

Security Risks Report – South Africa

March 2025

Executive summary

In recent months, there has been a noticeable increase in kidnappings targeting small and medium-sized entrepreneurs in South Africa. One such case was that of a farming entrepreneur from Pretoria, kidnapped in November 2024.

- The businessman remained captive at the time of writing this report, and kidnappers have used social media to post distressing videos of the victim, increasing pressure on the family.

The use of social media and communication apps like WhatsApp has added a new dimension to kidnapping, incentivizing increased violence to maximize the impact on families.

- This trend has been noted in previous Convex reports, along with the widespread availability of firearms. A recent police rescue operation in Johannesburg highlighted the violent nature of these crimes, involving a shootout and illegal firearms.

Crime statistics from the South African Police Service (SAPS) reflect the severity of the kidnapping crisis, with over 17,000 cases reported in 2023/24—a significant increase from previous years.

- Although the annual rate of increase has slowed, kidnapping remains deeply enmeshed with violent crime in South Africa.
- While property crimes are stable or decreasing, crimes against the person, including kidnapping, murder, and attempted murder, are on the rise.

Kidnapping has in fact become intertwined with other crimes such as carjacking and robbery, creating multi-stage felonies.

- So-called 'let's go for a ride' kidnappings often start as robberies or carjackings and escalate to abduction and extortion.
- These crimes are usually short-lived but have the potential to become more organized and prolonged.
- SAPS data thus shows that kidnappings for ransom account for only 4% of all cases, while 22% of kidnappings are related to robberies and 44% to carjackings.

The statistics for 2023/24 suggest that the rising trend in kidnapping could be levelling off, but the data is unreliable due to underreporting and the interlinked nature of these crimes.

As criminals become more organized, the risk of prolonged captivity and extensive extortion increases, posing significant challenges for law enforcement and private security efforts in South Africa.





Review of recent developments

In recent months several small and medium-sized entrepreneurs have been kidnapped. One high-profile case in the media has been that of Jerry Boshoga, a farming entrepreneur from Pretoria, who was kidnapped on 18 November and remained in captivity at the time of writing this report.

- The kidnappers abducted the businessman as he went to attend a meeting in Centurion. It is unclear from media reports whether the meeting was a trap set by the kidnappers, but according to an account from the family, he was last seen walking away with one of the people he was meeting.
- The kidnappers' initial demand was ZAR60m (USD3.3m), falling to ZAR10m; the kidnappers have said they will not go lower despite the family's pleas that they do not have the means to pay the ransom.

The case has acquired media prominence in part because the kidnappers have posted several videos online showing the victim being beaten, causing the family great distress.

- This strategy exemplifies how social media is creating an additional dimension for kidnappers to exploit when exerting pressure on families to pay ransoms.
- Indeed, the use of social media creates an incentive to escalate the violence perpetrated against hostages, since the point is to maximise the impact on the family.

Kidnappers also use communications apps, most popularly WhatsApp, to ensure that the family sees these distressing videos.

The increasing violence used by kidnappers has already been noted in previous reports by Convex, as well as the widespread availability of firearms.

- On 10 March a police team led by SAPS's anti-kidnapping task force rescued an Ethiopian businessman held captive in the Johannesburg suburb of Kensington and found a cache of four illegal firearms, including an AK-47. The rescue resulted in a shootout that left one of the five kidnappers dead.

The businessman had been kidnapped outside a restaurant in Norwood, an up-and-coming Johannesburg suburb considered among the least dangerous in the city.

- Details as to the method of his capture were not available, but an especially vulnerable moment for potential victims is waiting for taxis or other ride-hailing services.
- For instance, on 21 February a kidnap attempt in these circumstances was captured on CCTV. A woman standing on the side of the road was circled by a man while a car drew up alongside her. The car door opened, and a man inside tried to pull the woman in while the other man tried to push her in. She struggled against them and was able to escape unharmed.
- When the video was posted on social media, many of the comments advised not to wait outside but inside when booking a ride, and only come out when the vehicle has shown up. As the intended victim was from Tanzania, she may not have been fully aware of the risks.



The widespread installation of CCTV in South Africa's urban centres has meant that many attempted or successful crimes can now be viewed online.

- Together with postings on social media, these videos are raising the visibility of the security crisis in South Africa, and putting additional pressure on the police to tackle the situation.

One consequence is that SAPS is now willing to work with private security companies in kidnapping cases.

- Private security supported SAPS when the Ethiopian businessman was freed, and also in the rescue of another kidnapped businessman, a Pakistani national, on 13 March in Gauteng. Four kidnappers, two South African and two Pakistani nationals, were arrested in different locations of the province.
- Private security was also involved in another highly publicised kidnapping, that of Cape Town resident Alize Van der Merwe, who was taken from her car as she was driving to a spa resort. She was released alongside another woman, a Chinese tourist, who had been kidnapped separately.

Annual crime statistics by the South African Police Service (SAPS) confirm the severity of the kidnapping crisis that is frequently discussed in South Africa's media outlets.

- There were just over 17,000 cases of kidnap in the year 2023/24, an increase of around 260% since 2014/15. The bulk of this took place since the global COVID-19 pandemic: whereas reported cases of kidnapping in 2014-21 averaged around 5,500 per year, in 2021/22 they shot up by nearly 80% and have experienced double-digit increases since.
- One positive aspect could be that in 2023/24 the annual rate of increase slowed to 11% and in April-December 2024 the increase was 6.7% year on year.

The stats thus suggest that the rising trend in kidnapping could be levelling off, with the caveat that kidnapping data are among the least reliable crime statistics owing to the pressures victims face not to report the crime.

Another methodological caveat is that, in South Africa, kidnapping tends to be associated with and even the result of other crimes: often, when the criminal feels that the initial felony has not yielded sufficient rewards, the victim is taken hostage to increase the criminal's 'returns' (see **In focus: 'Let's go for a ride'**).

- This can obfuscate classification if the victim decides to report the original crime and not the kidnapping.

Reflecting the links between kidnapping and other crimes, SAPS kidnapping data are broken down to distinguish the causal drivers of kidnap – which in turn indirectly shows how wide-ranging a criminal activity kidnapping has become.

- The data show that in 2023/24 kidnap for ransom accounted for only 4% of all kidnappings, whereas 22% of kidnap cases were related to robberies and 44% were related to carjacking.
- Kidnapping is thus deeply enmeshed with a wider issue concerning violent crime in South Africa.

As noted previously by Convex, whereas crimes against property are stable or even trending down – property crime has fallen by 35% in the last ten years – crimes against the person are on the rise. While kidnapping experienced the steepest increase in 2020-24, nonetheless in that time murders rose by 38% and attempted murders by 52%. Carjacking, meanwhile, rose by 36% over the same period.





In focus: 'Let's go for a ride'

As the statistics show, the bulk of kidnapping in South Africa is associated with other crimes against the person – most notably carjacking, followed by robbery. This is known as 'let's go for a ride' kidnapping.

- The division between robbery and carjacking is also not clear-cut, as the felony can escalate in several stages.

A comprehensive example of this type of kidnapping, involving every stage, is where a robber fails to obtain enough cash or other valuables, therefore forces the victim into their car and proceeds to drive around, having essentially kidnapped the victim.

During the drive, the criminal will seek to extract as much money as possible from the victim. This can involve one or all of the following:

- Taking the victim to as many ATMs as feasible to extract as much cash as possible
- Forcing the victim to access their bank accounts on their mobile and transferring the maximum amount possible out – this can even include taking out loans in the victim's name
- Calling the victim's families to extract a ransom.

How many of these revenue-extorting options are used will depend on the circumstances of each abduction. These multilayered crimes are not planned in advance and can therefore unfold in a variety of ways as criminals think on their feet.

- Usually, the lack of planning means that these kidnappings are short-lived – the victim is held for a few hours and released as soon as the risks of holding them in their car outweigh the likely rewards. This adds to the blurred definitional lines between a kidnapping and an extended robbery or carjacking.
- However, each case is different, and as the practice spreads and criminals become more organised the risk has grown of victims being held captive for longer. These more complex felonies require a gang with some capabilities.
- In these instances, the 'ride' is followed by a period in captivity and the full range of extortions – from emptying bank accounts, taking out loans and demanding ransoms from the family – is deployed.

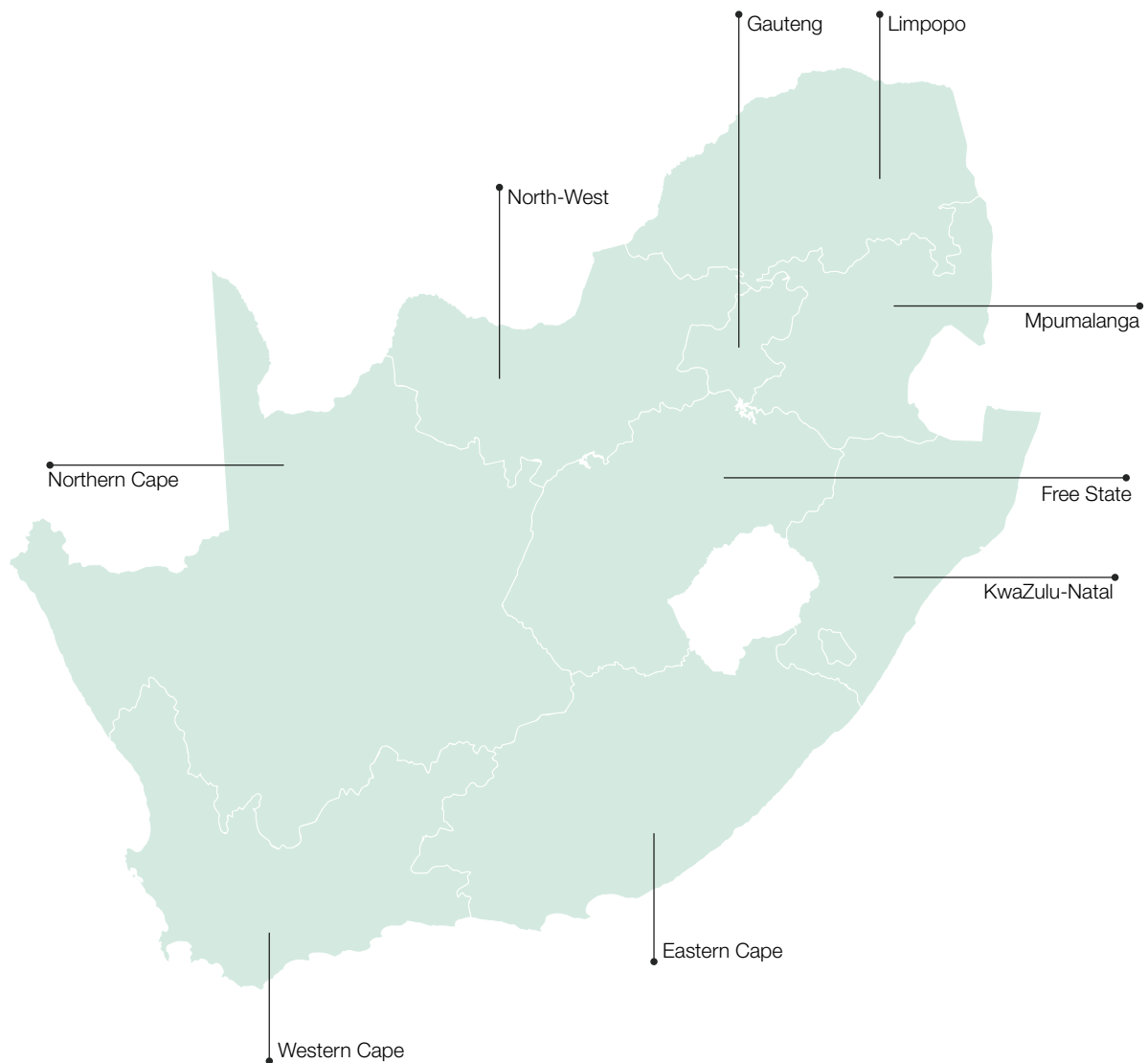
As these kidnappings are not pre-planned, falling victim to them is a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. However, the lack of planning and uncertain rewards also limits the risks the criminals are willing to take, as shown by the failed attempt to kidnap a Tanzanian woman in February (see Review of recent developments).

- In her case, the assailants were either not armed or not willing to use weapons, and they drove off without her after only a brief struggle.
- The level of threat posed by the perpetrators can, however, vary greatly.



US State Department advice

The US Department of State's Travel Advisory ranks South Africa at *Level 2: Exercise Increased Caution*. This level applies to all of South Africa's provinces. The Travel Advisory was amended on 7 November 2024 to list kidnapping as a main concern, reflecting the steady rise in the incidence of this crime. The State Department's Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) also updated its *Country Security Report* in January 2025, which includes a specific section on Kidnapping Threat.



Kidnapping and extortion: overview



Perpetrators

- Unlike in other kidnapping and extortion hotspots around the world, in South Africa these crimes do not have a broader dimension other than monetary gain.
- However, the pervasive nature of these crimes and the increase in the rates at which they are taking place add to and perpetuate the high levels of security risk in South Africa.
- Transnational gangs from Mozambique and Zimbabwe are believed to have played an important role in fuelling the rise in kidnapping in South Africa.
- Local petty criminals and gangs are increasingly involved in kidnapping, especially short-term and express kidnapping – often in the course of a carjacking.
- Larger organised crime groups tend to run extortion rackets, occupying specific niches – for example in the construction sector or the transport sector.
 - Construction mafias – known as ‘business forums’ – use violence and other illegal tactics to disrupt or control access to public sector projects, demanding payment in exchange for ceasing the disruptions. These construction mafias are said to have originated in KwaZulu-Natal but have spread across the country.
 - In Cape Town, nightlife extortion networks are expanding into other types of hospitality – cafés and restaurants, for example – as well as into real estate.
 - In Gauteng, there is a rising trend for extortion gangs to rebrand themselves as security companies: in this guise, they run protection rackets among their ‘clients’.
- The above list illustrates that organised crime syndicates are most prevalent in the Gauteng and Western Cape provinces.



Targets

- Kidnapping rates are highest in Gauteng, particularly in and around Johannesburg; carjacking rates are also highest there.
- Targets of kidnapping are predominantly South African nationals.
- High net-worth local businessmen tend to be the main victims of long-term kidnap for ransom; usually, they have been deliberately targeted by organised gangs, often transnational.
- However, kidnapping by local criminals is becoming more widespread and opportunistic.
 - Affluent-looking individuals are at risk simply by being in the wrong place at the wrong time.
 - Small and medium entrepreneurs have become more frequent victims of targeted abductions.
- The spread of express kidnapping in recent years has meant that low-income individuals, including those in townships, are also now targets.
 - As most express kidnapping is opportunistic, foreigners must also exercise due care and pay attention to their surroundings.

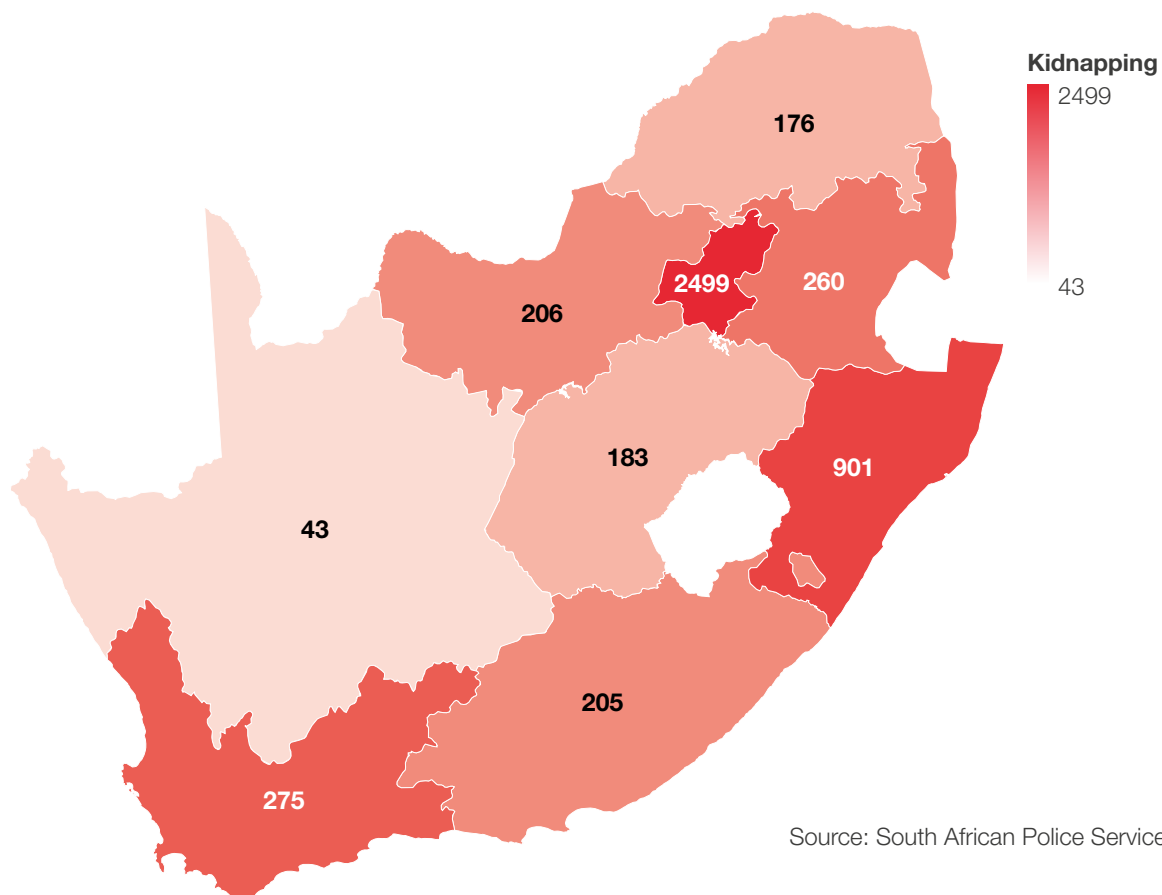


Statistics

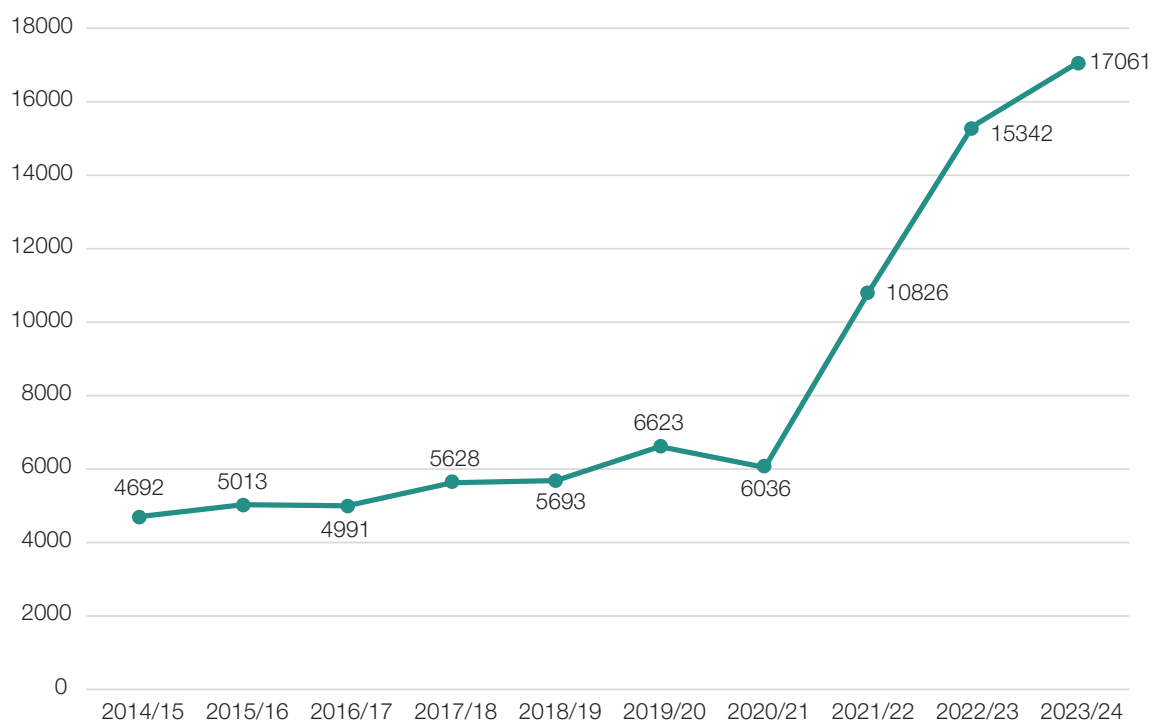
- Crime statistics are publicly available from the South African Police Service and Statistics South Africa.



Kidnappings by province, October-December 2024



Annual incidence of kidnapping





Principles of security

There are seven fundamental principles of security:



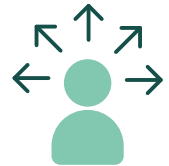
Layers of security



Planning



Communication



Situational awareness



Profile



Routine



Information security

These principles are applicable in any environment, however they are most relevant in unfamiliar surroundings or in areas with high levels of crime, terrorism or civil unrest. In terms of kidnap prevention, experience shows that given the relatively opportunistic nature of many kidnaps adherence to these principles can reduce the likelihood of someone becoming a victim of kidnapping.

- **Layers of security:** there is no single measure that enhances personal security, instead the focus should always be on applying several layers of mitigation involving physical, procedural and behavioural measures, as well as adopting a generally proactive attitude towards security.
- **Planning:** individuals can reduce risk simply by making an effort to understand the general security environment in their location and then pre planning appropriate security precautions (for example insurance, airport pick-ups, security escorts and/or other local support).
- **Communications:** identifying in advance key points of contact in emergencies (for example local office, hotel, police, embassy, security providers) and have a back-up method of communications in the event a phone does not work locally for network or other reasons. In higher threat environments share itineraries with others in advance and consider establishing lost contact plans involving periodic 'check ins'.
- **Situational awareness:** being aware of your general surroundings at all times but particularly with regards regular routines (for example arriving or leaving at home, the office, schools, or restaurants or shopping malls). Be aware of higher risk areas along routes you travel and be alert to unusual or suspicious incidents, behaviours, people or other occurrences in your vicinity. Avoid situations where you could become isolated and, above all, always trust your instincts.
- **Profile:** kidnappers – and criminals in general – normally target their victims because that individual has come to their attention for some reason. It is therefore important that individuals adopt a low profile in high kidnap threat environments. This should involve minimising overt displays of wealth, not unnecessarily sharing unnecessarily details of itineraries or business trips, and ensuring personal information such as home addresses, phone numbers and email address and family information are not easily accessible.
- **Routines:** kidnappers are most easily able to target and abduct victims who have a predictable routine. It is important therefore in higher threat kidnap environments to avoid setting predictable patterns of behaviour, particularly regarding places you regularly visit. Most kidnaps occur at the beginning or end of journeys, so it is critical to be alert during these phases.
- **Information security:** to reduce vulnerability to both kidnapping but also extortion it is important individuals and their families regularly undertake periodic reviews of their online profiles – including all corporate and social media – to enable an assessment of what personal information is easily accessible and could be utilised by criminals.

Kidnap and Extortion

INITIAL ACTIONS

IF YOU SUSPECT YOU ARE THE VICTIM OF A KIDNAP OR THREAT EXTORTION

DO

- ✓ Start a log of calls, events and any actions taken
- ✓ Form a small family crisis cell / company crisis team
- ✓ Preserve any physical evidence carefully (e.g. letters or parcels received)
- ✓ If possible record any telecommunications with the kidnapper/extortionist, or carefully note all details of what is said
- ✓ Note details of all demands, deadlines or threats received
- ✓ **If you are a Convex client call the 24/7 Response Helpline and ask to speak to the Convex Crisis Response Duty officer**

DON'T

- ✗ Agree to anything, make any offer or start negotiating
- ✗ Acknowledge, agree to or self-impose any deadlines (e.g. 'I can get that for you in an hour')
- ✗ Discuss the incident with anyone who does not need to know about it or, if it is not yet publicly known, report the incident without first receiving advice
- ✗ Make any decisions until advised by Convex Crisis Response.

If a kidnapping

Prepare for a possible first call from the kidnappers by:

- Identifying someone (not a decision maker) to act as a 'Communicator' to speak on behalf of the family/company
- Identifying anyone who could potentially receive a call from kidnappers and brief them on how to respond if they are contacted (to say and promise nothing and direct the caller to the Communicator's number).

If communication from someone claiming to hold the victim is received the Communicator should:

- Listen carefully to what is said and ask the caller to repeat anything that is unclear
- Reassure the caller you wish to cooperate
- Explain that you are not authorized to make any decisions as you have to consult other family or company members
- Ask to speak with the victim to confirm that they are alive and well, or ask for other evidence of their well-being (e.g. the answer to a question that only the victim(s) can answer)
- If you do speak with the victim(s) reassure them you are doing everything you can to secure their release and that their family(s) are being looked after
- Stay calm in the face of threats, these are normal, but challenge threats of violence towards the victim(s) (e.g. 'We want to resolve this without anyone getting hurt')
- If possible arrange a time for a call back
- Stall for time pending the arrival of the Convex Crisis Response consultant.



REMEMBER

If in doubt call the Convex Crisis Response Helpline – we would rather help you prevent an incident than help you respond to one.





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