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A Concentric Company

Global Insights Report

Your reliable source of intelligence for Kidnap, Ransom, Extortion and Piracy around the world

Developing Technologies & Their Impact on the KRE Landscape

June 2025

www.sps-global.com

Introduction

The kidnap, ransom, and extortion (KRE) threat landscape adapts quickly to new technological developments – in an era of unprecedented technological advances, the arms race between law enforcement and KRE criminals is speeding up, granting threat actors critical windows for expanded exploitation.

The development of new communications, finance, and content generation tools has changed the modus operandi of KRE criminals across the world. The proliferation of these technologies, particularly through mobile devices, has generated exploitation opportunities not just in high-income economies, but also across the increasingly electrified and networked Global South, making novel KRE developments a global challenge.

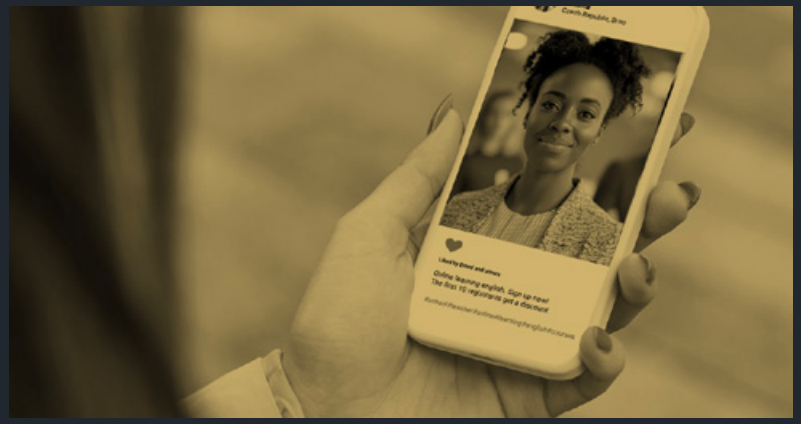
Mobile Banking

Cryptocurency

Four technologies have had a notable impact on the KRE landscape over the last five years: **mobile banking; cryptocurrency; generative artificial intelligence (AI)**; and **social media.** Developments in these fields have accelerated in recent times, providing criminals with new ways to target, capture, and extort their victims.

Generative AI

Social Media



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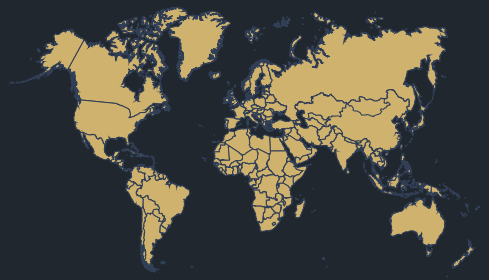


Kidnapping for Ransom

Fake Dating

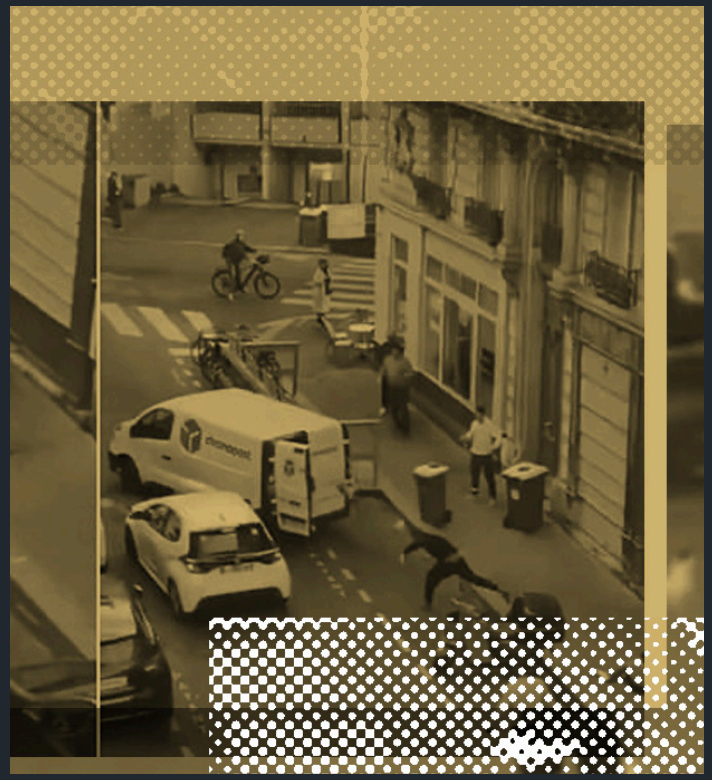
In 2022, over 90 percent of kidnappings in São Paulo were initiated through fake dating app profiles.

Crypto Kidnappings

In the first five months of 2025, France recorded five high-profile kidnapping incidents targeting cryptocurrency holders.

Mexican dating Apps

In May and June 2025, Mexico experienced a series of kidnappings of American citizens orchestrated through dating apps.



Kidnap-for-ransom operations are increasingly leveraging social media and cryptocurrency to improve how they target victims and secure payments. Recent crypto kidnappings in France underscore the risk of criminal targeting in commonly assumed safe countries.

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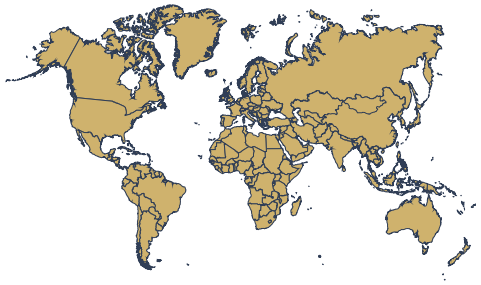
Kidnapping for Ransom



Analysis

The traditional structure of kidnapping for ransom has not changed over the last few years – however, new technologies are making targeting quicker and more accurate, and potential ransoms more lucrative.

The spread of Internet access into new regions beyond the traditional high-income economies has brought an explosion of online personal data availability, particularly through social media platforms. These provide would-be kidnappers with detailed information on a target's pattern of life, allowing them to more easily find locations for secure abductions. Some popular social media platforms such as SnapChat provide near live-time location feeds, enabling even more opportunistic kidnappings. Social media accounts also provide a powerful tool for making lures; using information about friends and acquaintances, criminals can accurately impersonate contacts with fake accounts to set up meetings in secure abduction locations. Online dating apps provide especially vulnerable targets, enabling kidnappers to quickly find and isolate wealthier individuals to maximise profit.

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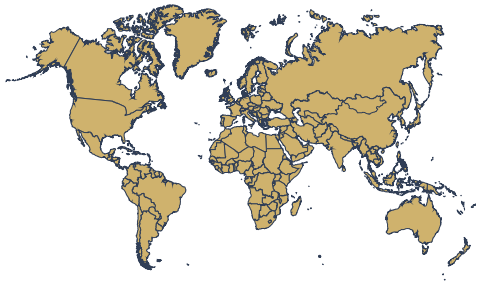
Kidnapping for Ransom



- In 2022, more than 90 percent of all kidnappings in Brazil's largest city, São Paulo, were conducted from fake profiles on dating apps. Middle class men between the ages of 30 and 65 were the most common victims, selected for their relative affluence and susceptibility to proposed meetings with strangers.

- More recently, in May and June 2025 Mexico recorded a series of kidnappings orchestrated through dating apps, targeting American citizens. A lack of Internet safety literacy, alongside higher proportions of organised criminality, have made Latin America one of the most fertile markets for kidnappers using these methods, although other regions such as the Asia Pacific have also experienced jumps in kidnapping incidents using social media lures.

- As Internet accessibility improves across new areas, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, we expect the lag in Internet safety awareness will provide new opportunities for criminal exploitation in kidnap-for-ransom incidents.

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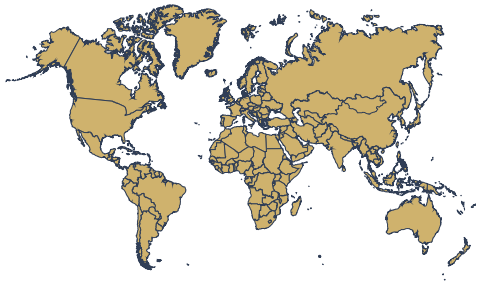
Kidnapping for Ransom



Technological developments in the finance space are also having an impact on ransom-based kidnapping, especially since the beginning of 2025. The growing ownership and use of cryptocurrency acts as a new objective for criminals searching for more reliable ransoms. Cryptocurrency is a decentralised, deregulated currency, over which law enforcement oversight is assumed to be far more limited than it would be with traditional ransom rewards. This makes holders of large quantities of cryptocurrency more attractive targets than other wealthy individuals, shaping criminal targeting.

- France has been the epicentre for this change: between January and May 2025, there were five separate high-profile targeted kidnap-for-ransom incidents involving individuals with high cryptocurrency wealth. These abductions involved the individuals themselves and occasionally their family members as targets, with cryptocurrency ransoms demanded to end torture and death threats.

- Preliminary investigations into these French cases found the criminals' organisational structure also leverages new technologies: the perpetrators are likely a diverse group of local criminals recruited and maintained via social media by a single Moroccan-based organisation.

- Since the beginning of 2025, high-profile cases have also been recorded in South Korea, the Philippines, Belgium, and Spain. While the vast majority of these cases saw law enforcement quickly reverse or prevent cryptocurrency transfers, the perception of crypto as being a more reliable reward for criminal abductions is likely to persist for the foreseeable future.

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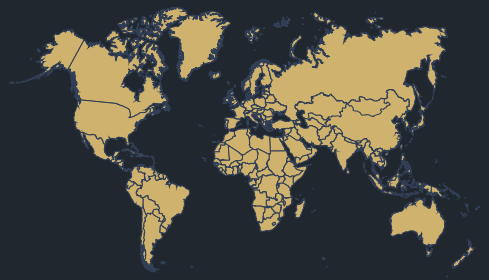


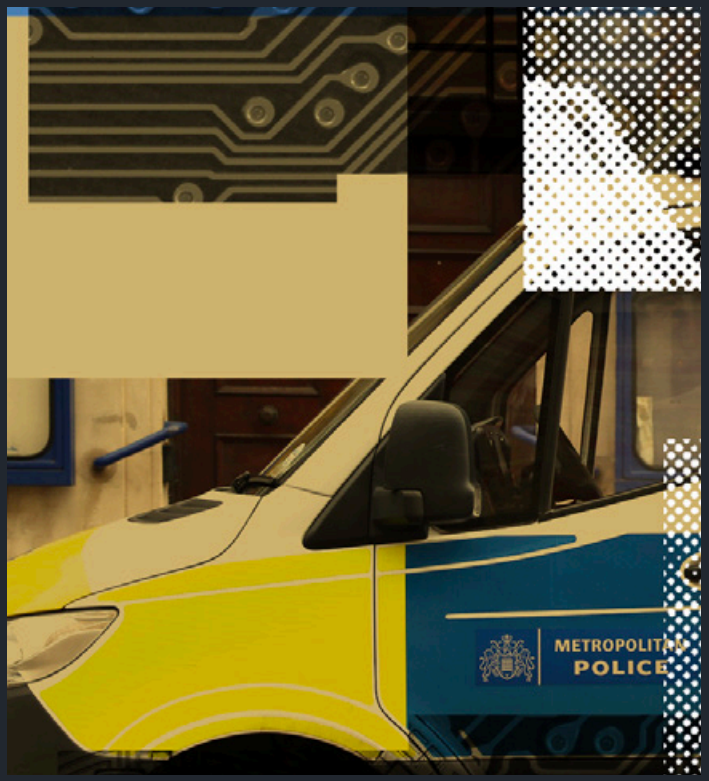
Express Kidnapping

PIX app

In the six months after the PIX payment app rolled out, São Paulo state recorded over 100 express kidnappings—a 40 percent rise to a level that has remained steady.

London Crypto Muggings

In London, over 290 arrests were made in one month in 2023 related to crypto mugging incidents.



New financial technologies are making express kidnapping faster, more discreet, and harder to trace. Mobile banking apps and instant transfer platforms such as PIX are removing traditional barriers for criminals, while the growing use of cryptocurrency is enabling similar crimes in high income countries.

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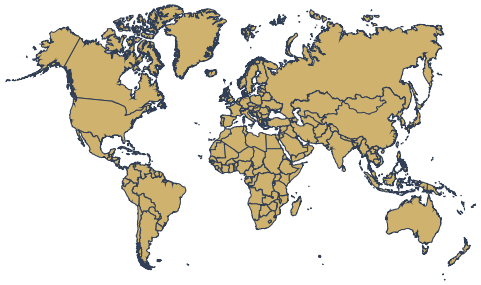
Express Kidnapping



Analysis

The development of online banking apps has liberated criminals from the geographical constraints of fixed ATMs, the traditional locus of express kidnappings, allowing operations to be conducted more swiftly across expanded areas and limiting the risk of engagement with law enforcement. Though this is a global trend, it has thus far been most prominent in the Global South, where banking safety features have been overlooked in favour of improving access to swift transfer methods.

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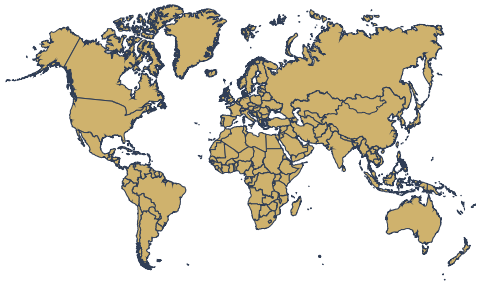
Express Kidnapping



- South Africa is a hotspot for this activity; the modus operandi typically involves criminals abducting victims and forcing them to make payments to foreign bank accounts or online purchases of specific items, leaving money transfers less traceable and retrievable.

- Meanwhile, in Brazil the rapid growth of the PIX payment app has made express kidnappings even faster: the QR code-scan transfer technology enables criminals to swiftly and even more discreetly extract funds from their victims.

- Despite heightened efforts to counter this trend from the Brazilian authorities, the unrelenting spread of PIX makes it a sustained driver of higher express kidnapping figures.

- In the first six months of 2021 following the app's release, São Paulo state alone recorded over 100 express kidnapping incidents, a 40 percent rise to a level that has remained steady ever since.

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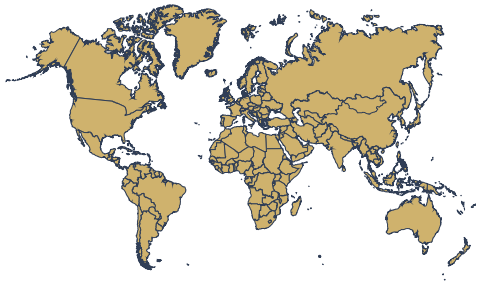
Express Kidnapping



Furthermore, the use of cryptocurrency has also affected express kidnapping cases, with "crypto muggings" a growing issue across high income economies. London is a hotspot for these crimes, where victims are isolated, assaulted, then robbed of their mobile phone, which is subsequently drained of its cryptocurrency funds.

- London's Metropolitan Police claim organised gangs are responsible for these crimes, with over 290 individuals arrested in connection with these incidents in just a month in 2023. As the use of cryptocurrencies expands towards the Global South, we assess the risk of express kidnappings aimed at extracting crypto funds will increase, driving up abduction and mugging figures.

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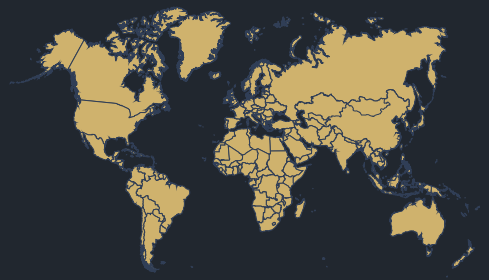

Virtual Kidnapping

Fake Kidnapping

In January 2024, a Chinese student in the U.S. was tricked into faking his own kidnapping, leading to an $80,000 ransom demand.

London Kidnappings

King's College London issued targeted guidance to Chinese families due to repeated virtual kidnapping scams involving overseas students.

Virtual kidnappings are becoming more effective due to increased access to personal data via social media and the rapid development of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools. Chinese overseas students remain high-frequency targets. AI-driven voice and video spoofing is set to significantly escalate this threat.

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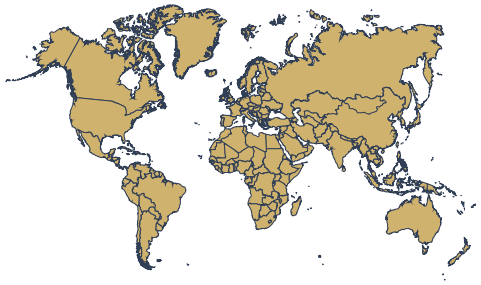
Virtual Kidnapping



Analysis

Virtual kidnappings depend on fear and speed to extort their victims without posing a physical security threat – novel developments in communications are having a dramatic impact on the effectiveness of these operations.

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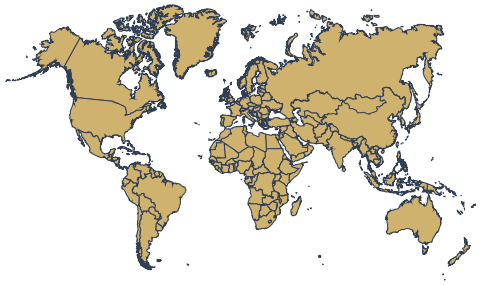
Virtual Kidnapping



Social Media

Social media and other online databases displaying personal information have improved criminal surveillance capacity. Monitoring operations can now be conducted in a matter of hours from anywhere in the world, entirely remotely. Criminals are able to track patterns of life and personal details of individuals more accurately, enabling them to falsify kidnapping scenarios before contact with loved ones or law enforcement can be established. Moreover, expanding social media access has meant scams designed to psychologically intimidate individuals into self-isolating prior to undertaking a virtual kidnapping call are becoming more elaborate and threatening.

- In January 2024, a Chinese student studying in the United States was successfully convinced via online lures to take photos of himself as though he were kidnapped and to self-isolate in a tent while the criminals extorted his family for an $80,000 ransom.

- Chinese students studying abroad, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom, are common targets for criminals due to their relative affluence and distance from family members, so much so that King's College London was recently compelled to publish specific advice over this issue to families of Chinese students.

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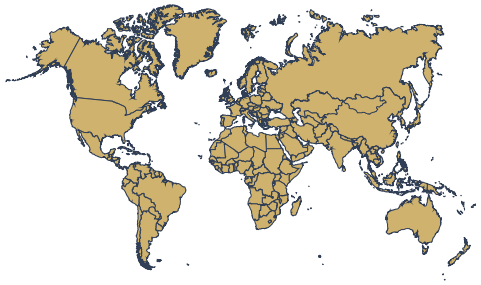
Virtual Kidnapping



This threat is set to expand substantially in the near future with the advent of new AI generative technologies, learning from a surplus of personalised training information available on social media.

- AI voice cloning programs now only require access to a small quantity of voice recordings to accurately imitate an individual's vocal cadence and tone, information readily available through a search on the average social media profile. This cloned voice can be used with high effectiveness on phone calls with victims.

- Image and video-based generative AI is also quickly developing the capacity to fake visual evidence of kidnapping events.

The threat from these new AI-enhanced virtual kidnappings is likely to persist in areas of concentrated wealth, such as the United States and European countries due to the more lucrative potential earnings, although it may also spread globally as AI scams become cheaper to conduct and Internet access more ubiquitous.

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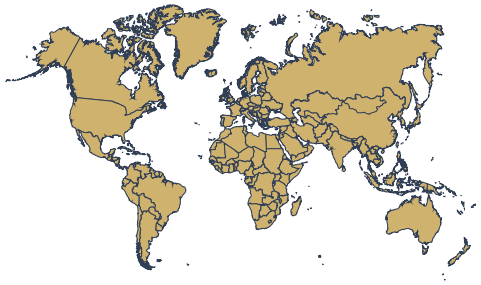
Virtual Kidnapping



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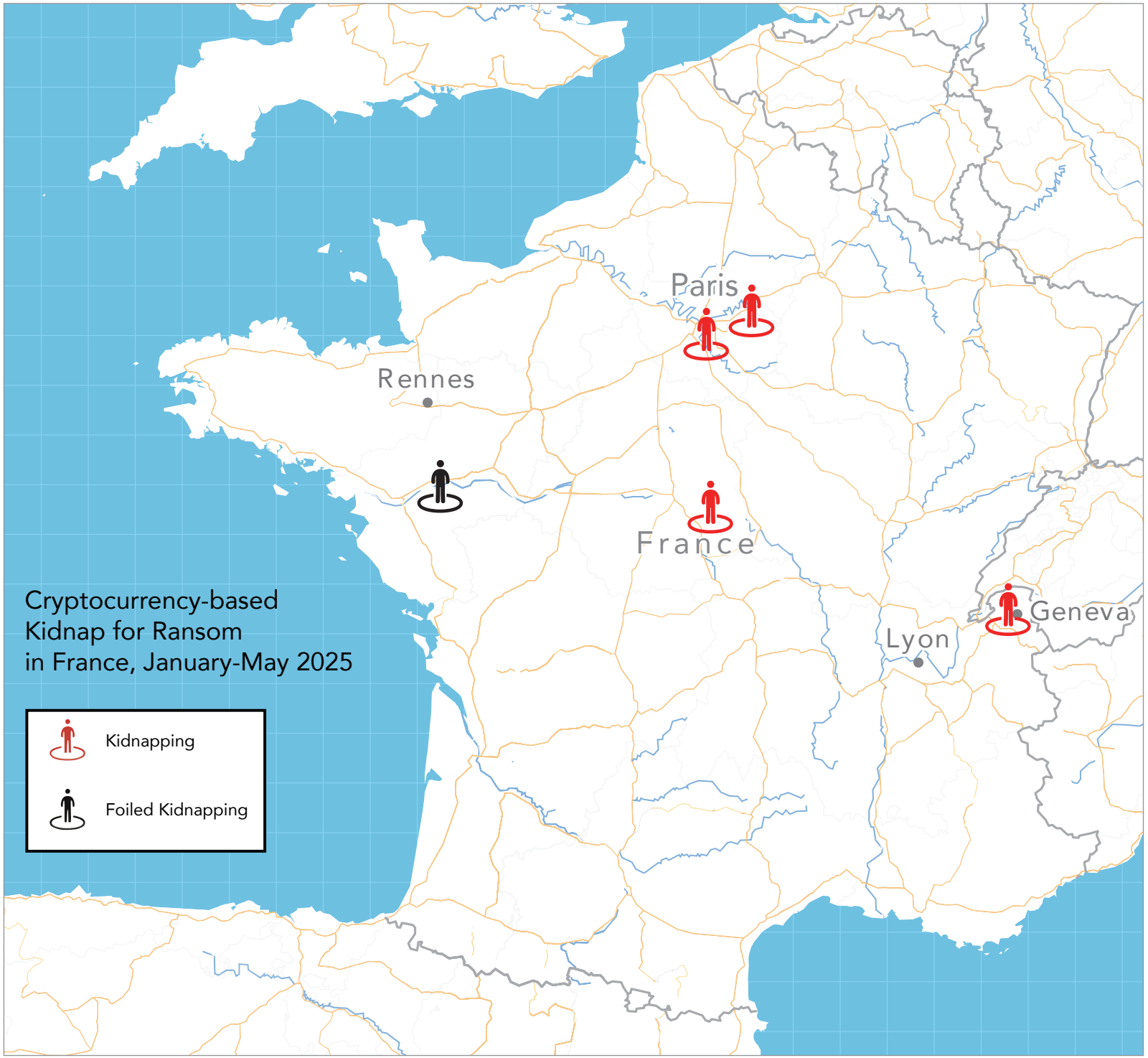
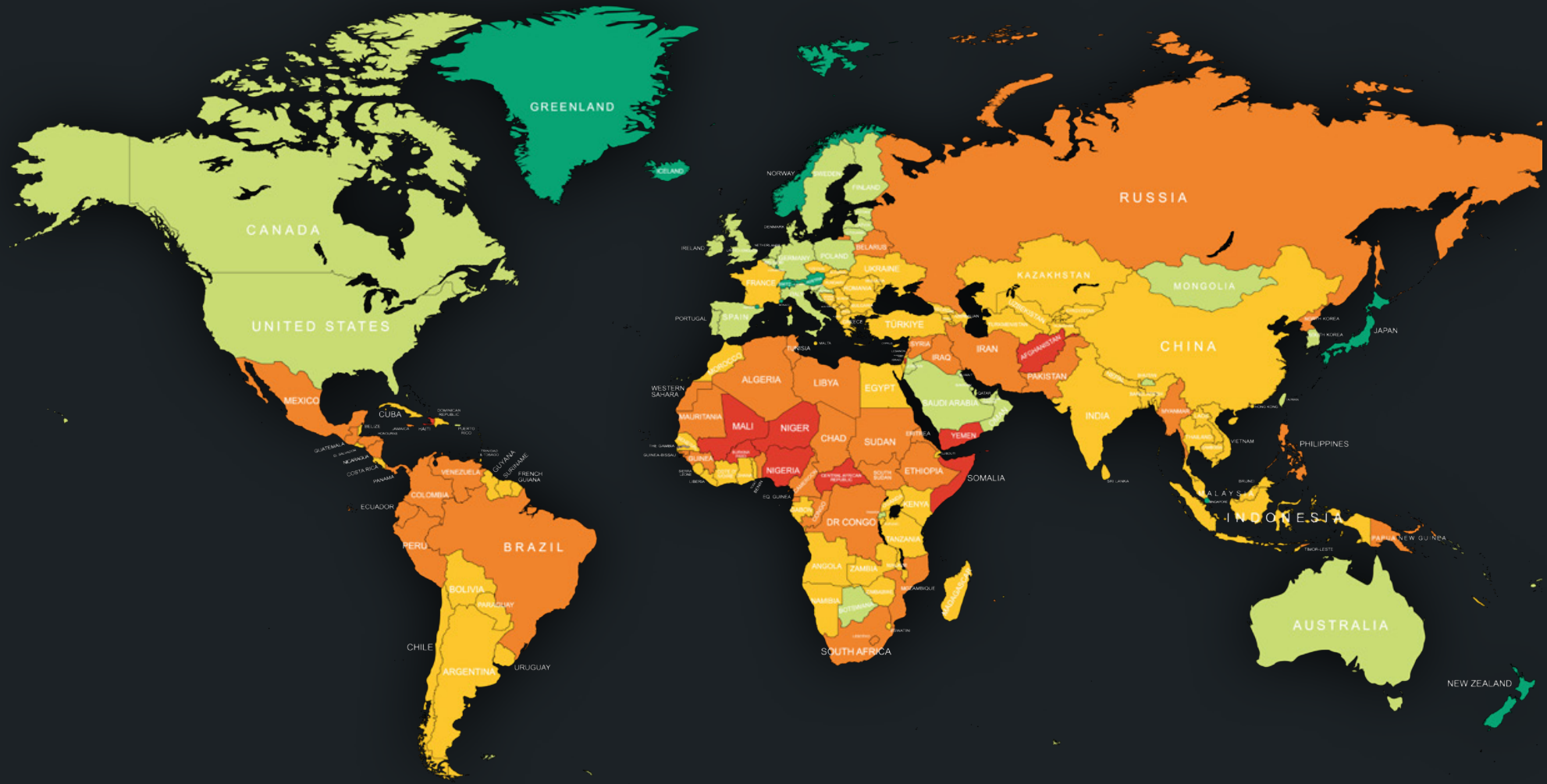


2025 Q3 KRE Risk Map



SPS 2025 Q3 KRE Risk Map

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Americas

Country	Risk
Anguilla	Moderate
Antigua and Barbuda	Moderate
Argentina	Medium
Bahamas	Moderate
Barbados	Moderate
Belize	Medium
Bermuda	Medium
Bolivia	Medium
Brazil	High
British Virgin Islands	Moderate
Canada	Moderate
Cayman Islands	Moderate
Chile	Medium
Colombia	High
Costa Rica	Medium
Cuba	Medium
Dominica	Moderate
Dominican Republic	Medium
Ecuador	High
El Salvador	Medium
Falkland Islands	Low
French Guiana	Medium
Greenland	Low
Grenada	Moderate
Guatemala	High
Guyana	Medium
Haiti	Extreme
Honduras	High
Jamaica	High
Mexico	High
Nicaragua	High
Panama	High
Paraguay	Medium
Peru	High
Saint Kitts and Nevis	Moderate
Saint Lucia	Moderate
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	Moderate
South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands	Low
Suriname	Medium
Trinidad and Tobago	Medium
United States	Moderate
Uruguay	Medium
Venezuela	High

Asia Pacific

Country	Risk
Australia	Moderate
Bangladesh	Medium
Bhutan	Moderate
British Indian Ocean Territory	Moderate
Brunei	Medium
Cambodia	Medium
China	Medium
Cook Islands	Moderate
East Timor	High
Federated States of Micronesia	Low
Fiji	Moderate
Hong Kong	Medium
India	Medium
Indonesia	High
Japan	Low
Laos	Medium
Malaysia	Medium
Maldives	Moderate
Mongolia	Moderate
Myanmar	High
Nepal	Medium
New Caledonia	Medium
New Zealand	Low
North Korea	High
Papua New Guinea	High
Philippines	High
Russia	High
Samoa	Moderate
Singapore	Low
Solomon Islands	Moderate
South Korea	Moderate
Sri Lanka	Medium
Taiwan	Moderate
Thailand	Medium
Timor-Leste	High
Tonga	Moderate
Vanuatu	Moderate
Vietnam	Medium

Central Asia + MENA

Country	Risk
Afghanistan	Extreme
Algeria	High
Bahrain	Moderate
Cyprus	Medium
Egypt	Medium
Iran	High
Iraq	High
Israel	Medium
Jordan	Medium
Kazakhstan	Medium
Kuwait	Moderate
Kyrgyzstan	Medium
Lebanon	High
Libya	High
Morocco	Medium
Oman	Moderate
Pakistan	High
Palestinian Territories	Extreme
Qatar	Moderate
Saudi Arabia	Moderate
Syria	High
Tajikistan	Medium
Tunisia	High
Turkey	Medium
Turkmenistan	Medium
United Arab Emirates	Moderate
Uzbekistan	Medium
Western Sahara	High
Yemen	Extreme

Europe

Country	Risk
Albania	Medium
Andorra	Low
Armenia	Medium
Austria	Low
Azerbaijan	Medium
Belarus	High
Belgium	Moderate
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Medium
Bulgaria	Medium
Croatia	Moderate
Czechia	Medium
Denmark	Moderate
Estonia	Moderate
Faroe Islands	Moderate
Finland	Moderate
France	Moderate
Georgia	Medium
Germany	Moderate
Greece	Medium
Hungary	Medium
Iceland	Low
Ireland	Moderate
Italy	Moderate
Kosovo	Medium
Latvia	Moderate
Liechtenstein	Low
Lithuania	Moderate
Luxembourg	Low
Malta	Medium
Moldova	Medium
Monaco	Low
Montenegro	Medium
Netherlands	Moderate
North Macedonia	Medium
Norway	Low
Poland	Moderate
Portugal	Moderate
Romania	Medium
San Marino	Low
Serbia	Medium
Slovakia	Medium
Slovenia	Moderate
Spain	Moderate
Sweden	Moderate
Switzerland	Low
Ukraine	Medium
United Kingdom	Moderate
Vatican City	Low

Sub Saharan Africa

Country	Risk
Angola	Medium
Benin	High
Botswana	Moderate
Burkina Faso	Extreme
Burundi	Medium
Cameroon	High
Cape Verde	Moderate
Central African Republic	Extreme
Chad	High
Comoros	High
Congo-Brazzaville	High
Côte d'Ivoire	Medium
Democratic Republic of the Congo	Extreme
Djibouti	Medium
Equatorial Guinea	High
Eritrea	High
Eswatini	Medium
Ethiopia	High
Gabon	Medium
Gambia	High
Ghana	Medium
Guinea	High
Guinea-Bissau	High
Kenya	Medium
Lesotho	High
Liberia	Medium
Madagascar	Medium
Malawi	Medium
Mali	Extreme
Mauritania	High
Mauritius	Moderate
Mozambique	High
Namibia	Medium
Niger	Extreme
Nigeria	Extreme
Rwanda	Moderate
São Tomé and Príncipe	Moderate
Senegal	Medium
Sierra Leone	Medium
Somalia	Extreme
South Africa	High
South Sudan	High
Sudan	High
Tanzania	Medium
Togo	Medium
Uganda	Medium
Zambia	Medium
Zimbabwe	Medium

Risk Criteria

Low:
Kidnapping and extortion incidents are extremely rare, isolated, and not part of any specific organised activity.

Moderate:
Kidnapping and extortion incidents remain infrequent and largely opportunistic within criminal circles often with personal motivations. Targets may include foreign travellers and businesspeople involved in express kidnappings, but organised kidnap for ransoms are unlikely.

Medium:
Kidnappings and extortion are a present tactic especially within organised criminal activity, with some violence and occasional fatalities involved. Express kidnappings and extortion of foreign nationals occur more widely, and criminal organisations may target expatriate communities. Kidnapping for ransom of foreign nationals occurs sporadically.

High:
The threat of kidnapping and extortion is widespread and stems from multiple threat actors. The use of violence is prevalent, with a moderate numbers of fatalities registered. Terrorist groups and other actors may use kidnapping or extortion tactics to elicit financial or political ransoms. Such groups may have explicit intent to target the expatriate community. The state security apparatus is often unable to provide adequate protection.

Extreme:
Kidnapping and extortion threats are widespread with an array of well organised and violent threat actors which may include criminal, terrorist and state actors. Violence and fatalities are common place. State protective measures to reduce the kidnapping and extortion threat are rendered null and void in these unstable security environments.
Propriety

Propriety Information

Contact

For more information on our
Kidnap, Ransom, Extortion and Piracy capabilities
please contact our Crisis Management Team at
cmt@sps-global.com