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New York State to Ask Smartphone Makers to Help Prevent Thefts

By THOMAS KAPLAN

Concerned about an increase in smartphone thefts, the New York State attorney general, Eric T. Schneiderman, is trying to get the nation's largest cellphone makers to do more to discourage the thefts.

Mr. Schneiderman will announce on Monday that he has sent letters to top executives of Apple, Google, Microsoft and Samsung seeking information from their offices about security protections, and asking for their cooperation in working on new measures to reduce theft.

He said that he was asking the companies to meet with lawyers from his office to discuss the issue and that he was inviting company officials to work with his office to develop new antitheft measures in consultation with a mobile security company, Lookout, which is advising his office.

"This is a multibillion-dollar industry that produces some of the most popular and technologically advanced consumer electronic products in the world," Mr. Schneiderman said in a statement.

"Surely we can work together to find solutions that lead to a reduction in violent street crime targeting consumers."

The attorney general's action is the latest sign of increased attention to what some have described as a national epidemic of smartphone theft, often called "Apple picking."

Some law enforcement officials have complained that carriers and handset makers are not doing enough to combat thefts, since they can stand to profit from the sale of replacement phones.

The sale of cellphone handsets brought in \$69 billion in the United States last year, according to the market research firm IDC.

The problem has been particularly acute in New York City, where the police and Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg said that crime would have declined in 2012 had it not been for a surge of thefts of devices like iPhones and iPads.

The New York Police Department aggressively pursues cases involving the theft of Apple devices and works with Apple to track down the pilfered devices.

And nationally, the Federal Communications Commission and the wireless phone industry are forming a central database to track stolen phones and prevent them from being reused.

In the letters, sent on Friday, Mr. Schneiderman cited a number of violent confrontations in New York that centered on cellphones, including a fight over an iPhone on a Queens subway platform in February in which three people were stabbed, and the fatal shooting of a Bronx man in April 2012.

Mr. Schneiderman also referred to various marketing claims made by each company about the security features of their phones, and expressed doubts about whether the products are living up to those claims.

His office said he had jurisdiction to get involved in the matter because New York State law empowered him to enforce statutes barring deceptive trade practices.