

BY U.S. SENATOR

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Last week in Dayton, I met 17-year-old Tyree Horn — a recent high school graduate and a recent victim of cell phone theft. Ohioans, like Tyree, should be able to focus on their lives on school and work. They shouldn't have to think twice about using their cell phone in their daily routine. However, Tyree was leaving work when a man followed him off the bus and stole his phone.

Unfortunately, Tyree's story is all too common. In Cincinnati, Cleveland and Columbus, I heard similar accounts from victims of cell phone theft. While these crimes aren't always violent, they are always panic-inducing and costly for people who rely on cell phones to connect with relatives, pay bills online or even find directions. Ohioans shouldn't be targeted for crime just because of the phone in their pocket or purse.

However, cell phones are an easy target for criminals because they're easy to resell. Cell phone carriers — like Verizon and Sprint—use subscriber identity module "SIM" cards, which deactivate cell phones when they are reported stolen. However, thieves often just replace the SIM card or switch carrier so they can use the phones — or sell them.

To combat these thefts, the cell phone industry agreed to use a national, interconnected database that keeps track of the unique identity numbers assigned to each phone — the International Mobile Equipment Identity number — which is similar to the VIN numbers on automobiles. However, thieves have also started tampering with those identification numbers to avoid having stolen phones turned off.

According to the Pew Research Center, as of last year, about 87 percent of Americans own a

cell phone – and about 45 percent are smart phones. At one time, the most valuable item most Ohioans carried was their wallet. Today, an iPhone can cost up to \$849 to replace.

And in addition to cost, stolen cell phones, unlike stolen iPods or mp3 players, contain an inherently dangerous threat. Cell phones – especially smart phones, like Blackberries, Droids, and iPhones – carry a lot of personal information. When thieves pocket them, they're also stealing access to e-mail inboxes – and potentially credit card and bank account information.

That's why I'm working to stiffen penalties for the brazen thefts we've been seeing in communities throughout our state. The Mobile Device Theft Deterrence Act, which I am cosponsoring, would impose criminal penalties of up to five years in prison for intentionally evading the database by tampering with cell phones. With industry support, this consumer-protection bill can help Ohioans keep their cell phones safe.

By imposing tougher penalties, we can help deter these widespread thefts, and help law enforcement officials dedicate their time and resources to stopping other criminal activity.