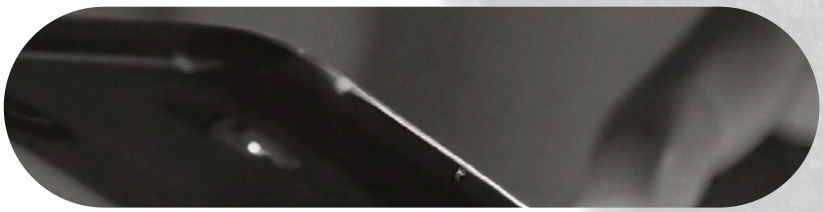
The Rising Threat of Smartphone Theft: Consumer Behaviour and Security Challenges

2025 Research Report

Nuke From Orbit | SAPIO RESEARCH

Table of Contents



Foreword

At the time of writing (May 2025), it is a little over two years since I had my phone stolen. It's that 'Eureka' moment, that set us on this path, leading to the creation of Nuke From Orbit.

While I knew we had a good idea at the time, and the first research we commissioned validated our business plan, what I couldn't have foreseen, was how much worse the situation would get.

More people are having their phone stolen. More people are experiencing some form of data or financial loss when this happens. And the number of obstacles they face when attempting to protect their data and assets is just too great.

In a chaotic world, one thing remains constant: criminals' prey on weakness. Not just the weakness of us as individuals, but on systems and structures that are poorly integrated and lack cross-platform synergies. Some providers are doing some good things, but everything is taking place in silos and there isn't enough cross-industry collaboration. The pace of change to combat increased threats is too slow, and it is an arms race that too many industries are losing.

Our mission is to help keep consumers safe if – and increasingly, when – their smartphones fall into the wrong hands. And it has never been more important for us to succeed. Demand for a solution like Nuke From Orbit is higher than ever and the good news for everyone (except criminals), is that we're on track to launching a viable solution into the marketplace this year.

While we work with partners, investors and other key stakeholders to provide the best product possible at launch, I present to you the findings of our latest research. Here, we assess the threats facing consumers, how smartphone usage is evolving, and what this means for the development of future solutions to the rising problem of smartphone thefts.

James O'Sullivan
CEO & Founder,
Nuke From Orbit

Introduction

Purpose of the research

A year on from launching the findings of Nuke From Orbit's inaugural research report into Evolving smartphone usage and the growing threat to consumers, this updated research was conducted to understand how both usage and the threat landscape has evolved.

In addition to a side-by-side comparison between up-to-date data and data from August 2023, the research was expanded to ask a greater range of questions. This provides us with a more holistic understanding of the challenges facing smartphone users and their expectations around a service that supports device blocking.

Methodology

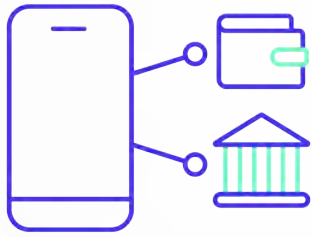
The survey was conducted among 1,000 consumers, 18+, who own a smartphone in the UK. Interviews were conducted online by Sapio Research in March 2025 using an email invitation and an online survey.

At an overall level, results are accurate to ± 3.1% at 95% confidence limits assuming a result of 50%.

Data from 2023 was obtained in August 2023 by KAM Insight with the same sampling parameters as data from 2025.

Key insights

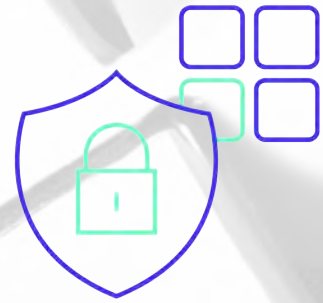
29% of UK consumers have expereinced phone theft in the past, compared to **17%** in 2023.



Consumers are most worried about unauthorised access to bank cards and bank accounts (both **67%**).

More consumers are using password managers today (**43%** vs **38%**) compared to 2023.

2 in 5 consumers say location tracking (**39%**) and biometric authentication features (**38%**) would make them feel most secure about their phone data.



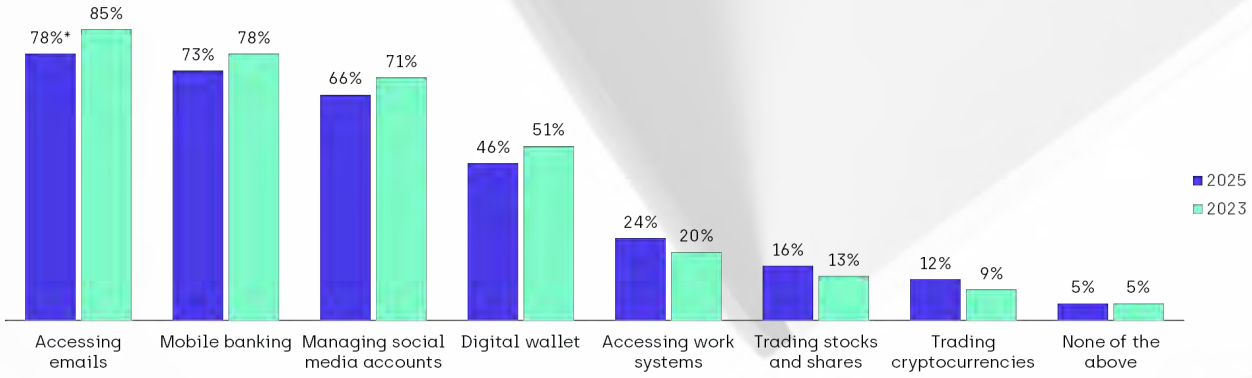
4 in 5 (**82%**) have at least some two-factor authentication methods set up to get into their phone or an app

Current usage patterns and security practices

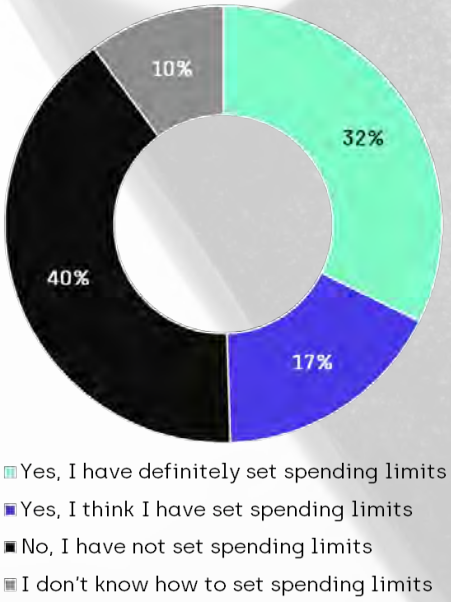
Increased functionality, decreased utilisation

Smartphones have become an indispensable part of daily life with them being used for a wide range of activities, including accessing emails (**78%**) and mobile banking (**73%**). But there is a clear indication that usage is changing, and in most cases, regressing.

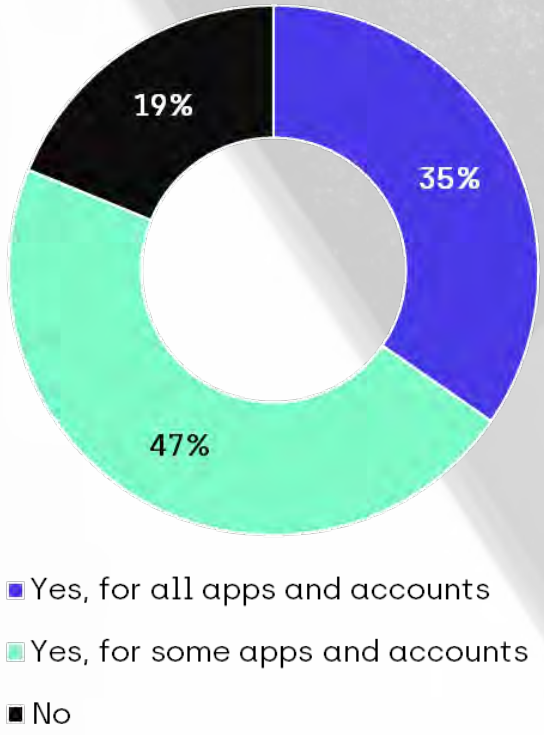
Which of the following do you use your smartphone for?



With the number of mobile phone thefts reported to the police in the UK almost doubling in the past five years, the findings of this research demonstrate that consumers are being more circumspect about what data and systems they allow access to on their smartphones. This is reflected in the average number of bank cards held in digital wallets, as the mean average has fallen from three in 2023, to two in 2025. Meanwhile, half (**50%**) have set spending limits for digital wallet payments, but one in 10 (**10%**) are unsure how to do so.



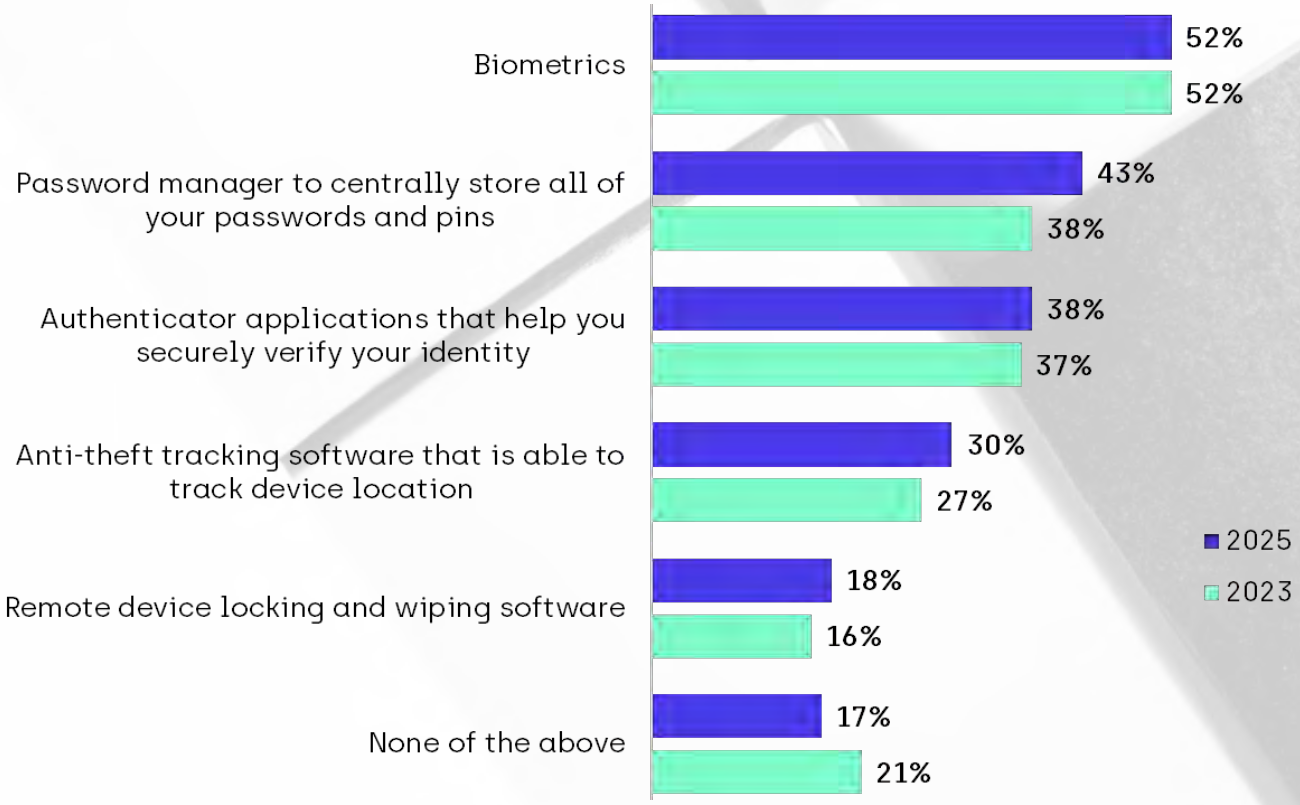
Do you use a two-factor authentication (2FA) method for your phone or apps?



Overall, there are more consumers who are using at least one safety feature (**83%** vs **79%** in 2023) suggesting a larger focus on phone safety. And, due to the sensitive nature of the many tasks phones are being used for, users are adopting security practices such as two-factor authentication (**82%**), biometrics (**52%**) and usage of a password manager (**43%**) to protect their data.

Although not every device offers a means of biometric verification, the vast majority do, so for only half of us to be using them is somewhat surprising and makes a lot of people more vulnerable to PIN theft.

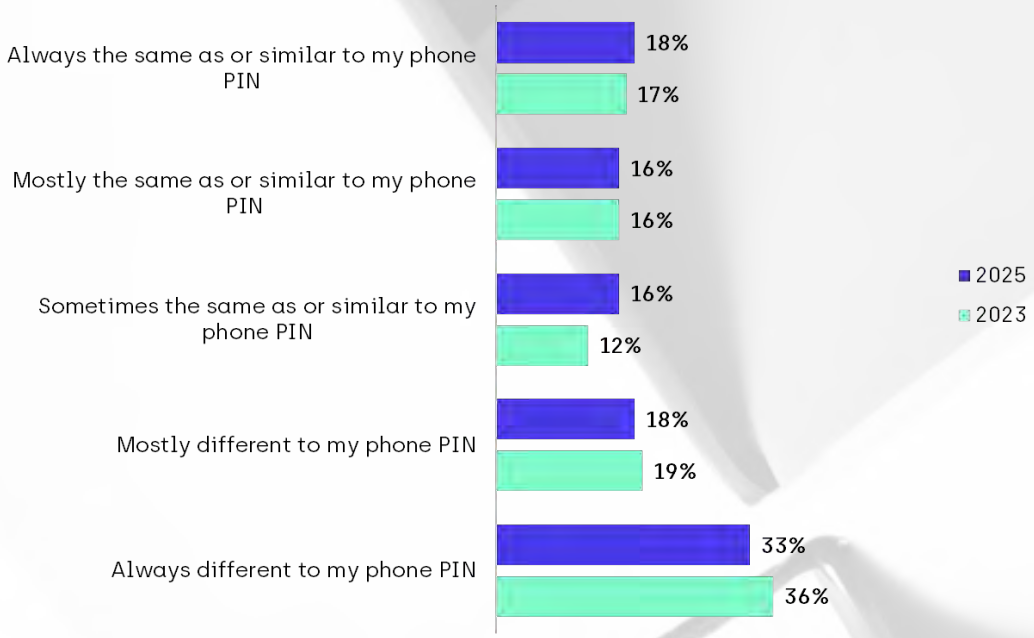
Do you have any of the following safety features active on your phone?



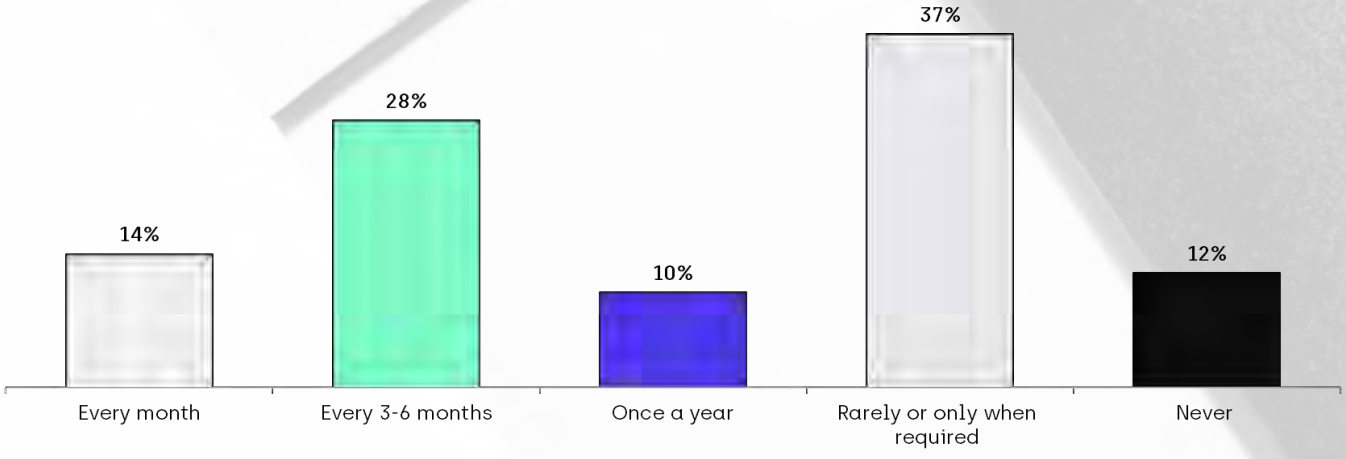
Problematic PIN hygiene persists

Although data suggests that consumers are taking smartphone safety more seriously, challenges remain with influencing user behaviour. Consistent with 2023, a third (**34%** vs **33%**) always or mostly have the same or similar PIN to apps as they do to their PIN to get into their smartphone. And nearly two in five (**37%**) rarely or only change their PIN when required by a service or app, and **12%** never change their PINs, suggesting that more education about phone safety is needed.

Thinking about Apps on your phone that use a PIN not a password. That PIN is:



How frequently do you change the PIN or password for your smartphone?

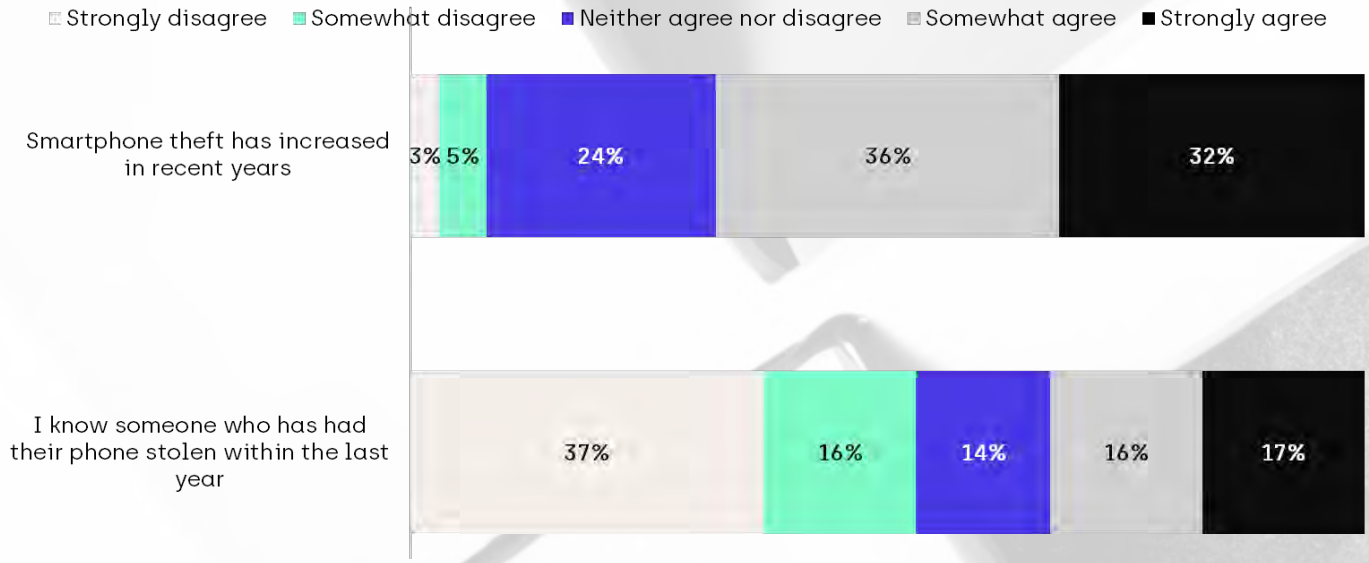


Risks and concerns related to smartphone security

Perceptions and reality

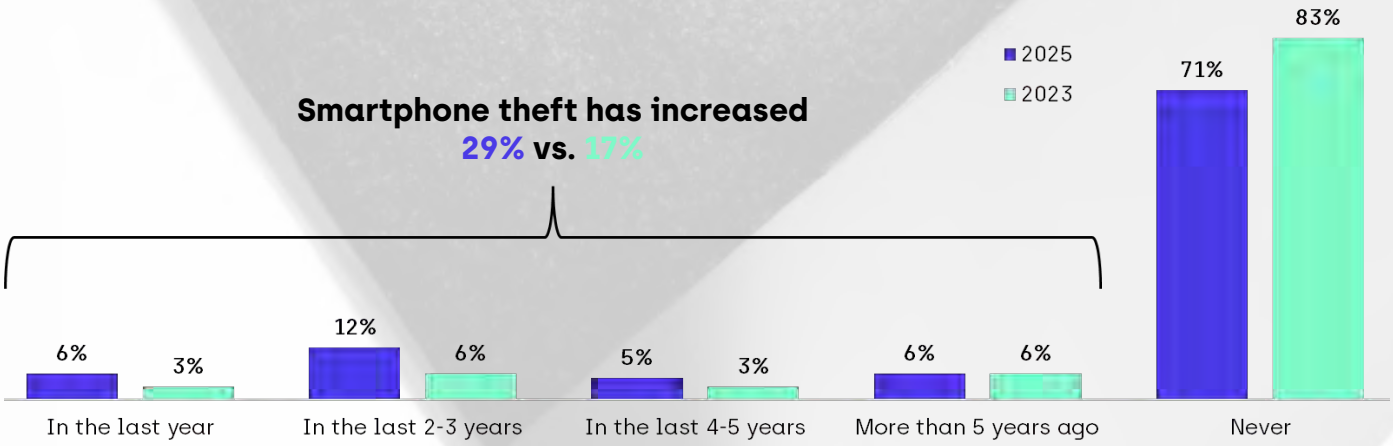
It has been well documented in the media that phone thefts are rising in the UK, but we wanted to understand the perceptions of consumers as it relates to this stark reality. Seven in 10 (**68%**) agree that smartphone theft has increased within recent years, with one in three (**33%**) knowing someone who has had their phone stolen in the last year.

How much do you agree with the following statements?



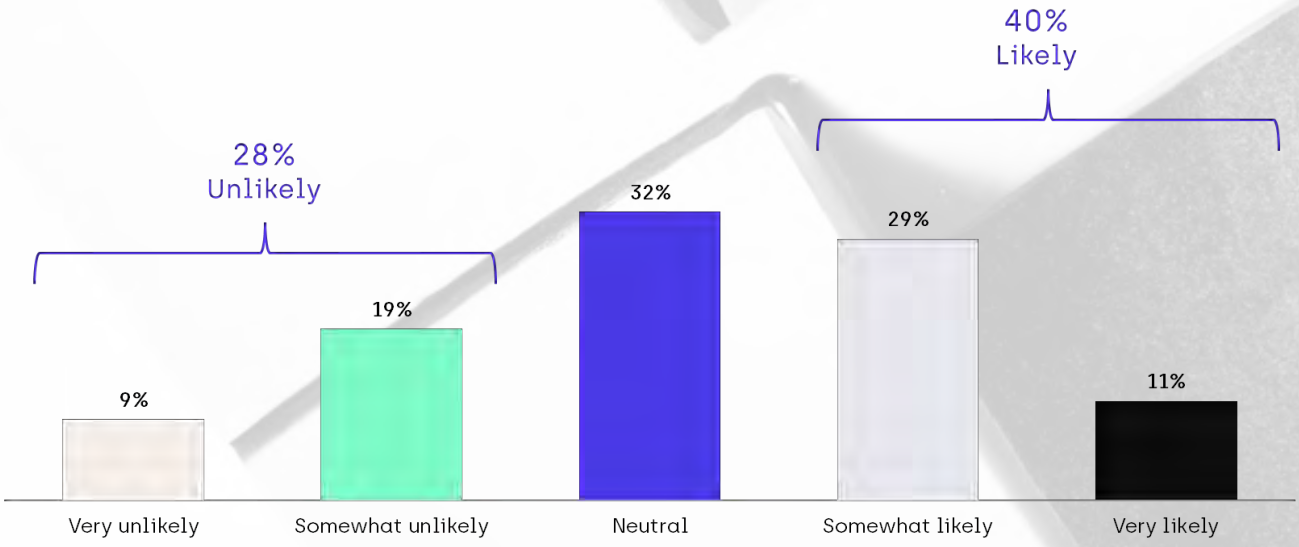
The third-party data we rely on to understand the rise in phone thefts is limited because it only factors in reported thefts. It is clear from this research that many more go unreported. Smartphone theft has increased by **12%** since 2023 (**29%** vs **17%**), with **6%** having it stolen in the last year. This is more prevalent amongst younger generations, with more than half (**52%**) of those aged 26-35 having their phone stolen at some point in time.

Have you had your smartphone stolen? If this has happened multiple times please reference the latest time this happened



Trust in technology's ability to keep us safe presents a mixed picture. Increased reliance on smartphones means security concerns are paramount, with over half (**57%**) agreeing that the growth of AI heightens the risk of unauthorised access to phones. Meanwhile, two-fifths (**40%**) believe that it is likely someone could bypass their phone's security features. The percentage drops to **31%** amongst those who have never had their phone stolen but skyrockets to **61%** for those who have.

How likely do you think it is that someone could bypass your phone's security features?

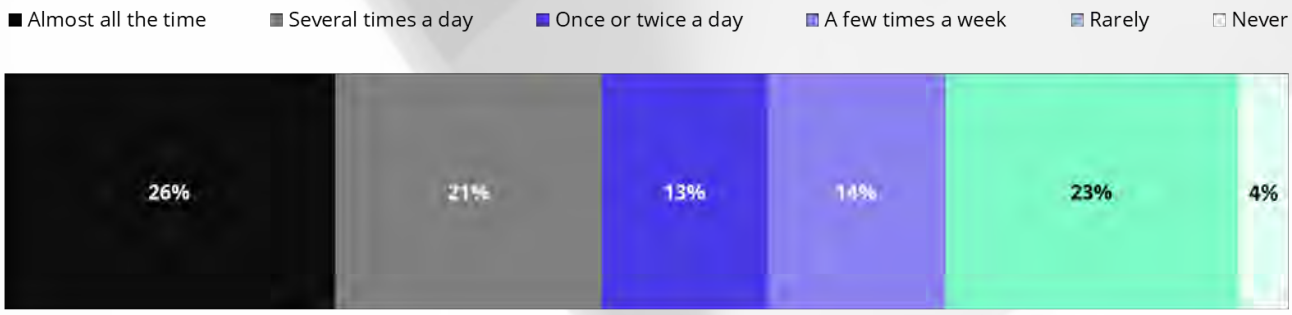


Habitual phone users

Let's look at some of the habits that are impacting these figures.

Nearly half (**47%**) have their phone out in public at least several times a day, with this increasing to **71%** amongst 18-25 year olds. And over a quarter (**26%**) of all respondents say they have their phone out almost all the time.

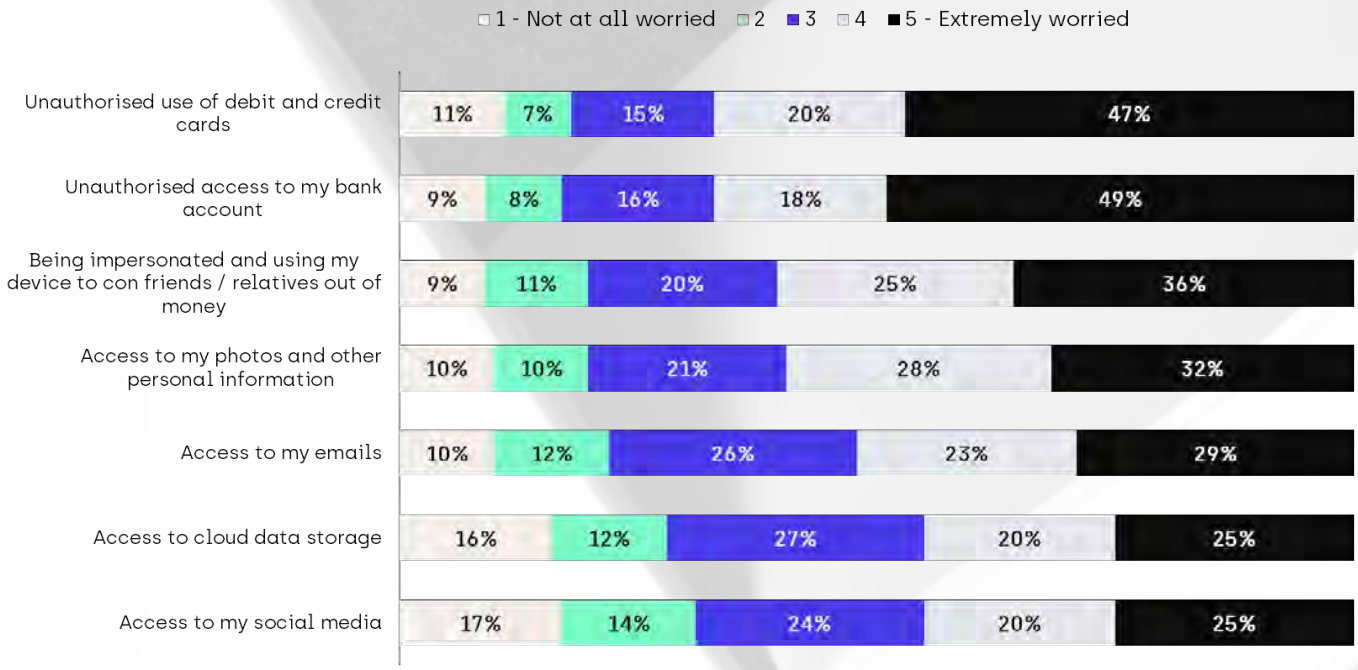
How often do you use or have your phone out in public places eg streets, public transport, cafes?



Despite this, half (**51%**) say they keep their phone in a more secure location and use their phone less frequently in public (**49%**). It's clearly a case of once bitten, twice shy, with those who have had their phone stolen in the last year now prioritising adding extra security features / apps (**45%**) compared to just **17%** of those who have never had their phone stolen. But it is also clear that our phones are often open and unlocked.

Once a smartphone is stolen, consumers are most worried about unauthorised access to bank cards and bank accounts and feel most vulnerable in public places while using navigation and in nightlife venues (both **31%**). Confidence is lowest for recovering personal data or photos (**40%**), whereas emails are seen as more secure (**28%**).

Which of the following, if any, are you worried about happening if your phone is stolen?

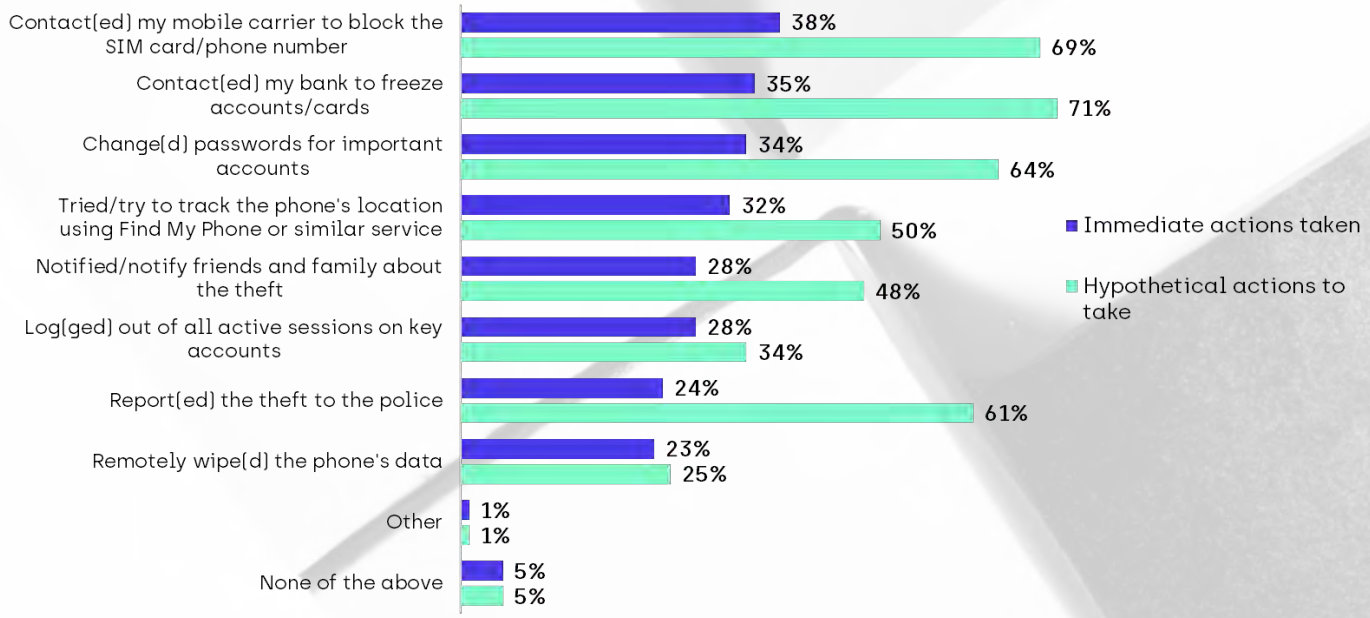


If your phone were stolen, how confident are you that you could recover or secure the following?

Consequences of smartphone theft for consumers

Protecting the SIM and bank accounts is a priority in case of phone theft in both actual (for those who have had their phone stolen) and hypothetical (for those who have not) scenarios. Interestingly, those who haven't had their phone stolen would be almost three times more likely to report the theft to the police than those who did.

What immediate action did you take after realising your phone was stolen?
Vs
What immediate actions would you take after realising your phone was stolen?

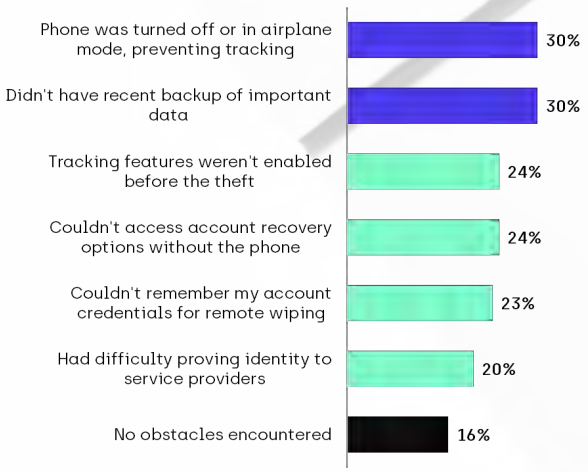


There are a couple of hypotheses we can infer from this stark contrast. One, is that when it comes to the crunch, contacting the police is a long way down the priority list as people look to lock down their digital identity. Two, is that experience tells consumers that contacting the police will have minimal effect on their ability to recover a device or its contents.

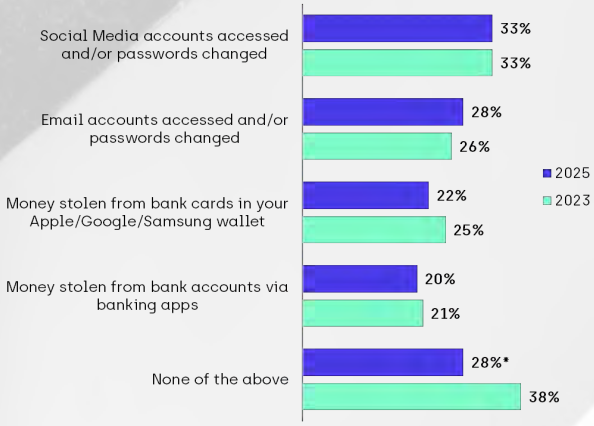
The incidence of features being compromised because of smartphone theft has increased in the last year (**72%** vs. **62%**). Therefore, certain measures to protect SIM identity and bank accounts are being prioritised by consumers both in reality and hypothetically.

Most victims of phone theft (**84%**) have experienced at least one obstacle in protecting their data following phone theft. For example, **30%** couldn't track their phone because it was turned off or in airplane mode, or they lacked proper backups (**30%**).

What obstacles did you face in trying to protect your data after your phone was stolen?



Were any of the following compromised when your smartphone was stolen?



The complexities around securing the contents of a device with data stored in multiple apps with myriad service providers highlights the challenges consumers face when attempting to secure their digital identity in the wake of a phone theft. They are reliant on multiple entities to keep them safe.

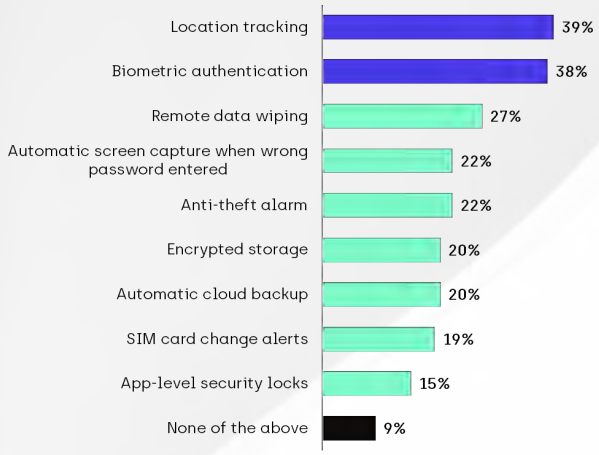
But without a unified solution to do so, and different service providers operating in separate security silos, there is a clear need for better integrated security. Providing a more straightforward and holistic solution to enable a faster and more comprehensive response must now be where industry focus shifts.

Solutions

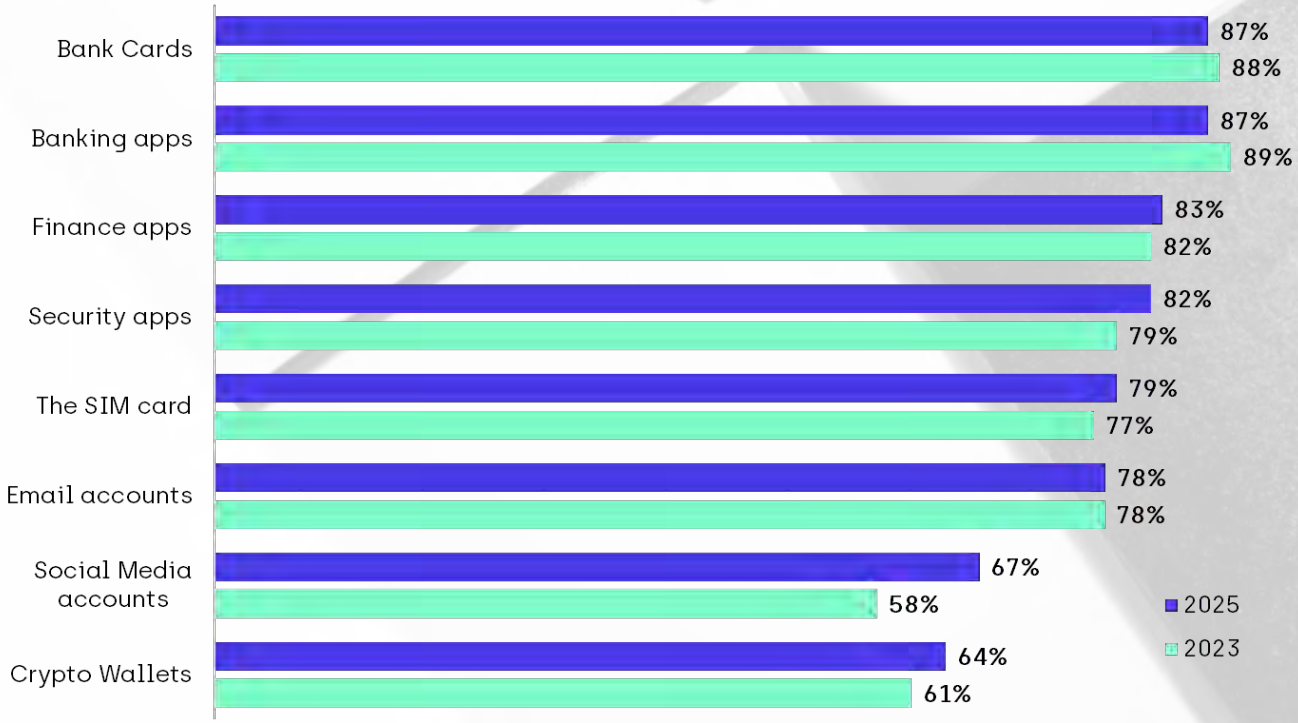
Over two in five (**44%**) think smartphone manufacturers are primarily responsible for smartphone security. However, only **64%** feel confident in their smartphone manufacturer's commitment to security.

Therefore, there is a demand for solutions that offer comprehensive protection, with location tracking (**39%**) and biometric authentication (**38%**) among the most desired features.

Which specific features would make you feel most secure about your phone data? Select up to three



How would you rate the importance of such a service, protecting the following?



Similarly, three quarters (**76%**) are interested in a service that allows them to instantly block access to their phone and accounts following theft with **63%** being willing to pay for this service. Social media (**67%** vs **58%**) has seen the most significant increase in importance regarding this question since 2023.

When enquiring specifically about the Nuke From Orbit brand, one in 10 (**12%**) are aware of the company, increasing to one in three (**32%**) for those who have experienced phone theft in the past. As a relatively small company that has only been in the public domain in any meaningful way since early 2024, these numbers surprised us. While Nuke From Orbit is encouraged that brand recognition is as high as it is, we will be testing the veracity of this data on an ongoing basis.

If your company provides any of the services consumers want Nuke From Orbit to protect, then get in touch with our partnerships team at partnerships@nuke.app today.

Conclusion

In the 18 months since Nuke From Orbit last carried out such research, it's clear that the problem of smartphone security has become significantly worse.. Many of the trends that the initial report established a baseline for have taken a downward turn, and new lines of questioning have expanded our depth of understanding of the problem. While smartphone manufacturers have announced several initiatives in the last year to help combat the problem, it would seem they have had limited – if any – effect.

There is also a disconnect between consumer fears and behaviours. They tell us that they are aware that phone theft is rising and that they are taking more precautions to keep themselves safe. However, the data also shows that PIN hygiene remains poor and that smartphones are used in public an alarming amount.

It is unfortunate, that lived experiences for those that have gone through the trauma of having their smartphone stolen, have a profound effect on our awareness of what can be done to mitigate the damage caused by phone theft.

It is perhaps the combination of rising phone thefts – both actual and perceived – combined with a lack of meaningful improvements in smartphone security measures, that has led to a downward trend in the utilisation of a smartphone's array of advanced capabilities. We've reached a tipping point, where fears over the damage that can be caused by smartphone theft, are beginning to trump the convenience that these devices were meant to bring to our lives.

It is, therefore, little surprise that demand for a holistic solution, such as Nuke From Orbit's platform, is keenly sought after. It is our hope that by educating consumers about the risks they face, in partnership with the media, industry bodies and likeminded businesses, that more will be better prepared to deal with the consequences or indeed reduce the risk of it happening in the first place.

Katie Vinogradova,
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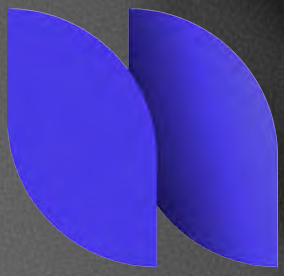
Sapio Research

Contact Details



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