

Crypto Kidnapping: How Armed Gangs Are Hunting the Internet's High Rollers

A Priavo Security Insight

Crypto

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Executive Summary

The global expansion of cryptocurrency has created unprecedented opportunities for wealth generation, but it has also exposed investors and entrepreneurs to an escalating form of violent crime: crypto kidnapping. This emerging threat blends traditional abduction and extortion with the coercive extraction of digital assets. As Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies reach new valuation highs, physical attacks targeting holders have risen sharply, with criminals recognising that forced access to digital wallets can produce instant, untraceable financial gain.

Security intelligence from Crisis24 reports 231 documented physical attacks against crypto holders in the last 18 months, including kidnappings, home invasions, torture and ransom-for-crypto extortion, with fatalities recorded. Parallel reporting from NBC News, TRM Labs and Kroll indicates a structural shift: criminals who once relied on hacking now increasingly favour violent coercion — because it is faster, harder to defend against and often more lucrative.

For high-net-worth individuals, executives, founders, and investors in cryptocurrency, this trend demands a more robust and holistic protective posture. Cybersecurity alone is no longer sufficient. Discreet physical security, movement control, OPSEC discipline and crisis readiness must now form an integral part of any modern risk-management strategy.

Priavo Security offers this analysis to outline the threat evolution, identify risk indicators and provide actionable recommendations for those exposed to this rapidly growing crime type.



Understanding Crypto Kidnapping: A Convergence of Digital Wealth and Traditional Violence

A new attack vector for organised crime

Crypto kidnapping, sometimes referred to as “wrench attacks”, represents the overlap of two worlds:

- Digital assets that are irreversible, decentralised and easily transferable
- Physical coercion that compels victims to surrender private keys or authorise transactions

According to analysis referenced by NBC News (2025), armed gangs, transnational criminal groups and opportunistic offenders have increasingly embraced this model because:

- Cryptocurrency ransom can be moved instantly
- Transfers cannot be reversed by banks
- Wallets often hold significant value
- Victims frequently lack robust personal security

This shift demonstrates a fundamental reality: crypto wealth, even when securely stored, becomes vulnerable the moment the holder becomes vulnerable.



Why Crypto Kidnapping Is Increasing Globally

Rising valuations increase criminal incentives

Multiple intelligence sources note a direct correlation between Bitcoin's rising price and the frequency of violent crypto-related crimes.

As NBC News reports, law enforcement has seen an upswing in abductions and physical extortion attempts as Bitcoin surged to its highest levels since 2021. High valuations magnify the upside for criminals, transforming even a single forced transfer into a multi-million-pound payout.

Pseudonymity and irreversibility appeal to criminal groups

Unlike bank transfers, crypto transactions:

- Cannot be frozen
- Cannot be reversed
- Offer a degree of anonymity
- Are difficult to recover through legal channels
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This makes ransom-for-crypto an increasingly preferred method for gangs who want immediate liquidity without traditional traceability risks.

Visibility of crypto wealth fuels targeting

Crypto investors frequently reveal personal details through:

- Conference appearances
- Social media posts
- Online forums
- Public business filings
- Exchange or Web3 start-up profiles

Criminals use these touchpoints to identify potential victims. In several European cases, attackers conducted detailed research into their targets' digital footprints before executing abductions.

Cybercrime becoming a hybrid crime

Reports from TRM Labs indicate that organised crime groups are moving away from purely digital thefts because hacking secure wallets is becoming harder, while coercing a victim physically remains an easier path to financial gain.

Real-World Incidents

Highlighting the Threat

Crypto kidnapping is no longer theoretical. Documented cases span Europe, the US, Asia and the UK.

France: €1.7 million ransom demand for Ethereum

As reported by Le Monde (2025), a gang abducted the father of a crypto entrepreneur and demanded €1.7 million in Ethereum for his release. This attack was part of a wider criminal network targeting digital-asset holders.

Europe: mutilation used as coercion

TRM Labs details a disturbing case where the co-founder of a global crypto wallet company was abducted along with his partner. Attackers severed one of his fingers to force compliance with a multi-million-euro crypto ransom demand.

New York: prolonged captivity and torture

Al Jazeera (2025) reported on a 28-year-old crypto investor who was held captive, pistol-whipped and electrocuted by criminals demanding his Bitcoin credentials. He was held for several weeks in a luxury apartment before escaping.

United Kingdom: kidnapping for crypto results in major convictions

Greater Manchester Police reported in 2025 that a gang responsible for kidnapping a vulnerable man and forcing him to transfer cryptocurrency under duress received a combined 76-year sentence. This confirms that the UK is not immune to the threat.

These incidents demonstrate a common pattern: violence, surveillance, and psychological coercion are now part of the toolkit used to extract digital wealth.



The Statistical Picture: A Structural Shift, Not an Anomaly

Incident volume is rising year-on-year

Crisis24's reporting confirms:

- 231 physical attacks on crypto holders over the last 18 months
- At least 6 deaths connected directly to crypto-related abductions and extortion
- A continued upward trajectory into 2025

Kroll's mid-2025 threat intelligence review notes that kidnapping-for-crypto is now a recognised risk vector, not a fringe phenomenon.

Crypto crime overall remains high

Kroll reports:

- US\$1.9 billion stolen in crypto-related crimes by mid-2025

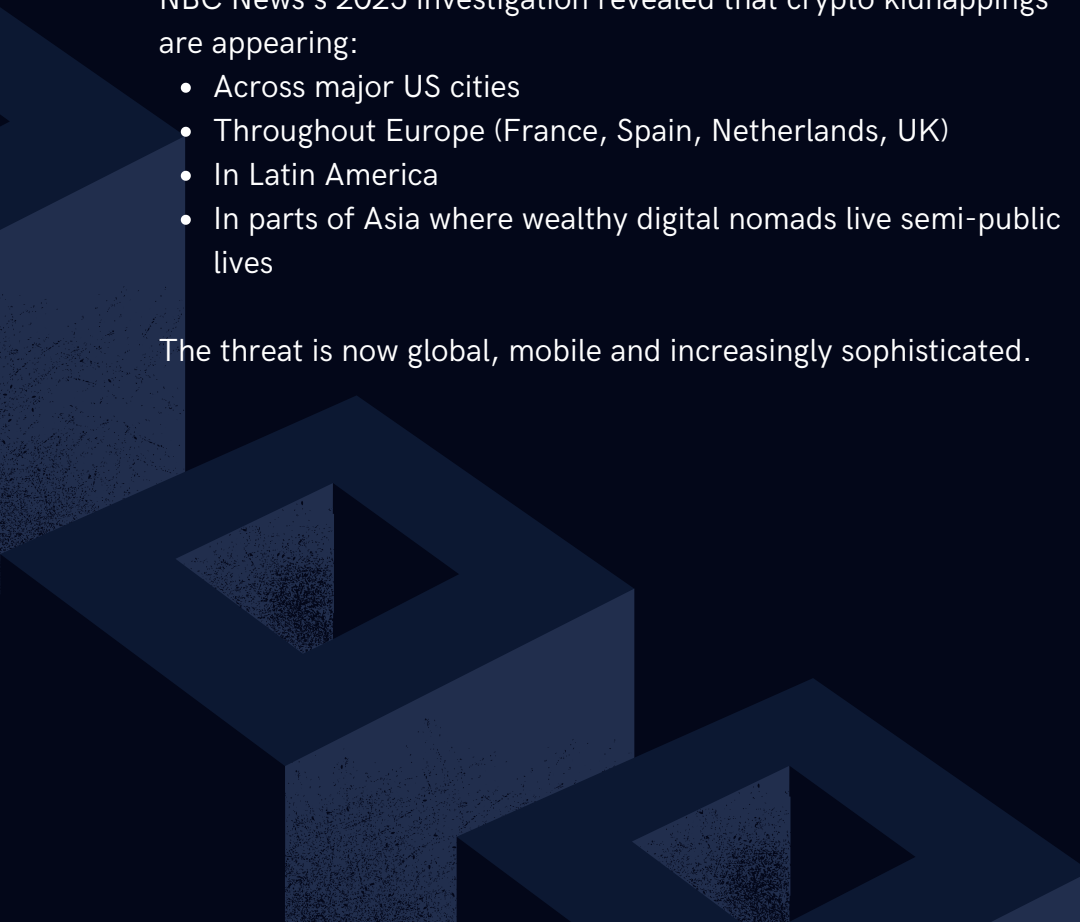
While this figure includes cyber theft, experts are clear: physical coercion is growing faster than digital compromise because the methodology exploits the human element.

Violent crypto extortion is diversifying geographically

NBC News's 2025 investigation revealed that crypto kidnappings are appearing:

- Across major US cities
- Throughout Europe (France, Spain, Netherlands, UK)
- In Latin America
- In parts of Asia where wealthy digital nomads live semi-public lives

The threat is now global, mobile and increasingly sophisticated.



Risk Factors: Why High-Value Crypto Holders Are Exposed

Public identity linked to digital assets

Executives, founders and influencers with visible crypto involvement face heightened targeting risk.

Concentrated personal wealth without traditional oversight

Crypto portfolios often bypass banks, wealth managers and regulated custodians — removing layers of protective scrutiny.

Inadequate personal security posture

Unlike corporate executives, many crypto investors lack professional:

- Secure-travel support
- Residential security
- Executive protection
- Operational security training

Criminal groups recognise this vulnerability.

Travel patterns and jurisdictional complexity

Many crypto holders are frequent travellers, often attending conferences or operating businesses across borders. Criminal groups exploit moments of movement, distraction or exposure.

Family members as leverage points

Several 2024–2025 cases involved relatives as pressure points. Kidnappers often target parents, partners or children when the primary victim maintains a lower profile.



Implications for High-Net-Worth Individuals and Corporate Stakeholders

For Priavo Security clients — including investors, technologists and executives in financial innovation — crypto kidnapping represents a tier-one emerging threat. It requires the same seriousness as traditional kidnap-and-ransom risk in high-risk regions.

Key implications:

- Personal threat exposure increases with public association
- Digital wealth must be viewed through a physical-security lens
- Low-profile behaviour is now a core protective requirement
- Crisis response plans must integrate digital asset considerations
- Family security becomes a necessary extension of executive protection
- Travel planning and secure movement protocols are essential

Failure to adjust to this new threat environment leaves individuals and organisations acutely vulnerable.

Protective Strategies: Priavo Security Recommendations

Priavo recommends a layered, intelligence-led and proactive approach.

Strengthening Physical Security Posture

1. Executive Protection
 - Close protection officers for high-risk movements or public engagements
 - Secure transport and vetted drivers
 - Surveillance detection routes and pattern variation
2. Residential Security
 - Access control design
 - CCTV and perimeter monitoring
 - Panic rooms or safe spaces
3. Event and travel security
 - Pre-arrival risk assessments
 - Liaison with local authorities and vetted security partners
 - Secure accommodation arrangements

Enhancing OPSEC Discipline

1. Reduce online footprint
2. Avoid broadcasting crypto holdings or conference attendance
3. Control personal information exposure (addresses, routines, family details)
4. Limit public wallet addresses linked to real identity

Hardening Crypto Custody and Access Controls

1. Use cold wallets and air-gapped storage
2. Employ multi-signature authentication
3. Avoid storing large balances in any wallet associated with public presence
4. Maintain separation between daily-use wallets and long-term holdings

Proper custody reduces the likelihood that a single coercive act can drain an entire portfolio

Intelligence-Led Protection and Ongoing Monitoring

1. Continuous threat-environment monitoring
2. Tracking of emerging kidnap-and-extortion methodologies
3. Regional intelligence briefs for clients travelling internationally
4. Monitoring dark-web chatter linked to high-profile crypto targets

Crisis Response Planning

1. Pre-established crisis protocol
2. Designated emergency communication channels
3. Clear decision-making hierarchy
4. Law-enforcement liaison capabilities
5. Ransom management procedures (where legally permissible)
6. Safe extraction strategies

A well-rehearsed plan dramatically increases survivability and reduces financial impact.



Preparing for a New Era of Hybrid Threats

Crypto kidnapping is not a passing trend; it is a significant shift in the criminal ecosystem. As digital wealth becomes more widespread and more visible, criminals increasingly choose coercion over code, recognising that the person is often the weakest link in any crypto security chain.

For the public, this presents a frightening evolution. For Priavo Security, it reinforces a long-held principle: robust physical security, strategic intelligence and disciplined operational behaviour remain the most effective defences against high-impact threat actors.

By integrating protective intelligence, secure-travel planning, executive protection and digital-footprint control, clients can mitigate exposure and continue operating confidently in an environment where digital and physical risks now intersect.

Priavo stands ready to support clients with discreet, bespoke strategies that match the scale of their risk — and the value of their assets.



Sources

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