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Across The Ocean: Follow the journey of stolen devices from the Bay Area to Vietnam

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Abstract

In 2023, around 1.4 million mobile phones were stolen across the U.S, according to the Federal Communications Commission. Most of them end up in Asia, particularly countries like China and eventually Vietnam, where they are sold as second-hand devices due to affordability. Countless accounts of phones ending up in China, Vietnam, Hong Kong and other Asian countries are common on Reddit, according to my data scrape. The Asia Pacific region has the fastest growing used and refurbished phone market, valued at over \$69 billion in 2026, says Mordor Intelligence. My reporting showed the demand remains high, especially for Apple devices. A new iPhone in Vietnam is almost 19% more expensive than one in the U.S. due to import duties and taxes. The average salary in Vietnam is less than 10% of that of someone in the Bay Area.

My reporting in Vietnam showed that second hand phones are sold over 30% percent cheaper than here in the U.S.. Bloomberg estimates that smartphone prices will increase and supply is set to be disrupted as a memory crunch hits and geopolitical tensions remain. Devices usually go to China first, in particular Shenzhen, where 90% of electronics make their way through according to the World Economic Forum. My reporting also showed that second-hand devices with U.S. serial numbers are more valuable. This was also confirmed by lawyers working with defendants part of crime rings shipping stolen devices from the Bay Area.

For years, California has tried to address the trend. Many organized operations also have been discovered in phone shops in Hayward and fronts like Boba Shops in San Francisco, with one in particular from Santa Clara County in 2018 that mentions the use of FedEx and the Port of Oakland to ship the devices to Vietnam, clearly bypassing checks. Court records show that the Bay Area, along with the state, are often the target of organized crime linked to overseas smuggling. Interviews with experts and federal agencies like the U.S. Customs and Border Protection reveal little oversight into eliminating the pipeline. Conversations with District Attorneys in various counties in the Bay Area, current and past, showed that it is tough to find rings in the Bay Area or the country, and it is too difficult to fish out the loophole that is allowing devices to leave the country.

Property crime has been falling in California, but since the incredibly popular Prop 36 went into effect a year ago, theft arrests as a result of Prop 36 have accounted for 3.9% of all arrests in the state. Prop 36 increases punishment for theft and property crimes, allowing prosecutors to build cases across counties, and to no longer have to prove a

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vehicle was locked to charge someone with car burglary, where personal devices are often stolen. It also raises theft offenses to a felony if you have a prior conviction. Experts I talked to say mental health diversion is a better way forward since a lot of people in the criminal justice system have underlying mental health or substance abuse issues.

On the other side of the world, Vietnam has imposed strict rules on smuggled goods from China after striking a 20% tariff deal with the U.S. last year. Vietnam is a major garment supplier for major U.S. brands, accounting for \$44 billion USD in exports in 2024 and ranking as the world's second-largest apparel exporter. Soon, stories emerged of smuggled Chinese goods being labelled as Vietnamese for export to dodge high tariffs on China, which are almost 50%. The Vietnamese government has since cracked down on goods coming in from China, as well as demanding invoices for all goods imported into the country.

My reporting showed that stolen devices are often taken apart for parts, or scammers try to hack into iCloud accounts to make the device usable again. Otherwise, the devices cannot be used if they are marked stolen and remotely erased by Apple. When shopkeepers in Vietnam were asked about the origin of devices, they say devices are returned by customers who want an upgrade and often are bought from the same store.

Local experts in Vietnam say that the Vietnamese government's crackdown will mean contraband devices may become more expensive in Vietnam as the supply tightens. But second hand devices still remain lucrative in Asia as it remains a status symbol or perfect work tool that must be acquired no matter where it comes from.

Source List

- Bert Feuss, car break in victim
- Lee, phone dealer in Vietnam
- Cong Khai, journalist in Vietnam
- Majo George, Professor at University of Economics, Vietnam
- Randall Knox, the lawyer who represented Quoc Le, a defendant in a Bay Area crime ring case prosecuted by District Attorney Chesa Boudin
- Chesa Boudin, former San Francisco District Attorney
- Edward Liang, Santa Clara County District Attorney
- Jaime Ruiz, Customs and Border Protection spokesperson
- Thorin Klosowski, Senior Security and Privacy Activist, Electronic Frontier Foundation.

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- Thomas M. Nosewicz, legal director of the California Committee on Revision of the Penal Code at the California Policy Lab.
- K. Jon Breyer, attorney on Apple lawsuit

Data Sources

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- <https://datasets.lib.berkeley.edu/dataverse/igs>

Court Records:

- Santa Clara County- Criminal Docket No. C1881652
- San Francisco County- Case No. CRI- 19000446, CRI- 23007397, CRI- 22004523

Other

- Reddit Posts: Scraped via API key and pullpush.io in RStudio

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