

LAW and ORDER

SIM Cards

Written by Kevin Gordon

The SIM card is frequently used in cell phones. I wondered how much or how little we, as police officers, knew about SIM cards, what they are and how they are used. I sent an e-mail to dozens of officers from the patrol level up to the chief of police. First, what is a SIM card? Second, can it be used in a cell phone? Third, can you exchange it with another?

The responses went from one extreme to the other, but only about one-third knew enough about it to provide a good explanation. Almost everyone was aware of what a SIM card is, mostly because they recently purchased a new phone. At the other end of the spectrum were, "I have no idea," "Are you kidding? I'm just happy to get my phone to turn on," and "I think it is part of the phone that holds info."

As is often the case, those who work against the law are usually ahead of those on the side of the law when using new methods. There is a reason they call us a reactive service! There have been several recent informational sheets sent out across the country referencing suspects with phones missing the SIM card, thereby making the phone almost useless as an investigative item during a variety of investigations including interdiction efforts. In one recent local case, the suspect had hidden the SIM cards in his shoe in a failed effort to keep them from investigators.

A SIM card is a subscriber identification module, which is sometimes called a subscriber identity module. This holds all the phone settings and personal information of the subscriber. It acts as the digital brain of the phone. It can be easily switched from phone to phone, and as soon as you put it in the new phone, you can receive calls to your number.

This ease of changing phones is a great benefit to the typical user, as you no longer have to input all your phone numbers in your new phone as in the past. As an example, by installing your SIM in a friend's phone, you can make or receive calls using your stored information. Upgrading your phone is as simple as slipping your SIM card in a new phone. It is also a great benefit to those on the dark side.

The new trend is prepaid SIM cards. A simple check of the Internet finds thousands of sites where you can purchase prepaid cards for just about any country. Quite simply, prepaid cards mean anonymity. Cards can be purchased for every country on the continent of Europe. One site proudly lists, "Prepaid SIM cards can typically be purchased from US \$17 to US \$79, and nearly every time include free incoming calls originating from anywhere in the world."

There are even roaming SIM cards for travelers who will be visiting multiple countries. Another online site lists, "All of the cellular phones we rent and sell are unlocked," that is, not 'locked in' with any specific provider or SIM card. Therefore, as long as the frequencies are compatible, you can use any SIM with your phone." Law enforcement must say up to speed on this common technology...and its potential for criminal use!

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