

Beat: News

FBI and U.S. Border Patrol Warns Public of an Increase of Kidnapping

Ransom Extortion Crimes in Borderland

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USPA NEWS - The FBI El Paso Field Office's Violent Crime Task Force with assistance of the U.S. Border Patrol El Paso Sector, were able to rescue 24 individuals that were being held against their will. The following information was supplied in a press release from the FBI El Paso Field Office.

The FBI and the U.S. Border Patrol (USBP) continue to see an increase in crimes involving kidnapping for ransom extortion crimes directly affecting undocumented immigrants who have paid human smugglers to bring them across the U.S.-MX border. FBI El Paso and USBP want to bring this very serious public safety matter to the public's attention so they can be aware of signs associated with these crimes so they can notify the FBI.

"As a community, we should be concerned about the increase of these kidnappings and the threat they pose to the public safety of our city," said Special Agent in Charge Jeffrey R. Downey. "We need the help of the entire community to see suspicious activity occurring in our neighborhoods. We are asking community members to help eradicate this violent crime from existing in our city. I would like to thank USBP, DHS Homeland Security Investigations, El Paso Constables Office, and the Ysleta Del Sur Pueblo Tribal Police Department for their assistance in this ongoing investigation."

"Border Patrol Agents in the El Paso Sector maximize their success with strong and effective law enforcement partnerships to help disrupt threats and illicit activity conducted by Transnational Criminal Organizations," said El Paso Sector Chief Patrol Agent Gloria I. Chavez. "Extortion and holding migrants against their will are common and nefarious practices done by human smugglers that prove a complete disregard for human lives. We are committed to jointly targeting these Transnational Criminal Organizations."

Kidnapping extortion crimes exploit victims through threat and/or actual harm (physical or emotional), arrest, legal action, or other demands in an attempt to force the victim into handing over money. These threats are aimed at the victim's person or property or to their family and friends. Kidnapping for ransom and virtual kidnappings have increased in the region and are some of the most common extortion crimes investigated by the FBI El Paso Field Office.

The FBI continues to see a shift of the extortion calls being directed towards undocumented immigrants who have paid human smugglers to bring them across the U.S.-MX border and their family members in the U.S. or their country of origin. They are quickly trapped in a very frightening nightmare as other human smuggling organizations are kidnapping them from the original human smugglers' stash houses and then begin the process of extorting family members for monetary demands for their release.

Many of these victims don't report the incident because of fears they will be deported due to their immigration status. The FBI El Paso Field Office wants to stress the focus of the investigation is not on a person's immigration status, but instead on the extortion crime.

The kidnappings happen when the family member is told, over the phone, that his or her family member has been kidnapped. Then, through deception and threats, criminals coerce victims to pay a ransom. On average, the family sends thousands of dollars to the scammers before contacting law enforcement.

If you receive a phone call from someone who demands payment of a ransom for a kidnapped victim, the following should be considered:

Stay Calm.

Try to slow the situation down.

Avoid sharing information about you or your family during the call.

Request to speak to the victim directly. Ask, "How do I know my loved one is okay?"

Listen carefully to the voice of the kidnapped victim if they speak and ask questions only they would know.

If they don't let you speak to the victim, ask them to describe the victim.

While staying on the line with alleged kidnappers, try to call the alleged kidnap victim from another phone or attempt to physically locate the victim.

Attempt to text or contact the victim via social media.

To buy time, repeat the caller's request and tell them you are writing down the demand, or tell the caller you need time to get things moving.

Don't directly challenge or argue with the caller. Keep your voice low and steady.

Contact the local authorities at 911 or the FBI El Paso at (915) 832-5000.

Many undocumented immigrants are kept in stash houses located across El Paso. A stash house can be a house, shed, or any type of structure used to hide illegal activity from law enforcement. Stash houses are meant to blend in, so they can be found even in the middle of a city or gated community.

Here are some red flags to identify a stash house:

If you don't know who lives at the residence

A lot of trash is constantly being placed outside homes, multiple water jugs or disposable plates lying around

Different types of vehicles, especially vans and pickup trucks, will enter and exit the garage at different hours of the day or night (quite often they prefer to work in the nighttime or early morning hours.)

The vehicles arriving at the stash house will have different license plates on them, including Arizona, California, Texas, New Mexico, and Mexico. They may often display paper "buyer" or "dealer" tags. They may also use these license plates interchangeably with all of the vehicles.

Large amounts of food and water are taken to the house on a daily basis.

If you are the landlord and somebody is hesitant to provide information or they appear to use a false name or something like that

If you have any questions about whether the call is a virtual kidnapping or a legitimate kidnapping, contact FBI El Paso at 915-832-5000 or call 911 immediately.

FBI El Paso is committed to working with our state, local, and federal law enforcement partners to increase public awareness regarding the threat posed by kidnappings and will continue to investigate and refer these types of cases for prosecution. Tips can also be submitted online at <https://tips.fbi.gov>. All tipsters may remain anonymous.

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Wendy writes for the United States Press Agency and is a former columnist with the Fulton County Expositor, Wauseon, Ohio.

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Westhoven, based in Hungary

Editorial program service of General News Agency:

United Press Association, Inc.

3651 Lindell Road, Suite D168

Las Vegas, NV 89103, USA

(702) 943.0321 Local

(702) 943.0233 Facsimile

info@unitedpressassociation.org

info@gna24.com

www.gna24.com