

Japan police struggle against cybercrime

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Japan may still be one of the safest countries in the world when it comes to violent crime, but the number committed in cyberspace is on the rise, according to the National Police Agency.

The police reported Friday that the number of arrests made for cybercrime in 2005 rose by 51.9 percent from a year ago to a record 3,161 cases.

The police pointed out that the anonymity and convenience of the Internet have backfired as they have made it easier for con men to operate, and the number of fraudulent online sales and auctions nearly tripled from 2004 to 1,408 arrests. In addition, the police reported that computer hacking was on the rise, with 277 cases being cracked down in 2005.

In terms of the types of crimes committed in cyberspace, fraud was the most common, accounting for nearly 45 percent of all arrests, followed by prostitution and pornography of minors which made up 10.2 percent of the total. Meanwhile, illegal access of Web sites ranked in at third place with 8.8 percent of all arrests.

One example of a recent crime committed is abusing spyware software, whereby one man obtained information about the bank account of a company that paid its bills online, and ended up siphoning over \$10,000 from the corporation. Another involves a man who started selling fake designer brand bags by setting up shop at a legitimate online auction retailer illegally.

Some experts argue that actual arrests made by the police force represents only a tip of the iceberg, and the actual number of crimes committed in cyberspace could easily be at least threefold the number of arrests.

Certainly, if the number of calls to the police seeking advice on what to do regarding cybercrime is any gauge of the prevalence of cyber crime, then the number of cases is certainly much higher. The police reported that the number of calls it has fielded regarding crimes in cyberspace rose above 84,000 last year alone, marking an increase of nearly eightfold over the past five years since the police agency started tracking the number.

The most common problem that the police have had to answer was sales fraud, which made up nearly half of all complaints filed, followed by Internet auction fraud that accounted for 21 percent of calls the police fielded.

As a result, the Japanese police have stepped up efforts over the past year not only to educate the public on the perils of Internet shopping, receiving spams, and the dangers of phishing, but it has also set up an independent unit focused solely on dealing with cyber crime, and have recruited more specialists in information technology-related crimes.

At the same time, the police pointed out that the number of problems arising from online dating sites fell over the past 12 months, albeit only slightly in part due to the aggressive campaign efforts by the authorities to increase public awareness of the potential dangers of meeting someone in cyberspace. Earlier this month, the police reported that the number of reported problems arising as a result of online dating sites dipped by one case to 1,581 from 1,582 from 2004.

Child prostitution as a result of online dating sites totaled 654, down 12

percent from a year ago. However, child pornography increased by 130 percent to 53 cases, the police said.

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