

Teens and Computer Crime



Many teens are smart with computers. Sometimes they like to show off just how smart they can be. One way is to hack into a big computer system. For the hacker, this can be a kind of challenge. For the big computer systems, it's bad news. And it's also illegal.

Fifteen year-old Jonathan James was the first juvenile convicted and jailed in the United States for hacking. He caused a 21-day shutdown of the NASA computers that run the international space station. Michael Calce, known as "Mafiaboy" on the internet, was arrested in Montreal for attacks against major sites like eBay, Amazon, and CNN. Perhaps the most famous teen hacker, James Kosta, broke into several big business and military computers, including major banks. He was sentenced to 45 years in prison.

According to the National Crime Agency in England, most teenage hackers aren't in it for the money. Some see it as a game. Others do it to impress their friends. According to the NCA report, "Conquering the challenge, proving oneself to the group and intellectual satisfaction are more important motivations than financial gain."

Adam Mudd is an exception. When he was 16, he created malware that was used to carry out 1.7 million cyber attacks. He made over \$500,000 selling his program to other cyber criminals.

Some people believe that the best way to prevent cyber crime is to teach teenagers how to hack. After all, cyber crime and cyber security are two sides of the same coin. Hacker High School provides a set of free online lessons to help teens learn cyber security and other Internet skills. The Cyber Security Challenge is a series of contests to boost technology skills. It hopes to prepare people for future careers in cyber protection.

Speaking of future careers, what ever happened to those teen hackers? Some of them have turned their lives around. Michael Calce is now a "white hat" hacker. That means he helps big companies find ways to prevent cyber crime. James Kosta was lucky enough to stand before a judge that saw some hope in him. Instead of serving 45 years in jail, the judge offered James the opportunity to join the military. "It was a no-brainer," said James. And it changed his life. By the age of 20, he was working for the CIA. Today he runs a video game company that earns over 10 million dollars a year.

James Kosta's message to teens is this: hacking might seem like a game to you but jail time is no laughing matter. And there's a lot more money – and glory – in becoming a cyber fighter than a cyber criminal.