

Travel Security - Country Fact Files - Kidnapping

Over the past decade, global kidnappings have demonstrated a complex pattern, influenced by economic crises, political instability, organised crime, and terrorism. Key kidnapping hotspots include Latin America, parts of Africa, and South Asia, with incidents increasingly fuelled by socio-economic pressures and the growth of organised criminal networks.

Global Kidnapping Stats

Global kidnapping statistics for 2020 through 2023 show notable fluctuations due to shifting socioeconomic factors and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, reports of kidnappings decreased slightly, influenced by travel restrictions and lockdowns, which limited kidnappers' access to potential targets. However, as restrictions eased in late 2020 and throughout 2021, cases surged, driven by economic instability, political crises, and weakened security in various regions, including Latin America, Africa, and parts of Southeast Asia.

Between late 2020 and 2021, the worldwide kidnapping rate reportedly increased by 50%, with significant activity in countries like Nigeria, Haiti, and South Africa. Haiti alone saw record numbers of kidnappings in 2021, with 782 cases reported by October due to the country's unstable political environment. South Africa also reported a 133% increase in kidnappings over the last decade, with incidents remaining high through 2022 and 2023, primarily affecting high-net-worth individuals and expatriates.

By 2022 and 2023, while some regions like the Gulf of Guinea showed declines in maritime-related kidnappings due to improved security measures, terrestrial kidnappings in countries facing economic pressures, such as Colombia and Brazil, continued to rise. Moreover, increased reports from organisations like Constellis and AKE indicate that high-risk environments in the Middle East and Africa continue to experience heightened kidnap-for-ransom incidents targeting foreign nationals and the local elite.

Trends

Businesspeople, foreign nationals, and affluent locals are increasingly targeted, especially in countries facing economic downturns. High-profile targets are more likely to face prolonged detention and higher ransom demands.

Virtual Kidnappings: This tactic has risen globally, where criminals demand ransom from family members by claiming to have abducted a loved one, even though no physical kidnapping has occurred. This scam is prevalent in the United States, parts of Latin America, and certain European countries.

Express Kidnappings: This involves quickly abducting a victim and forcing them to withdraw cash from ATMs or to pay a small ransom, typically within hours. Express kidnappings are popular in urban areas where kidnappers can target people who look financially capable.

Kidnap-for-Ransom (KFR): This is the traditional form of kidnapping, where victims are held for extended periods while kidnappers negotiate a ransom with the family or an employer. Sophisticated groups target high-profile individuals or corporate executives. Some KFR groups also negotiate with governments if they capture foreign nationals.

Tiger Kidnapping: In this approach, the kidnappers detain a person (typically a family member of the target) to coerce the main target into meeting their demands, such as opening bank vaults or giving access to secured areas. This requires significant planning and knowledge of the target's schedule.

Maritime Kidnapping: Conducted by pirates or criminal gangs, maritime kidnappings involve the abduction of crew members from ships in international waters, usually for ransom. This method is also associated with theft of cargo and hijacking.

Political Kidnapping: In politically motivated kidnappings, the abduction is conducted by militant or terrorist groups as a means of advancing a political agenda, often in exchange for prisoner release or to gain attention for their cause. Hostage situations involving journalists or aid workers fall under this category.

Inside Job/Corrupt Official Involvement: In countries where police or other officials may be complicit, kidnappers sometimes collaborate with authorities. This technique often sees corrupt officials providing information on potential targets or even participating in the abductions.

These techniques highlight the importance of security awareness, particularly in high-risk regions where kidnapping risks are exacerbated by political instability and economic distress.

These trends reflect the adaptability of kidnapping tactics in response to socio-economic and political conditions. The rise in organised criminal networks, corruption within security agencies, and deteriorating economic conditions in various regions underscore the need for robust crisis management and security protocols.

Africa:

The Sahel region has seen kidnappings by terrorist groups rise by 250%, while South Africa has experienced a surge due to sophisticated crime syndicates and opportunistic kidnappings targeting business people and their families. In 2022, South Africa recorded an average of over 1,100 kidnapping cases monthly, with ransom demands sometimes exceeding \$1 million. Collusion and corruption among law enforcement have also exacerbated the problem.

South Africa has seen a sharp rise in kidnappings, mainly in urban centres like Johannesburg and Cape Town. Although only about 5% of these kidnappings are ransom-related, syndicates targeting businesspeople are highly active. Ransom demands for high-profile targets range from \$100,000 to over \$1 million. The South African Police Service faces challenges like limited resources and corruption, which have hindered consistent rescue efforts

Latin America:

Mexico consistently reports high kidnapping numbers, with annual cases often exceeding 1,000. Express kidnappings—quick abductions targeting cash withdrawals—are prevalent in Brazil and Venezuela. In Mexico, nearly a third of kidnapping victims are eventually released unharmed after ransom payments, although reporting discrepancies mean the real numbers could be higher.

Kidnapping techniques include "express kidnappings," in which victims are abducted for short periods to drain their bank accounts, and "virtual kidnappings," where criminals demand ransom by falsely claiming they have kidnapped a family member. The state of Tamaulipas has historically recorded the highest kidnapping rates

Brazil: Express kidnappings are prevalent in Brazil, especially in major cities like São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Victims are often held briefly until a relatively modest ransom is paid, making these incidents hard to trace. Socioeconomic instability has been a major driver, with criminal organisations targeting both locals and tourists.

Venezuela: Caracas, the Venezuelan capital, is notorious for kidnappings that often involve ransom negotiations. The ongoing economic crisis and high crime rates have made kidnappings increasingly common, especially in affluent areas where criminal gangs operate with relative impunity

Middle East:

Economic and political instability in Lebanon has led to a surge in kidnapping incidents, particularly along the Syrian border, where gang-related kidnappings target wealthy locals and foreign nationals. In the Philippines, kidnappings tied to the gambling industry have led to a notable increase in cases involving Chinese nationals.

Lebanon: Since 2022, Lebanon has faced a significant increase in kidnappings, primarily due to economic and political crises. Victims are usually wealthy locals or foreign nationals lured through social media or business scams. The involvement of cross-border gangs has made abductions particularly challenging to address, with ransom demands frequently ranging from \$100,000 to \$1 million.

Syria-Lebanon Border: The Syrian civil war has led to increased criminal activity along the Lebanon-Syria border, with both Lebanese and Syrian gangs involved in cross-border kidnappings. Victims are frequently taken to remote areas, making rescues difficult for local authorities.

Despite the overall trend, some regions have seen decreases in specific types of kidnappings, with countries like Georgia reporting a decline due to improved policing. However, the increase in global connectivity and weakened economies suggests that kidnapping remains a persistent and evolving threat worldwide, especially in high-risk areas.

Asia

Philippines: Kidnappings have become more frequent, with organised crime targeting foreign nationals, particularly Chinese citizens involved in the Philippine Offshore Gaming Operations (POGO) industry. Kidnapping incidents connected to POGO operators involve both ransom and human

trafficking motives, with the Philippine-Chinese Chamber of Commerce reporting 56 cases in September 2022 alone.

Bangladesh and Indonesia: In Bangladesh, kidnappings have occasionally been tied to the illegal drug trade, with notable cases involving ransom demands in major urban centres. Similarly, Jakarta and other Indonesian cities have seen a rise in kidnapping cases due to organised crime and economic challenges.