

Published: Thursday, February 12, 2004

Increased laptop thefts concern police

Will Sullivan
Staff Reporter

Luis Castellano, a.k.a. Jose Rivera, 30, of New Haven, was arrested Jan. 22 by University police for stealing a laptop from a Yale dorm room. Upon questioning by detectives, Castellano led them to three more laptops he had stolen -- all from students' rooms.

Castellano's case is only special in that he was caught. Across campus, laptop theft is a rising problem, up 37 percent in 2003 from the previous year. For police, the thefts are frustrating because they are difficult to solve and easy to stop.

"Three quarters of laptop thefts here are preventable," University Police Lt. Michael Patten said. "And 90 percent of the thefts from residences were preventable."

In 2003, 67 laptops were stolen. Of these, 15 were taken from unsecured dorm rooms and 29 were taken from unsecured offices. Only one of the dorm rooms from which a laptop was taken in 2003 was locked, Patten said.

University Deputy Secretary Martha Highsmith attributed the rise largely to an increase in the prevalence of laptops themselves. Patten said the laptop's portability and small size -- the very things that make laptops attractive to students -- make the computers especially appealing to criminals.

Patten said despite the arrest of Castellano, only a handful of laptop thieves are apprehended, and few laptops are ever recovered.

Patten said the thieves police have caught are usually young men who dress like students, so they can move around dorms easily.

"They are opportunists," Patten said. "These people will walk around and look for a room that's open."

After the theft, the criminals usually simply sell the laptops on the street, Patten said. A \$2,000 computer is typically sold for as little as \$50.

Patten said the easiest way to prevent laptop theft is to lock all dorm rooms and offices. Students with laptops should also buy portable locks to lock the computers when they are in the library or in common areas, said Susan Burhans, a security education coordinator for the University Police.

Yale security officials also recommend students participate in the STOP program, a national registration program. Participants in the program have an ID plate which cannot be removed without applying thousands of pounds of force, Burhans said. Removing the plate reveals an indelible marking which reads, "Warning: Stolen Property." A bar code is also added to the laptop, so that the computer can be easily identified if recovered.

Burhans said the STOP program mainly acts as a deterrent. She said five students left their laptops unattended in the library a few years ago. When they returned, they found that the two computers without the STOP program were stolen.

Yale students can also get a discount on zTrace, a security program which is undetectable and unerasable, Burhans said. Every time a computer with zTrace is logged onto the Internet, it performs a "handshake" with the zTrace server which allows police to find its exact physical location if it is stolen, Highsmith said.

The zTrace program also allows users to lock, delete or download files from the stolen computer, preventing thieves from using sensitive files or recovering lost papers, Burhans said.