

# Virtual kidnapping scams are popular and terrifying

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A recent social media post from my local sheriff's office announced it had seen at least two cases of a "virtual kidnapping" scam in our area. It encouraged everyone to learn about how the scam works, so I did. And it's frightening.

This type of fraud is nothing new, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation reports this type of extortion has been around for at least 20 years. But this scam that was once limited to southern border states now knows no boundaries. Do a quick search of virtual kidnapping news, and you'll see recent incidents in Virginia, California, Delaware and Canada.

How does it work? The FBI says the tactic often involves criminals randomly calling phone numbers in affluent areas, trolling for victims. When someone answers the phone, they may hear screaming or crying on the other line, and instinctively think it might be their child.

The victim may then ask if everything is OK and use their child's name, which gives the criminals a piece of vital information. Social media may come into play here as well, since many people — especially the younger generations — think nothing of sharing information like names and travel plans online. The criminals will then claim to have kidnapped that child — often using the kid's name — and demand the victim wire money. The caller will threaten violence against the child if the person on the phone does not meet demands. The FBI's warning says a victim may hear a man's voice say something like, "We have Mary. She's in a truck. We are holding her hostage. You need to pay a ransom and you need to do it now or we are going to cut off her fingers."

The scammers will try to keep the victim on the phone, hoping they won't be able to verify that their loved one is safe.

Kathie Gross, a California mother victimized by such scammers, told the Orange County Register it was the "most terrifying experience" of her life. In her case, the people who called her pretended to be her 12-year-old daughter, pleading for help. She did not pay the ransom and was eventually able to reach her daughter at school. But Gross said she doesn't feel safe anymore and has changed all her social media passwords.

A San Diego father wasn't so lucky: He told his local news station that his virtual kidnapping call led him to wire \$10,000 to Mexico before learning his daughter was safe.

The U.S. Army's Criminal Investigation Command is also warning the military community about this crime after a scammer targeted an Army family. It says the scammers can be forceful, abrasive and very convincing on the phone. The victim in this case was able to quickly call and confirm their child was safe at school, but there are definitely instances when a parent may not be able to do so. With so many 20-somethings away at school, studying abroad, in the military or just traveling, parents of older children may not always know their child's whereabouts.

The FBI says certain clues can point to a scam if you receive one of these calls. The caller will insist you stay on the line and try to prevent you from contacting your child. The amount demanded for ransom money may also drop quickly and the call will not come from the supposed victim's phone.

If you do receive one of these calls, the FBI cautions to never confirm or acknowledge your loved one's name and to ask questions only the alleged kidnap victim would know. Consider trying to slow down the situation and request to speak with your child. Never agree to pay a ransom, but instead try to contact your child any way possible. Here's where GPS tracking capabilities may come in handy. Many parents use apps on their phones to track their kids throughout the day. Most often, the FBI says, the best course of action is to simply hang up. If you believe a real kidnapping is taking place, contact law enforcement immediately.