

Prosecutors say man stole 130M credit card numbers

August 17 2009, By DEVLIN BARRETT , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Federal prosecutors on Monday charged a Miami man with the largest case of credit and debit card data theft ever in the United States, accusing the one-time government informant of swiping 130 million accounts on top of 40 million he stole previously.

Albert Gonzalez, 28, broke his own record for identity theft by hacking into retail networks, according to prosecutors, though they say his illicit [computer](#) exploits ended when he went to jail on charges stemming from an earlier case.

Gonzalez is a former informant for the U.S. Secret Service who helped the agency hunt hackers, authorities say. The agency later found out that he had also been working with criminals and feeding them information on ongoing investigations, even warning off at least one individual, according to authorities.

Gonzalez, who is already in jail awaiting trial in a hacking case, was indicted Monday in New Jersey and charged with conspiring with two other unnamed suspects to steal the private information. Prosecutors say the goal was to sell the stolen data to others.

How much of the data was sold and then used to make fraudulent charges is unclear. Investigators in such cases say it is usually impossible to quantify the impact of such thefts on account holders.

Prosecutors say Gonzalez, who is known online as "soupnazi," targeted

customers of convenience store giant 7-Eleven Inc. and supermarket chain Hannaford Brothers, Co. Inc. He also targeted Heartland Payment Systems, a New Jersey-based card payment processor.

According to the indictment, Gonzalez and his two Russian coconspirators would hack into corporate computer networks and secretly place "malware," or [malicious software](#), that would allow them backdoor access to the networks later to steal data.

Gonzalez faces up to 20 years in prison if convicted of the new charges. His lawyer did not immediately return a call for comment.

Gonzalez is awaiting trial next month in New York for allegedly helping hack the computer network of the national restaurant chain Dave and Buster's.

The Justice Department said the new case represents the largest alleged credit and debit card data breach ever charged in the United States, based on a scheme that began in October 2006.

Gonzalez allegedly devised a sophisticated attack to penetrate the computer networks, steal the card data, and send that data to computer servers in California, Illinois, Latvia, the Netherlands and Ukraine.

Also last year, the Justice Department announced additional charges against Gonzalez and others for hacking retail companies' computers for the theft of approximately 40 million credit cards. At the time, that was believed to be the biggest single case of hacking private computer networks to steal credit card data, puncturing the electronic defenses of retailers including T.J. Maxx, Barnes & Noble, Sports Authority and OfficeMax.

Prosecutors charge Gonzalez was the ringleader of the hackers in that

case.

At the time of those charges, officials said the alleged thieves weren't computer geniuses, just opportunists who used a technique called "wardriving," which involved cruising through different areas with a laptop computer and looking for accessible wireless Internet signals. Once they located a vulnerable network, they installed so-called "sniffer programs" that captured credit and debit card numbers as they moved through a retailer's processing networks.

Gonzalez faces a possible life sentence if convicted in that case.

Restaurants are among the most common targets for hackers, experts said, because they often fail to update their antivirus software and other computer security systems.

Scott Christie, a former federal prosecutor now in private practice in New Jersey, said the case shows that despite the best efforts by companies to protect data privacy, there are still individuals capable of sneaking in.

"Cases like this do cause companies to sit up and take notice that this is a problem and more needs to be done," said Christie.

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