014 Top Larceny Hotspots for Central Division

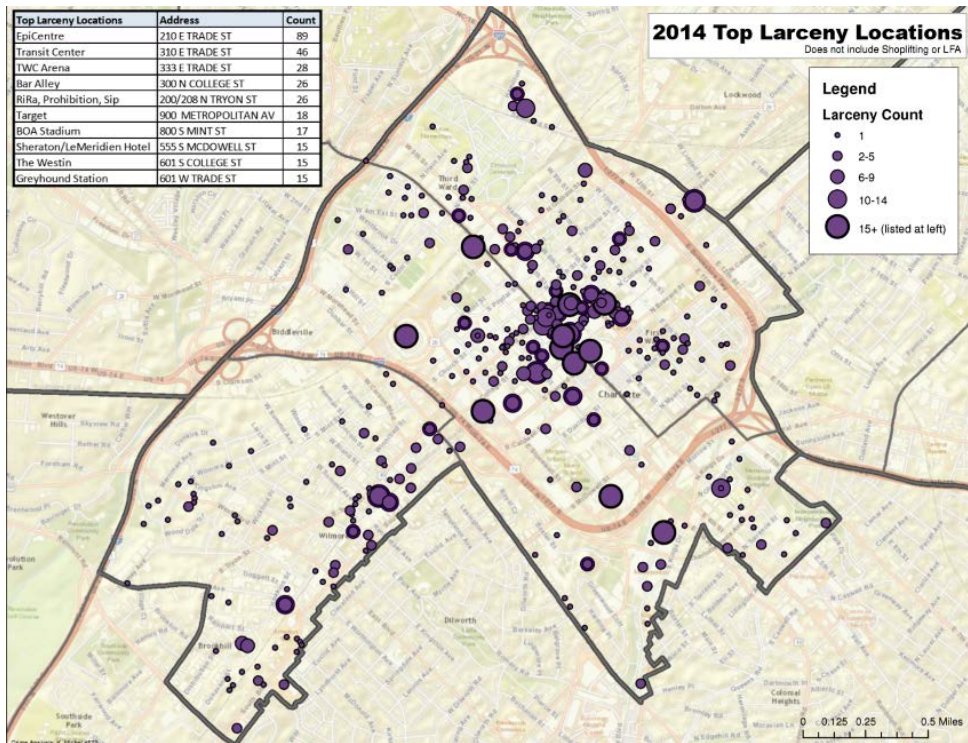


Figure 2: City of Charlotte's Epicenter



Figure 3: Be SMART poster



Figure 4: Leave It and Lose it poster



Appendix II: Partnership with local hotels.

To: Center City Hotel Security Managers

From: CMPD Central Division

Subject: Larceny/Lost and Found Policy for Items of Value

Recently there have been numerous incidents where identifiable items of value such as Phones, Tablets, Laptops, Wallets and Purses (with ID cards and credit Cards inside) have been found by hotel employees and were turned into management or a supervisor only to have the items placed in an area where they would sit idle for weeks, sometimes months at time without anyone notifying the Police or making an attempt to locate and notify the owner.

In an ongoing effort to proactively deal with these types of incidents, we would like to recommend that whenever a similar incident occurs, please document it, make some attempt to locate and notify the owner and if your attempt has not yielded a positive result within a (7) day period, please contact one of the following officers listed below via email and we will take possession of the items and provide you with a property receipt for items. We will make an attempt to identify and locate the owner and then log the property into our property management system as found property.

There may be times that we will be able to locate owners by matching serial numbers or other identifying features documented in police reports that were made by the owners of the items.

We ask that you please take a look at your current policy and procedures to identify how we can strengthen our current partnership and work closely together to reduce the number of larceny reports that are made as a result of items simply being lost and found by matching lost and found items with the owners.

Officer D. Crawford dcrawford@cmpd.org

Officer J. Chow jchow@cmpd.org

Officer V. Simpson vsimpson1@cmpd.org

Officer M. Rowland mrowland@cmpd.org

Thanks in advance

Officer V.K. Simpson

Appendix III:

 **CMPD_Uptown**
@CMPD_Uptown



Rhonda Eldarini returned bait phone on the light rail. Rewarded by @LibrettosCLT. @CATSRideTransit #CMPDbesmart

 **CMPD_Uptown**
@CMPD_Uptown



@shelbyabrams returned CMPD bait phone! @StrikeCityCLT gift card! #richandbennett #stpattysdamaritan

Char-Meck DA follows

 **Marvin Beach**
@MBeach14



CMPD developing "Bait phone" program to find thieves in Uptown bars & nightclubs @WCCBCharlotte

 **CMPD_Uptown**
@CMPD_Uptown



Eric Hincaple found CMPD Bait Phone and returned it. Rewarded with a gift card! Well done, sir! @EpiCentreNC

 **CMPD_Uptown**
@CMPD_Uptown



Bait Phone program isn't all sunshine and lollipops. Elijah Roland arrest for stealing it. #CMPDbesmart

 **Flake Griffin**
@Cpizzledakid



My Charlotte folk. CMPD is planting bait phones uptown. Turn it in get a reward, keep it and get arrested. Stay Woke out there!

 **B.G.**
@IRan_itUp



Cmpd planting bait phones now 🤔🤔 they tired of 🤝 stealing phones

 **Dwight James Clark**
@DwightClark12



Bait Phone project is a great idea!...@CMPD

Appendix IV: Local newspaper story

CMPD launches 'bait phone program' to tackle thefts uptown

By Adam Bell and Joe Marusak

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To combat cellphone thefts around uptown Charlotte, police have launched a "bait phone program" to trick the bad guys and reward good Samaritans.

The program targets the uptown entertainment district, Charlotte-Mecklenburg police Lt. Bret Balamucki said Tuesday, where cells and tablets make tempting targets for thieves looking for where people congregate.

CMPD officers have various cellphones and tablets they will leave unattended as bait. Then they will pounce if they see someone take the bait.

Not only do they hope to catch criminals but they also want to promote good behavior. People who turn in unattended cellphones or tablets to management, staff or police will get a gift card.

"The plan of the operation is to put these items in places that are consistently prowled by criminals, and then allow it to do the work for us that officers normally do," Balamucki said. "And we're trying to instill the idea for people to do the right thing."

The program went live last week. It already resulted in two arrests, he said. Also, two civilians noticed when officers walked away from their phones, and told them about the devices they had left behind.

Police plan to use social media to highlight when people return the bait phone and get those gift cards.

Last year, 399 cellphones were stolen in the Central Division, police said, along with 117 tablets and laptops. Police released statistics Tuesday showing that larcenies make up 67 percent of all crime in CMPD's [Central Division](#).

The phones can be sold on the streets for \$100 by people looking for quick cash, Balamucki said.

Each week, police said, unattended phones make up about a third of the thefts in the division.

About 42 percent of Central Division thefts occur in the many nightclubs, bars and restaurants in the center city, police said.

The Central Division comprises nearly 4.2 square miles of business, residential, recreational and academic areas. The division includes Bank of America Stadium, Time Warner Cable Arena, the EpiCentre entertainment complex and academic institutions, including Central Piedmont Community College and Johnson & Wales University.

The bait program can be used citywide, police said, and will be deployed at such major events as the upcoming St. Patrick's Day festivities.

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Read more here:

<http://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/article13178102.html#storylink=cpy>