



MEDIA RELEASE

NSW Police issue warning to Chinese students following rise in 'virtual kidnappings'

NSW Police Force

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The NSW Police Force, together with Chinese authorities and universities, is warning members of the community about an elaborate phone scam targeting Chinese students, known globally as a 'virtual kidnapping'.

This year, eight known incidents of 'virtual kidnappings' have been reported to the NSW Police Force, with scammers targeting Chinese international students and successfully obtaining \$3.2 million in ransom payments.

Incidents of a similar nature have been reported to international law enforcement agencies and netted millions of dollars from victims around the world.

A 'virtual kidnapping' is a sophisticated extortion scam that involves young victims faking their own kidnappings following phone calls from fraudsters – who then demand ransom payments for their safe release from relatives.

Investigators have been told that initial contact is made through a phone call from someone usually speaking in Mandarin and claiming to be a representative from a Chinese authority, such as the Chinese Embassy, Consulate or Police.

The caller then convinces the victim that they have been implicated in a crime in China, or that their identity has been stolen, and that they must pay a fee to avoid legal action, arrest or deportation.

Using technology to mask their physical locations, scammers encourage victims to continue communications through various encrypted applications such as WeChat and WhatsApp.

The victim is then threatened or coerced into transferring large amounts of money into unknown offshore bank accounts.

In some instances, victims are convinced to fake their own kidnappings – known as a 'virtual kidnapping'.


Scammers instruct victims to cease contact with their family and friends, rent a hotel room and take photographs or video recordings that depict them bound and blindfolded. These files are then shared with the victim's relatives overseas.

When the victim's parents are unable to establish contact with their child in Australia, they send large ransom payments in exchange for their 'release'.

The caller will continue to make threats and ransom demands until they are unable to obtain any further payments, often resulting in the victim's family making contact with police.

NSW Police Force State Crime Command Director, Detective Chief Superintendent Darren Bennett, said police have engaged with the Chinese Embassy and Chinese Consulate in Sydney to warn the community of such scams.

"Virtual kidnappings are designed to take advantage of people's trust in authorities and have developed considerably over the last decade by transnational organised crime syndicates," Det Ch Supt Bennett said.

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“While these phone calls appear to be random in nature, these scammers seem to be targeting vulnerable members of the Chinese-Australian community.

“NSW Police have been assured from the Chinese Consulate-General in Sydney that no person claiming to be from a Chinese authority such as police, procuratorates or the courts will contact a student on their mobile phone and demand monies to be paid or transferred. If this occurs, it is a scam.

“This year alone, NSW Police are aware of eight instances of virtual kidnappings where ransom payments that range between \$20,000 to \$500,000 and in one case – \$2 million – have been paid.

“While we are working with our law enforcement colleagues to investigate the origins of these scams, we are urging the community to heed our warnings not to respond to the caller’s demands,” Det Ch Supt Bennett said.

More than 212,000 international students are enrolled to study in NSW, and with preparations being made to allow those on student visas to return to the state as COVID-19 restrictions are reassessed, police are urging the community to educate themselves about these types of elaborate phone scams.

NSW Police Force Corporate Sponsor for the Safety and Wellbeing of International Students, Assistant Commissioner Peter Thurtell, said the international community are urged to contact police if they suspect they have been a victim of a scam.

“Our officers, together with education and government partner agencies, play a key role in making the overall experience of international students a positive one in New South Wales,” Assistant Commissioner Thurtell said.

“International students who have chosen to study abroad in Australia, are in an unfamiliar environment and often living away from family and friends for the first time.

“For any students who receive calls from someone claiming to be a Chinese official and wish to check on the validity of the caller – we urge them to contact the Chinese Consulate in Sydney for advice.

“We also urge students to seek advice from their university or school, and report the matter to police, who will act in their best interests and welfare.

“The victims of virtual kidnappings we have engaged are traumatised by what has occurred, believing they have placed themselves, and their loved ones, in real danger.

“In these instances, it is often friends and family that encourage victims to come forward and report the crime to police, as victims feel embarrassed or ashamed by what has transpired.

“The community should be reassured that NSW Police will pursue these criminals through every investigative avenue available and that bilingual officers are on hand to assist those who speak English as a second language,” Assistant Commissioner Thurtell said.

Law enforcement officials are also working closely with the NSW Government and universities to provide support and resources to international students who encounter suspected ‘virtual kidnapping’ scams.

Macquarie University Pro Vice-Chancellor International, Ms Nicole Brigg, said universities are aware of the scam calls and are available to provide assistance to any student with concerns.

“We want any student who chooses to study in New South Wales to enjoy their time here and not be fearful of falling victim to scam calls,” Ms Brigg said.

“Students can do two important things to protect themselves against these types of crimes – firstly, be aware they exist and secondly, ask for help early if they think it might be happening to them or someone they know.

“Each university regularly distributes communications to students advising them of scams and would encourage anyone that receives a call of this nature to contact university staff,” Ms Brigg said.

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According to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) June 2020 'Targeting scams' report for Australia, the 'Chinese authority' scam caused the highest losses of all government impersonation scams for 2019.

Last year, 1172 reports of 'Chinese authority' scams were recorded across the country by Scamwatch with a total loss in excess of \$2 million.

The NSW Police Force State Crime Command's Robbery and Serious Crime Squad provide a specialist response to all reported kidnap-for-ransom offences – both physical and virtual – in New South Wales.

Examples of 'virtual kidnappings' reported to police this year include;

- On Wednesday 22 April 2020, officers from Ryde Police Area Command commenced an investigation following contact from a university in Sydney's north-west, concerned for the welfare of a 20-year-old female student. Police were told family members in China believed the woman had been kidnapped and that \$300,000 had been paid following ransom demands from a caller purporting to be Chinese Police. Following inquiries, the woman was located safe and well at a home at Chatswood about midday on Thursday 23 April 2020.
- Officers from North Shore Police Area Command commenced an investigation following reports a video of a 22-year-old woman, who was bound and blindfolded, had been sent to family in China via WeChat about 12.30pm on Saturday 30 May 2020. Police were told that the family had paid \$20,000 following ransom demands for her safe release. Following inquiries, detectives located the woman at a hotel at North Sydney safe and well about 1am the next day (Sunday 31 May 2020).
- About 12.45am on Wednesday 17 June 2020, officers from St George Police Area Command received a phone call from man in China who reported that he had received a video of his Sydney-based daughter at an unknown location and that she was bound. An investigation was commenced, and the 22-year-old woman was located safe and well at a hotel at Hurstville just after 1am. Police were told that more than \$2 million had been paid following ransom demands by a caller purporting to be Chinese Police.
- About 10am on Tuesday 14 July 2020, officers from Ryde Police Area Command received a report that a 21-year-old woman had been kidnapped. The woman's housemate contacted police after her parents were sent a video of her pleading for help at an unknown location and were unable to contact her. Following inquiries, officers located the woman safe and well at a hotel at Pyrmont about 10pm the same day. Police were told that \$100,000 had been paid by the woman into an offshore bank account following demands by an unknown caller prior to the 'virtual kidnapping'.

The advice for anyone who receives a call involving demands for money under the threat of violence is to hang up, contact the Chinese Consulate in Sydney to verify the claims and report the matter to the NSW Police Force.

Anyone with information relating to incidents of virtual kidnappings should contact Crime Stoppers: 1800 333 000 or <https://nsw.crimestoppers.com.au>. Information is treated in strict confidence. The public is reminded not to report crime via NSW Police social media pages.

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