



GSM security country report: Netherlands

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Abstract. GSM networks differ widely in their protection capabilities against common attacks. This report details the protection capabilities of the three GSM networks in the Netherlands. We find KPN to have implemented the most protection features and T-Mobile to be the network offering the most attack surface in the Netherlands.

Some popular passive interception devices will not work against KPN. KPN users are predominantly using latest encryption technology. Users of T-Mobile are not sufficiently protected from interception.

Impersonating users of T-Mobile and Vodafone is possible with simple tools.

Contents

1 Overview	2
2 Protection measures	3
3 Attack scenarios	4
3.1 Passive intercept	4
3.2 Active intercept	5
3.3 Impersonation	6
3.4 User tracking	6
4 Conclusion	7

1 Overview










Protection dimensions (higher means better)			
Operator	Intercept	Impersonation	Tracking
KPN	 68%	 85%	 51%
T-Mobile	 28%	 32%	 86%
Vodafone	 51%	 64%	 77%

Table 1: Implemented protection features relative to 2013 best practices (according to SRLabs GSM metric v2.4)

This document provides a security analysis of the Netherlands' three GSM networks, based on data collected between April 2011 and January 2014. The analysis is based on data samples submitted to the GSM Map project¹. It compares implemented protection features across networks.

The GSM Map website reports protection features condensed into three dimensions as shown in Table 1. This report details the logic behind the analysis results, lists some of the implemented protection features, and maps the protection capabilities to popular attack tools.

Disclaimer. This report was automatically generated using data submitted to gsmmap.org by volunteers. (Thank you!) The analysis does not claim accuracy. Please do not base far-reaching decisions on the conclusions provided herein, but instead verify them independently. If you detect inaccuracies, we are looking forward to hearing from you.

¹GSM Map Project: <https://gsmmap.org>

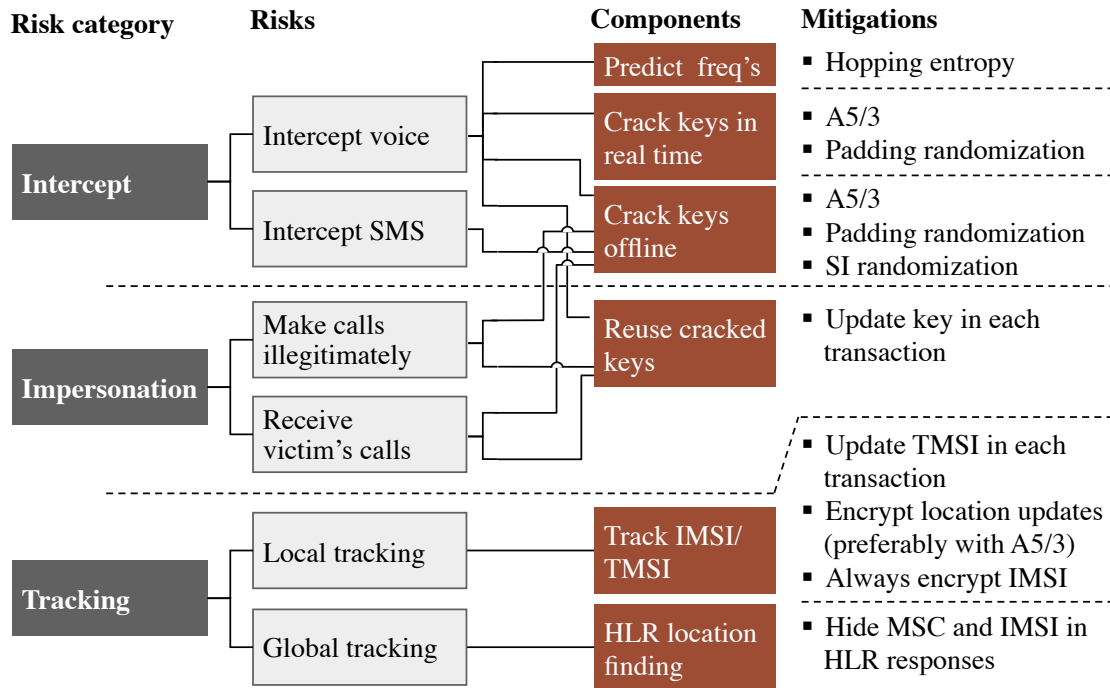


Figure 1: Best practice GSM protection measures can mitigate three attack scenarios.

2 Protection measures

The SRLabs GSM security metric is built on the understanding that GSM subscribers are exposed to three main risks:

- **Interception.** An adversary records GSM calls and SMS from the air interface. Decryption can be done in real time or as a batch process after recording transactions in bulk.
- **Impersonation.** Calls or SMS are either spoofed or received using a stolen mobile identity.
- **Tracking.** Mobile subscribers are traced either globally using Internet-leaked information or locally by repeated TMSI pagings.

The SRLabs metric traces these three risks and six sub-risks to an extensive list of protection measures, some of which are listed in Figure 1.

Table 2 details the implementation depth of some of the mitigation measures present in the Netherlands' GSM networks.

Attack vector		Networks		
		KPN	T-Mobile	Vodafone
Over-the-air protection				
- Encryption algorithm	A5/0	1%	0%	0%
	A5/1	21%	100%	90%
	A5/3	78%	0%	10%
- Padding randomization				
- SI randomization				
- Require IMEI in CMC				
- Hopping entropy				

HLR/VLR configuration				
- Authenticate calls (MO)				
- Authenticate SMS (MO)				
- Authenticate paging (MT)				
- Authenticate LURs				
- Encrypt LURs				
- Update TMSI				
- Mask MSC				
- Mask IMSI				

Table 2: Protection measures implemented in analyzed networks, compared to best practice references observed in 2013.

3 Attack scenarios

The protection measures impact the effectiveness of various common GSM attack tools.

3.1 Passive intercept

Passive intercept of GSM calls requires two steps: First, all relevant data needs to be intercepted. This step cannot be prevented completely, but aggravated significantly by using less predictable frequency hopping sequences. KPN uses such less predictable hopping sequences. The T-Mobile and Vodafone networks make it particularly easy to record radio signals (*hopping entropy*).

Secondly, the intercepted call and SMS traces need to be decrypted. This can be prevented by hardening the A5/1 cipher or by upgrading to modern encryption algorithms.

Hardening the A5/1 cipher . The A5/1 cipher was developed in 1987 and is still by far the most common encryption algorithm for GSM calls. First weaknesses of this cipher were discussed in 1994², but it took until the mid-2000's until successful attacks on GSM were demonstrated publicly. These attacks exploit (partially) known plaintexts of the encrypted GSM messages to derive the encryption key. Consequently, countermeasures need to reduce the number of predictable bits in GSM frames.

Nowadays, several generations of passive A5/1 decipher units exist, that attack different parts of the transaction. Early generation boxes attack the Cipher Mode Complete message. Vodafone generally protects from these boxes. KPN and T-Mobile are fully vulnerable (*Require IMEI in CMC*).

More modern decipher units leverage predictable Null frames. These Null frames contain little to no relevant information and are filled up with a fixed uniform padding, facilitating known-plaintext attacks. None of the networks in Netherlands have deployed protection against this type of attack.

Recently updated boxes further leverage System Information (SI) messages. These messages can be randomized, or not sent at all during encrypted transactions (*SI randomization*). T-Mobile and Vodafone have deployed no protection against this type of attack.

Upgrading to modern encryption algorithms. With the introduction of third generation mobile telecommunications technology, the A5/3 cipher was introduced. Only theoretical attacks on this cipher were so far presented publicly, none of which had practical significance.

Modern phones can use this cipher for GSM communication, if the network supports it. With passive intercept being prevented, attackers must then use active intercept equipment, e.g. fake base stations, as described in Section 3.2. KPN and Vodafone have begun rolling out A5/3. To intercept subscribers of KPN and Vodafone in A5/3-enabled areas, attackers will need to use active equipment. In the Netherlands, T-Mobile and Vodafone continue to mostly rely on outdated encryption.

3.2 Active intercept

Attacks through fake base stations can be prevented to different degrees, based on what the fake base station is used for:

- **Location finding:** In this attack scenario, a phone is lured onto a fake station so that the phone's exact location can be determined. This scenario occurs independent from the phone network and hence cannot be prevented through network protection measures.
- **Outgoing call/SMS intercept:** A fake base station can proxy outgoing connections. In this attack, the network is not necessarily required, so no protection can be achieved from outside the phone.
- **Encrypted call/SMS intercept:** Modern fake base stations execute full man-in-the-middle attacks in which connections are maintained with both the phone and the real network.

²See <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!msg/uk.telecom/TkdCaytoeU4/Mroy719hdroJ>

Networks can make such active attacks more difficult with a combination of two measures:

First, by disabling unencrypted A5/0 calls. Secondly, by decreasing the authentication time given to the attacker to break the encryption key. This timeout can be as much as 24 seconds according to GSM standards. All networks use encryption in all call and SMS transactions; however, the GSMmap currently lacks data to decide whether the networks would accept unencrypted transactions as well.

The GSM Map database currently lacks reliable data on authentication times in the Netherlands.

3.3 Impersonation

Mobile identities can (temporarily) be hijacked using specific attack phones. These phones require the authentication key deciphered from one transaction. They use this key to start a subsequent transaction. The obvious way to prevent this attack scenario is by requiring a new key in each transaction (*Authenticate calls/SMS*).

In the Netherlands, call impersonation is possible against T-Mobile and Vodafone. The same is possible for SMS messages from KPN and T-Mobile.

3.4 User tracking

GSM networks are regularly used to track people's whereabouts. Such tracking occurs at two different granularities:

- Global tracking: Internet-accessible services disclose the general location of GSM customers with granularity typically on a city level. The data is leaked to attackers as part of SMS delivery protocols in form of the MSC address (*Mask MSC*). All networks suppress MSC information for their customers in the Netherlands. In addition, users' IMSI's can leak in HLR requests. This is the case for KPN. T-Mobile and Vodafone protect this information.
- Local tracking: Based on TMSI identifiers, users' association with location areas and specific cells can be tracked, providing a finer granularity than MSC-based tracking, but a less fine granularity than location finding with the help of fake base stations. IMSI-based tracking is made more difficult by changing the TMSI in each transaction (*Update TMSI*). KPN and T-Mobile have implemented this feature. T-Mobile and Vodafone have not addressed this threat thoroughly. In some countries, unencrypted location updates can be observed that ease the tracking of users; Vodafone shows this behavior (*Encrypt LocUpdate*).

4 Conclusion

The GSM networks in the Netherlands implement only few of the protection measures observed in other GSM networks.

KPN and Vodafone have begun upgrading their network to the more secure A5/3 encryption algorithm. T-Mobile and Vodafone are protecting their subscribers particularly well against tracking.

The evolution of mobile network attack and defense techniques is meanwhile progressing further: Modern A5/1 deciphering units are harvesting the remaining non-randomized frames and – thanks to faster computers – are achieving high intercept rates again.

The 3GPP, on the other hand, already completed standard extensions to reduce A5/1 attack surface to a minimum. These standards from 2009 are only hesitantly implemented by equipment manufacturers, leaving users exposed to phone intercept risks.

The available protection methods – even when implemented in full – are barely enough to protect users sufficiently. At the same time, mobile phone attacks are becoming increasingly attractive. A stronger push for implementing modern protection measures is needed to revert this erosion of mobile network security.