WiFi 'vampires' attack

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If a squatter moved in next door, and ran electrical extension cords from his living room to an outlet on your patio, you might object to his obvious pirating of your electricity -- because his actions would be obvious.

Many computer criminals around the country likewise may be stealing, but in this case the commodity is broadband WiFi access.Because the thefts occur over invisible wireless networks, however, most victims do not know about it, experts told UPI's Wireless World."Having your WiFi signal stolen is a real risk today," said Janet Kumpu, president and chief executive officer of Fortress Technologies in Tampa, Fla.,, a networking software developer."It's not just hackers who want to break into an e-mail account.They want to use your network for their own broadband connection."

A suspect was arrested recently in Florida allegedly for doing just that.Police arrested Benjamin Smith III, age 41, reportedly for accessing a computer network without authorization -- a third-degree felony.According to the police in St.Petersburg, Fla.,, the suspect was sitting in his SUV using a laptop computer outside the home of Richard Dinon.

This kind of thing, cyber-squatting, is more common than a casual observer may suspect, experts said."Years ago, before I had a clue how WiFi worked, and when I lived in a condo, my bandwidth was always dog slow," said Robert Siciliano, an ID theft expert and security consultant in Boston."Then my computer geek friend came over and

discovered that my neighbor was running a peer-to-peer program -- Kazaa -- next door off of my wireless connection."

Sometimes, the piracy may be unintentional."Recently, I rented a vacation condo that included WiFi access," said Ted Demopoulos, an IT consultant and professional speaker in Durham, N.H."There were two equally strong and wide open signals.Which one was I supposed to use?" WiFi networks are generally set up in one of three ways, experts said.Sometimes, they may be visible and open -- and require no password to access.They also may be visible and password protected, or may be hidden and password protected.What makes things even more complicated is although most open networks are public, more and more suburbanites and urbanites are installing WiFi access in their homes, and paying a subscription fee for it.Because most people are not very literate technically, they may not know how to set up encryption or other security features."The hackers go there," said Wayne Burkan, vice president of marketing at Interlink Networks in Ann Arbor, Mich.,, a WiFi security company."They know that the networks of companies are protected, but those of homeowners are not."

There are Internet sites for hackers such as wigle.net, which aggregate data for the computer criminals and let them know what networks in what neighborhoods may be vulnerable, Burkan said."My guess is that 50-70 percent of networks are not protected."

Burkan said that the risks of hacking into a WiFi network are greater for consumers than those posed by hacking into a landline network.That is because the passwords and user names are transmitted wirelessly for particular accounts and therefore can be grabbed.When someone acquires that information, "they can log into any Internet account as if they are you," Burkan said."These people are information vampires -- ready to suck the life out of you."

Some experts doubt whether criminal prosecution of any WiFi offenders will succeed, however.Attorney Evan Barr, formerly the chief of the major crimes unit at the U.S. Attorney's office for the Southern District of New York, and now a lawyer with Steptoe & Johnson, said the courts long have held it is not illegal to intercept calls placed by users of cordless and mobile phones."That's because people who use these devices do not have any reasonable expectation of privacy under the Fourth Amendment," Barr said."WiFi basically operates on the same principle as these devices, so it seems unlikely that a prosecution for stealing a WiFi signal could withstand judicial scrutiny."