

Security Risks Report – South Africa

June 2025

Executive summary

A number of headline-grabbing kidnapping incidents took place in Eastern Cape in the second quarter of 2025.

- On 21 June a woman was kidnapped from the Nelson Mandela Bay Fresh Produce Market. Her husband was assaulted with a gun while she was bundled into a vehicle.
- A US Baptist missionary was kidnapped on 10 April and held for ransom for six days. He was rescued by the Hawks, a division of the South African Police Service (SAPS).
- On 11 June, a construction manager was kidnapped on the highway from Gqeberha to Addo; the project has been plagued by construction mafias' demands for "protection" fees.

Construction mafias are a notable problem in the Eastern Cape, targeting public works projects and demanding extortion fees. This line of "business" takes advantage of a stipulation in public procurement regulations that sets aside 30% of the value of public projects for local small businesses. Construction mafias extort this 30% from contractors through intimidation, violence and sabotage, without contributing to the works.

The government has claimed some success in reducing the problem, but there are internal differences within the ruling coalition as to further steps: most notably, the pro-business Democratic Alliance (DA) has the public works portfolio and wants to abolish the 30% stipulation.

- The DA is also challenging new legislation on employment quotas, and these persistent policy differences with the African National Congress (ANC) raise the spectre of political instability.

Uncertainty over government cohesion undermines governance at a time when SAPS already faces issues of public trust and internal corruption, including police involvement in kidnapping and extortion.

The Hawks, facing recruitment and funding challenges, are crucial in addressing the kidnapping crisis but are hampered by a high vacancy rate and a lack of advanced digital skills.

Gauteng has experienced a surge in kidnappings, particularly express kidnappings.

- These are attractive for criminals owing to the low-risk yet large potential pools of funds available from individuals thanks to their banking apps.

Banks are implementing measures to combat express kidnappings, reflecting the widening range of the problem in South Africa.





Review of recent developments

In March-June 2025 there were widely reported kidnapping incidents in or near Motherwell, a suburb of the Eastern Cape provincial capital, Gqeberha (formerly Port Elizabeth).

- The victims all had very different profiles: one was a US national, another a business owner, another a construction manager.
- The range of victims illustrates that kidnapping risk in South Africa is not a problem specific to a given demographic.

On 21 June a couple were attacked by armed gunmen as they came to work at the Nelson Mandela Bay Fresh Produce Market, in Markman Industrial Area. The husband was pistol-whipped and his wife was kidnapped.

- The victim was reunited with her family on 25 June, reportedly unharmed.
- Business owners in the Fresh Produce Market are under pressure from protection rackets, and despite efforts to upgrade security in recent years, the boundaries of the market remain porous.

On 10 April a Baptist missionary from the US was kidnapped at gunpoint from the pulpit of a church in Motherwell.

- The kidnappers demanded a ransom of ZAR5m (USD277,160).
- The pastor was held for six days and was rescued by the Directory for Priority Crime Investigations of the South African Police Service (SAPS), known as the Hawks.

Also in Eastern Cape, on 11 June a construction manager was kidnapped at the site of a large-scale project to upgrade the highway between the town of Addo and Motherwell.

- An eyewitness to the kidnapping told the local media that another colleague had suffered a robbery only weeks before, with additional (if unverified) reports that construction mafias had demanded a monthly “protection” fee of ZAR450,000 (USD25,254).
- The Eastern Cape premier, Oscar Mabuyane, has identified construction mafias as a key problem in his province and called for assistance from the army to combat the problem.

Public works sites are frequent targets for construction mafias (see **Kidnapping and extortion: Perpetrators**). However, widespread popular discontent, which leads to frequent protests and has escalated in recent months, can sometimes obfuscate the situation concerning disruptions of infrastructure projects.

- For example, in June 2025 a key road artery in Johannesburg, the Golden Highway, was shut down. In large part, this was the result of ongoing protests since March over access to water resources, but there were also reports that construction mafias were involved and were threatening workers on the project.
- A court affidavit submitted by the lead subcontractor on the Golden Highway project stated that workers had been shot at and assaulted in an effort to ramp up pressure on the company. Moreover, the subcontractor was not only battling “construction mafias”; the affidavit also stated that local businesses, taxi associations and politicians had all demanded money from the company.

Public works projects thus act as a magnet for all manner of extortion demands from a multitude of sources. When criminal demands culminate in kidnapping, as in the case of the Eastern Cape construction manager, it is the senior members of the team on site who are most at risk. However, all onsite workers are at risk of physical assault.

The scale of the problem and its direct adverse impact on infrastructure development – which further fuels popular discontent – has led the government to draw up a specific strategy to target construction mafias, known as the Durban Declaration.

- The government claims that, since the Declaration was signed in November 2024 by SAPS, the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure (DPWI) and the finance ministry, crime at construction sites has fallen significantly.
- Dedicated provincial prosecutors have been appointed, tasked with prioritising the prosecution of extortion cases in the construction sector.

Despite the alleged success of greater cooperation between the public works ministry and SAPS, construction mafias remain a significant blight on infrastructure development.

- One contentious issue is a procurement law originally established to help local communities and black empowerment by setting aside 30% of large public projects (in value terms) for employing small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs). This target is not currently mandatory, but a new Public Procurement Act (PPA) approved in July 2024 will make it a legal requirement once the act comes into force.
- Construction mafias pose as “business forums” and demand this 30% – not carrying out any works but instead using violence, intimidation and sabotage tactics to extort this sum from contractors.
- The DPWI, led by a member of the pro-business Democratic Alliance (DA) within the Government of National Unity (GNU) wants to remove this 30% requirement.

The DA is also challenging employment quotas set out in a new Employment Equity Act that came into force in January 2025. The disagreement between the DA and the African National Congress (ANC) within the GNU feeds into South Africa’s overall security risk by creating a backdrop of uncertainty as to the stability of the coalition.

The risk of political instability also feeds into an erosion of governance, an issue which is especially important given the population’s lack of trust in SAPS, fed further by scandals involving police officers.

- On 5 June a teenager was kidnapped by what was originally reported to be two men impersonating policemen. However, further investigation revealed that the vehicle used to abduct the teenager was indeed SAPS property and an officer was arrested. The case was ongoing at the time of writing, and the teenager had not been found.
- On 3 June, SAPS arrested two police officers in Gauteng province on charges of kidnapping, extortion and fraud. The two officers were accused of operating a syndicate targeting undocumented foreign nationals. The syndicate also targeted Gauteng businesses run by foreign nationals.

Gauteng continues to be a hotspot of kidnapping and extortion, according to official statistics. While several provinces experienced a year-on-year decline in recorded kidnapping – for example, in Western Cape the incidence fell by 19% – in Gauteng there was an increase of nearly 16%, accounting for over half of the total for South Africa.

- Of the top 30 police stations registering kidnappings, all but four were in Gauteng, with the remainder in KwaZulu-Natal.
- Of these top 30, the largest rise year on year (61.5%) was seen in Johannesburg Central police station. Johannesburg Central thus overtook in absolute terms three other stations that had previously had a larger number of recorded kidnappings.

The surge in kidnappings in Gauteng, and Johannesburg more specifically, are likely to be closely linked to a mushrooming in express kidnappings. Criminals see these as low-risk, high-reward operations, by contrast to cash-in-transit or bank robberies.

- These latter types of crime are included in what SAPS terms “TRIO” crimes (carjacking, residential robberies and non-residential robberies), which fell year on year across South Africa, including Gauteng.
- Although rates of TRIO crimes remain high in Gauteng, and account for 40.4% of all TRIO crimes in South Africa, the trend reflects the shift from higher- to lower-risk crimes.

TRIO crimes were labelled thus by SAPS because until now they have been the three crimes considered to be a priority. However, as the statistics show, SAPS is having to dedicate increasing resources to the kidnapping crisis.

This will be a key challenge for the new head of the Hawks, a position vacant since the retirement of the previous incumbent, Lieutenant-General Godfrey Lebeya, on 30 May. However, the recruitment process does not appear to be going smoothly.

- The position was first advertised four months prior to Lebeya’s retirement. Then on 9 June the Minister of Police, Senzo Mchunu, withdrew the advertisement, seemingly owing to a lack of satisfactory candidates.
- The advanced skills needed to investigate serious crimes – including cyber and forensic accounting skills – have left the Hawks as a unit with a recruitment problem, which is likely also affecting the appointment of a new head. According to the Institute for Security Studies, a local think tank, the Hawks has a chronic vacancy rate below 50% owing to insufficient funding.

The Hawks unit needs advanced digital skills owing to the increasing use of technology in kidnapping. Express kidnapping is especially attractive because mobile phones with banking apps give criminals access to substantially larger pools of funds than traditional robberies of individuals used to yield.

- The relative ease with which express kidnappings can be carried out – as opposed to targeting a business, for example – and the fact that everybody in an urban area is virtually assured to be carrying a mobile phone has fuelled these kidnappings and also “democratised” them: whereas traditionally kidnappers targeted wealthy individuals, this new approach puts all individuals at risk.

Banks are beginning to respond to the burgeoning crisis. Several banking apps allow the user to hide large-value accounts, and at least one South African bank has launched a “panic code”: a second password that alerts the bank that the user is under duress.



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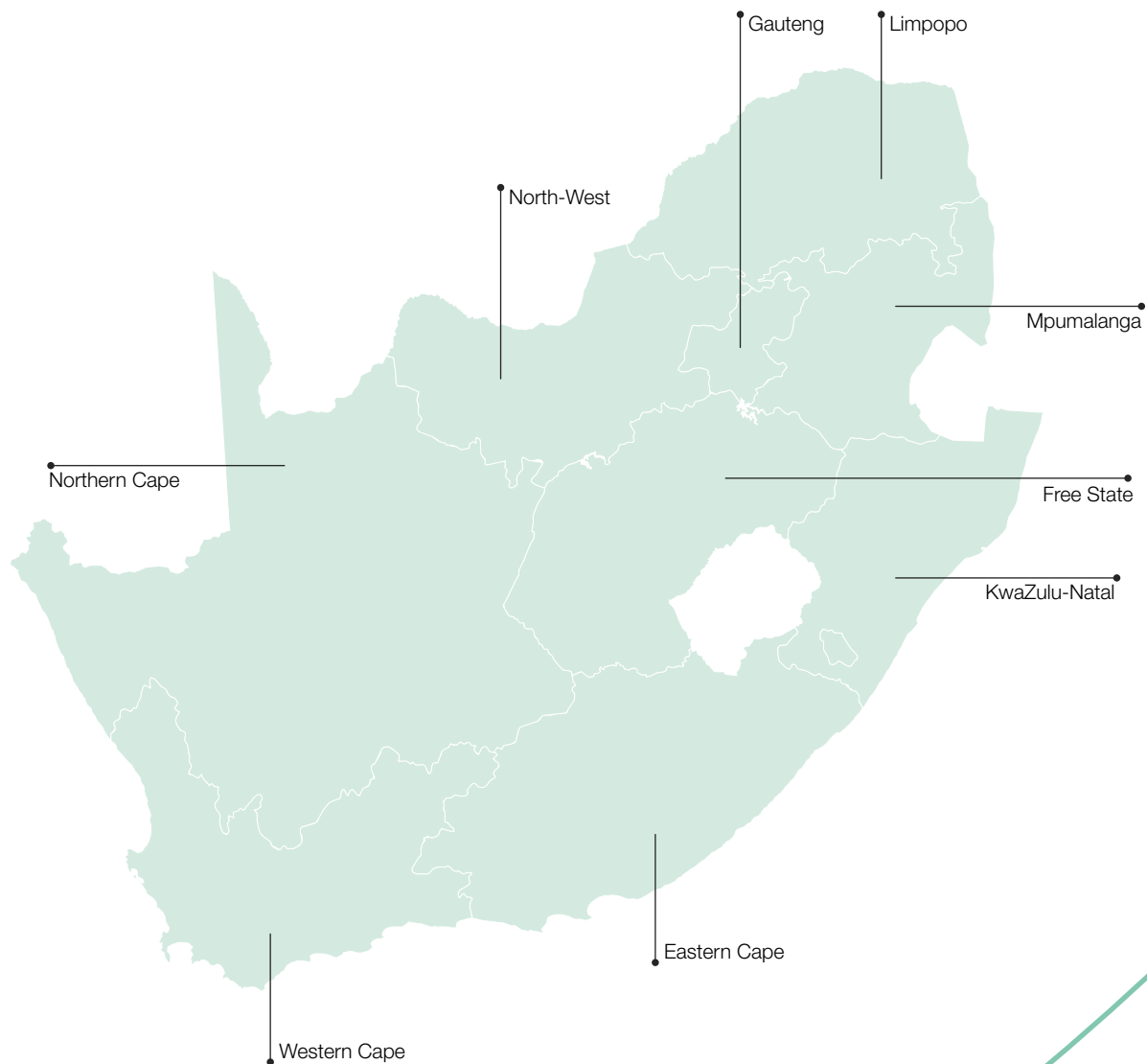
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US State Department advice

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 lists kidnapping as a main concern, reflecting the steady rise in the incidence of this crime. The State Department's Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) *Country Security Report* 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 has become 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.

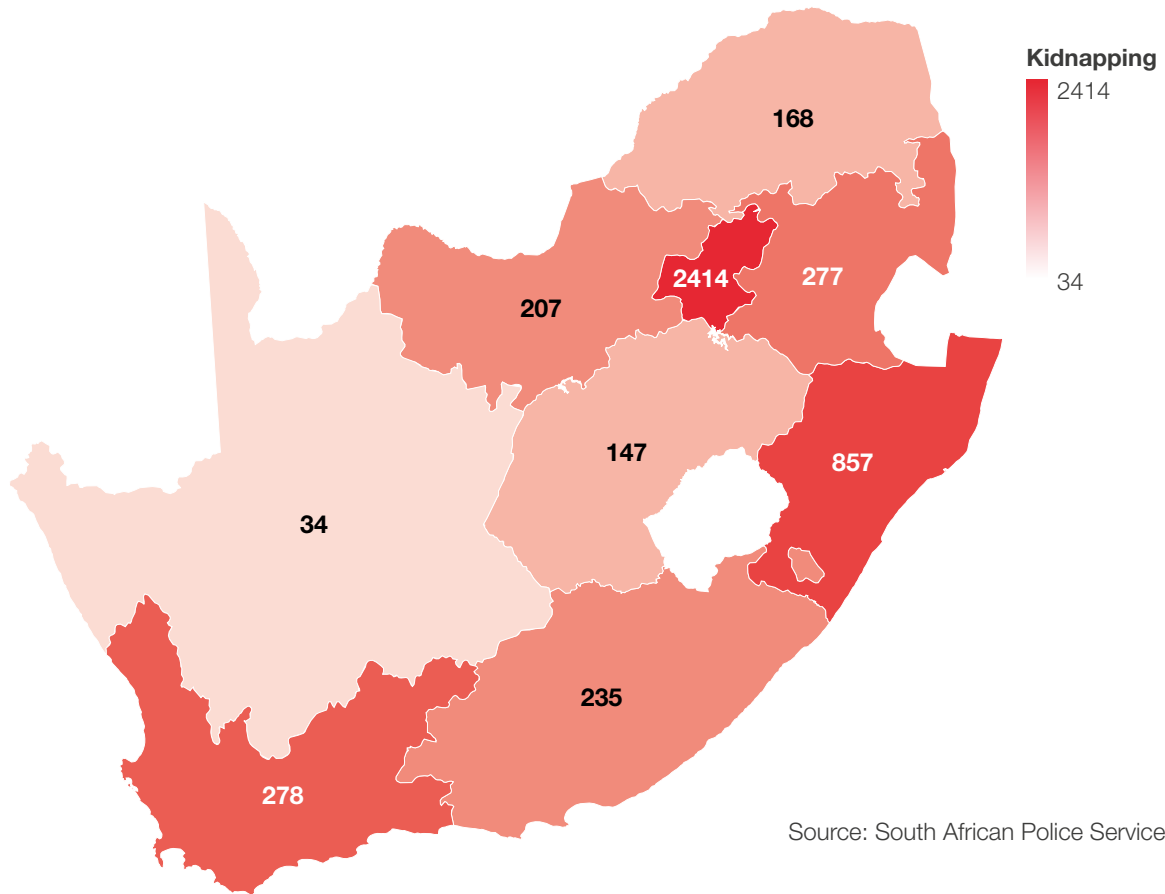


Statistics

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Kidnappings by province, January-March 2025



Source: South African Police Service



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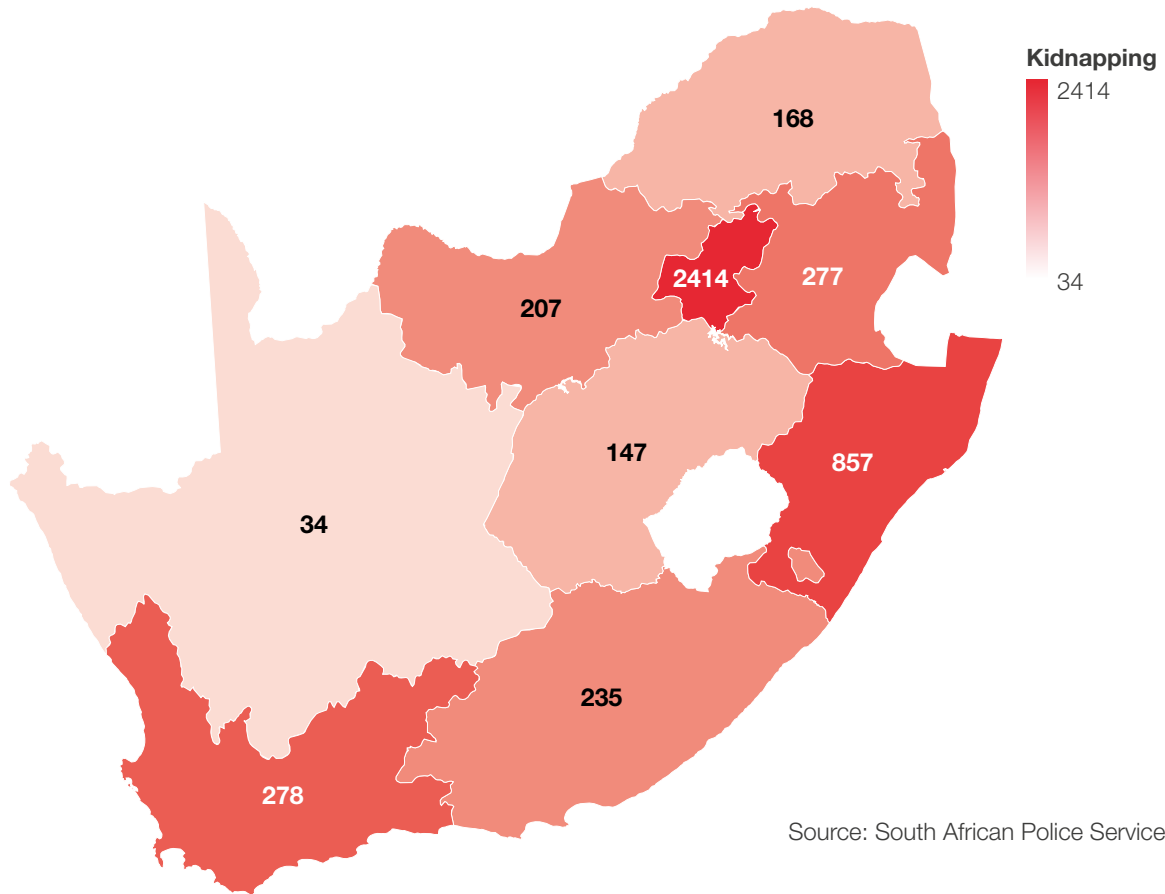


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Source: South African Police Service





Principles of security

There are seven fundamental principles of security:



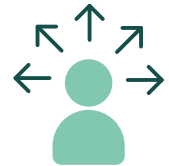
Layers of security



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.





Convex Insurance UK Limited

52 Lime Street, London EC3M 7AF
+44 (0)20 3886 0560

Convex Re Limited

Point House, 6 Front Street, Hamilton HM 11, Bermuda
+1 441 232 0112

Convex Europe S.A.

37 Boulevard Joseph II, 2ème étage,
L-1840 Luxembourg, Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg
+352 27 86 22 76

Convex Guernsey Limited

Bucktrout House, Glatigny Esplanade, St Peter Port, Guernsey, GY1 1WR

convexin.com

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