

Advisory | **Virtual Kidnapping for Ransom scams** | No. | 30th July 2020 *[A brief advisory regarding 'virtual' kidnappings happening around the world]*

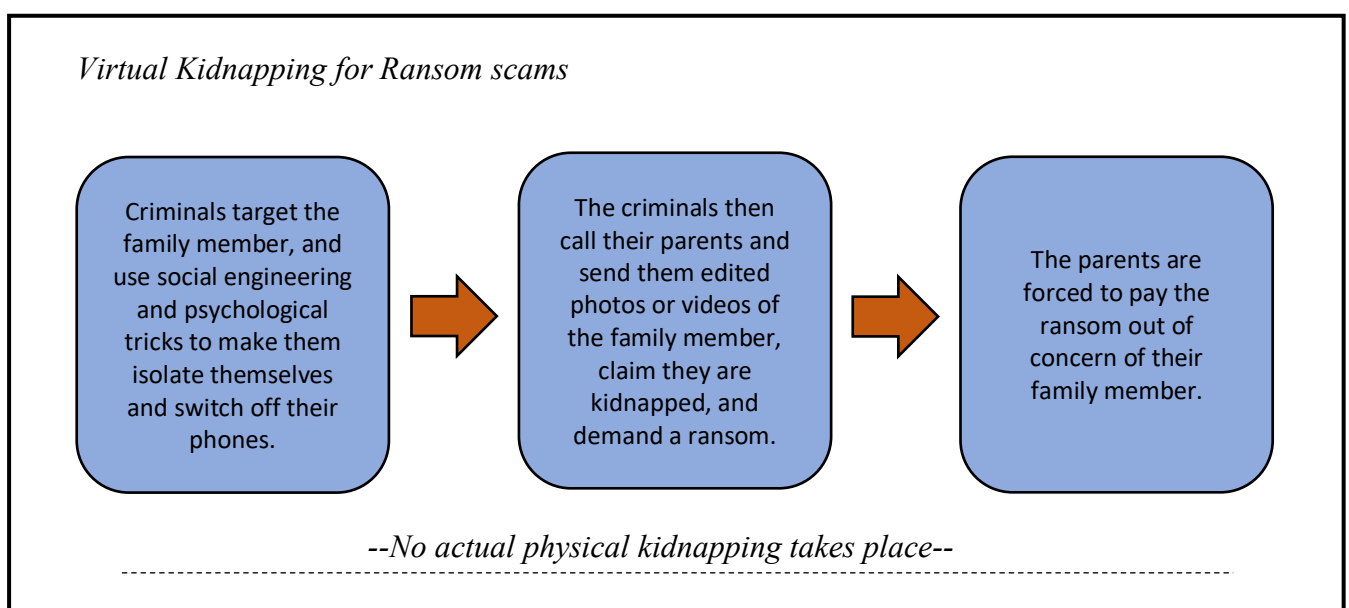
Introduction

There have been a string of virtual kidnappings happening with international students from various countries where the cybercriminals make the parents think that their child has been kidnapped using technology and psychological tricks, and force them to pay a ransom. Using technology to spoof phone calls, and using image morphing software to stage a fake virtual kidnapping, criminals have extorted money from scared parents. As imaging and AI technology progresses to the point that 'deep-fakes' of people are possible, disturbing uses like virtual kidnappings are a possibility.

Modus Operandi

- The criminals exploit the fear that parents have for children who are away from home.
- The criminals have used social engineering tricks to force the children to not attend to their cell phones or go underground under some fake circumstances.
- The criminals then use photos that are publicly available on the internet of the children and use photo/video editing tools to fake a kidnapping.
- These photos/ videos are then sent to the parents, and a ransom is demanded in cryptocurrency or wire transfers.
- The parents who are fooled by the photos or videos, and who are unable to contact the children, give in to the criminal's demands. There is no actual physical kidnapping of the victim, just the illusion of it.

A pictorial flow chart can be demonstrated as below:





International cases of Virtual Kidnapping scams

As per international news reports, almost 8-10 cases have been reported this year in Australia and USA involving virtual kidnapping.

- One case involved American children staying near the US-Mexican border for virtual kidnapping case.
 - i. American children staying at a hotel near the US- Mexico border were told that their hotel is surrounded by armed bandits.
 - ii. They were told to go over to the Mexican side of the border for safety.
 - iii. The criminals then convinced the children to video call them, following which the criminals took a screenshot of them and sent it to their parents claiming the child was kidnapped.
- In the second case, Chinese students in Australia were targeted.
 - i. Fraudsters sent out thousands of messages about a package delivery to random people.
 - ii. A few overseas Chinese students responded to the message regarding the package delivery, and got a call back from a man speaking Mandarin who took their identity information.
 - iii. Soon after, they got a call from a person claiming to be from the Chinese embassy.
 - iv. The person claimed that the package they enquired about contained illegal contents, and that the student could be imprisoned or deported because of it.
 - v. The person claiming to be from the embassy told the students to shut off their phones and check into a hotel, to 'hide' from the authorities.
 - vi. The fraudsters then called their parents, convinced them that they had kidnapped their child, and demanded a ransom.

Analysis of the Scam

The cyber criminals are exploiting the fears of the parents who have children away from home to demand ransom. No actual physical kidnapping is done in these scenarios, but the trauma of such an incident is very difficult for all those involved. The criminals doing these scams are using technology to aid their schemes. Photo editing and video editing tools, coupled with AI and deep-fake technology can be used to create a realistic looking photo/ video of the victim. The criminals also use call-masking techniques so that the calls they make appear to come from certain places like an embassy or a police station, to fool the victims.

Precautions to take for citizens if they find themselves in such a situation

- Report any such incident to the nearest local police station.
- Check if the 'kidnapping' calls are actually from the victim's phone. If they are not, this kidnapping might be staged and probably a scam.
- Ask to speak to the kidnapped person. Ask the kidnapped person questions that only they might know answer to- for verifying if the kidnapped person's identity. Avoid sharing information about you or your family members with strangers.
- Try alternate ways to contact the child, or reach out to close friends for information on their whereabouts.
- Do not trust strangers who randomly claim to be from an embassy or any other legal body.
- When abroad, always be aware of the local laws, and keep the contact details of important agencies including the embassy, the university, and the local law enforcement.