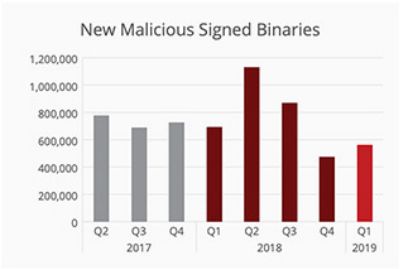
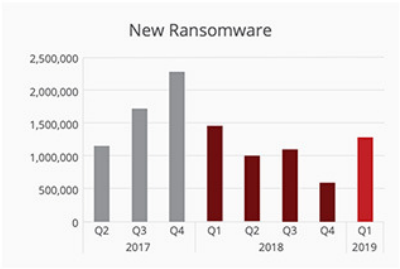
Help Net Security
August 29, 2019

New ransomware grows 118% as cybercriminals adopt fresh tactics and code innovations

McAfee Labs saw an average of 504 new threats per minute in Q1 2019, and a resurgence of ransomware along with changes in campaign execution and code. More than 2.2 billion stolen account credentials were made available on the cybercriminal underground over the course of the quarter. Sixty-eight percent of targeted attacks utilized spear-phishing for initial access, 77% relied upon user actions for campaign execution.





"The impact of these threats is very real," said Raj Samani, McAfee fellow and chief scientist. "It's important to recognize that the numbers, highlighting increases or decreases of certain types of attacks, only tell a fraction of the story. Every infection is another business dealing with outages, or a consumer facing major fraud. We must not forget for every cyberattack, there is a human cost."

Ransomware resurgence features new campaign tactics

McAfee Advanced Threat Research (ATR) observed innovations in ransomware campaigns, with shifts in initial access vectors, campaign management and technical innovations in the code.

While spear phishing remained popular, ransomware attacks increasingly targeted exposed remote access points, such as Remote Desktop Protocol (RDP); these credentials can be cracked through a brute-force attack or bought on the cybercriminal underground. RDP credentials can be used to gain admin privileges, granting full rights to distribute and execute malware on corporate networks.

McAfee researchers also observed actors behind ransomware attacks using anonymous email services to manage their campaigns versus the traditional approach of setting up command-and-control (C2) servers. Authorities and private partners often hunt for C2 servers to obtain decryption keys and create evasion tools. Thus, the use of email services is perceived by threat actors to be a more anonymous method of conducting criminal business.

The most active ransomware families of the quarter appeared to be Dharma (also known as Crysis), GandCrab and Ryuk. Other notable ransomware families of the quarter include Anatova, which was exposed by McAfee Advanced Threat Research before it had the opportunity to spread broadly, and Scarab, a persistent and prevalent ransomware family with regularly discovered new variants. Overall, new ransomware samples increased 118%.

"After a periodic decrease in new families and developments at the end of 2018, the first quarter of 2019 was game on again for ransomware, with code innovations and a new, much more targeted approach," said Christiaan Beek, McAfee lead scientist and senior principal engineer. "Paying ransoms