

CRACKDOWN ON THE

Authorities and the public are learning how to cope
with this sick pest who uses the phone to annoy, threaten, insult

TELEPHONE CRANK

By JACK EICHOLZ
and LOUISE ALLEN

THE TELEPHONE RINGS. A housewife answers it. A distinct click at the other end indicates that the connection has been broken.

Who was it? Someone with a wrong number? An unwelcome salesman checking to make sure she is home?

The phone rings again. This time the connection remains open, but the caller remains silent. The housewife hangs up. The sequence is repeated. This can be a nerve-racking experience. It can become terrifying if the anonymous caller speaks, mumbling something incoherent or obscene, or makes indecent suggestions.

At this point, a woman knows that she has been singled out by a phone crank, a member of a growing army of individuals who make thousands of such phone calls in the United States each day. In one Eastern city, telephone officials estimate that more than 50,000 anonymous calls clog their lines each year.

Fortunately, the majority of anonymous phone calls are not of the dangerous variety. Some phone cranks, however, are afflicted by psychological disorders and use the telephone to work off emotional frustrations or satisfy some mental aberration. Envy or revenge also is a motive behind the crank call.

One afternoon, in a Midwest suburb, a young housewife answered her phone, and as she listened her hand began to tremble. "It's my husband's office," the distraught woman whispered to a visitor. "He has just had a heart attack." The wife called the police and was rushed downtown where she found her husband sitting calmly at his desk, very much alive. She was so shocked that medical attention was required.

A similar call was made to the same home a week later and, through use of a new detecting device, was traced to a neighbor who was envious of the family's financial position.

Some anonymous phone calls originate with sexually immature individuals. Such a caller may demand that the housewife meet him for a love tryst. "You'd better come," he threatens, "or something will happen to your son on the way to school."

According to one psychologist, this caller is closely related to the Peeping Tom or the indecent-exposure sex offender. These types of men are so afraid of women that they have to approach them from a distance.

Most persons who become the victims of crank callers hope that the aggressor will become tired of his game and give up. Frequently this is the case, but sometimes the crank persists.

In a Cleveland suburb, for example, a 65-year-old woman was apprehended and convicted of making 13,800 voiceless phone calls over an 18-year period. She would begin her calls at 2 a.m. and dial the number of some 20 of her former neighbors against whom she bore resentment. As soon as a connection was made, she would hang up and call the next victim.

WHAT IS BEING DONE to nab phone cranks?

In the Chicago area, a device records the fact that a certain station is making many calls each day to another subscriber. When the second phone subscriber is notified, she is given the name of the originating station if she requests it. Legal action may be initiated by the person if the calls are annoying.

Another innovation is the "trapping circuit," which is effective in smaller cities and towns. The device is activated by the mere push of a button and "locks" any phone connection. The

line remains open until the source of the call can be determined by the telephone company.

Preventive action by police and public utilities companies is often hampered because in some areas telephoning for malicious purposes is not illegal. Even where there are laws, penalties frequently are light. A common penalty for a convicted crank caller usually involves a suspended sentence and a fine of from \$25 to \$100.

What course of action should you follow if you become the victim of a phone psychopath?

Some intrepid women, harassed by a phone crank, decide to set a trap for the caller by arranging the meeting he suggests. Such action can be dangerous, especially if the caller happens to be psychotic. Never initiate such action without the cooperation of police.

For the average subscriber who becomes the victim of a crank caller, the following suggestions may prove helpful:

1. If you are greeted by silence, don't panic. If you simply hang up, the crank may give up after a few tries.

2. If the caller speaks, don't become angry. Calmly try to get clues to his identity. If you have a tape recorder, use it to record his voice and then give him a playback. This may halt his calls. Turn the tapes over to police for further identification of his voice.

3. If someone calls you with a report of injury or death, have the caller identify himself or ask for his number so that you can call back to verify the facts.

4. If the calls become a real nuisance, get an answering service to screen them. A telephone pest won't persist if he can't get through to you.

5. If you know of someone who makes such calls, report him promptly so that he can be given psychiatric help before he causes harm.

Authorities are beginning to get the phone crank's number, thanks to science. But it is still the public that can do the most to silence him.

COVER:

John Engstead photographs Gina Martin (with her famous actor-dad Dean Martin) in a brilliant peacock-blue sailor dress, one of six creations from her new school wardrobe. All available in patterns, p. 8.

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