

Scammers force student into hiding, threaten family in China, Calgary police say

[cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/kidnapping-virtual-scam-chinese-student-calgary-international-1.4687567](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/kidnapping-virtual-scam-chinese-student-calgary-international-1.4687567)

Rachel Ward · CBC News · Posted: Jun 01, 2018 11:13 AM MT | Last Updated: June

June 1, 2018

1



International students are being warned they may be the target of scammers who run elaborate virtual kidnapping schemes. (Darryl Dyck/Canadian Press)

International students in Calgary are at risk of falling victim to an elaborate "virtual kidnapping" scam that forced one man into hiding and terrified his family in China, police say.

There have been two such cases reported by Chinese students in the city since the start of May, following reports of the scam elsewhere in the country, the Calgary Police Service said.

"The duress it puts the family in is unbelievable," acting duty inspector Jeff Bell said at a news conference Friday afternoon.

On May 5, a family in China contacted their local police to report they had received a ransom request through their son's social media account.

Their son was studying at a Calgary university. The message said he was being held against his will and would be harmed unless the family sent them money.

Chinese authorities were able to reach Calgary police, who found the student hiding in a Calgary hotel.

Warning public

Police have been in touch with local schools, in particular the University of Calgary and its campus security team, as one of the students goes to that school, they said.

Officers made this case public in the hope of alerting international students and their families to this kind of scheme. The cases can be difficult to investigate as the threats must find their way to Canada through overseas law enforcement agencies and embassies.



Campus security at the University of Calgary has been alerted to the scam by city police. (Dave Gilson/CBC)

In the case in early May, the student had been told to destroy his communication devices and credit cards so he couldn't be traced. The scammers then convinced him to get a new cellphone and not tell anyone else the number. That made it hard for his family to find him while they were being told to pay the ransom.

The victims don't know that they're participating in their own kidnapping because they're under mental duress, Bell said. Scammers tell them different stories that make them believe they must do as they're told.

'You'll get a dead body': Father was 'distracted' over international student's fake kidnapping

Often, families are so worried they're willing "to pay large amounts of money to get their children back," he said.

"It's very traumatic, obviously, for the family."

In a case in Montreal, the friends and family of an 18-year-old student were defrauded out of more than \$200,000. The international student had been manipulated into taking photos of herself tied up and in distress.

Police said those photos were sent to her mother, who collected the money for the scammers before calling police.

Scammers may use doctored videos

Police are asking any families or students who receive similar threatening messages to contact police as this family did, and to not transfer any money.

The scammers can be very convincing, police said. Some have sent videos of the supposedly kidnapped victim to family members. These videos appear to show the victim under duress but in fact were faked and compiled from other videos, police said.

This one targeting international students "compiled the best of a whole bunch of scams in one," Bell said.

Sagar Grewal, president of the University of Calgary Students' Union, said international students are especially vulnerable to abuse because they're away from their home, often for the first time, and English may be their second language.



Sagar Grewal is the president of the University of Calgary Students' Union. (Dave Gilson/CBC) "We just really hope that international students feel as if they're supported and that they feel they are safe on our campus," he said. "We're here to help."

Fake kidnapping sparks police hunt for missing Chinese student in Halifax

Other signs include a student being forced to stay on the phone for hours and not being allowed to say why, being called from spoof numbers that look like official government agencies, and convincing students to leave school or work to make cash withdrawals, pack suitcases and leave home.

Getting help

Students and families should know the Canadian government will not force you to stay on the phone or stop you from seeking legal advice or calling loved ones, police said.

Police also advise students to verify requests from supposedly government officials by calling numbers they look up themselves, and taking time to do that research before responding.

On the University of Calgary campus, students can also ask for help from the free student legal assistance and the international student centre, both of which the student union can help them find.
