



# Over 20,000 taxpayers victims of IRS phone scam

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In the largest telephone scam ever, over 20,000 taxpayers have been targeted by fake Internal Revenue Service agents, the IRS revealed last week.

"If someone unexpectedly calls claiming to be from the IRS and uses threatening language, that is a sign that it really isn't the IRS calling," J Russell George, Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration, said in a statement. "This is the largest scam of its kind that we have ever seen."

He warned taxpayers against phone calls from individuals claiming to represent the Internal Revenue Service to defraud them.

George said the agency is aware of thousands of victims who have collectively paid over \$1 million.

"The increasing number of people receiving these unsolicited calls from individuals who fraudulently claim to represent the IRS is alarming," George added.

"At all times, and particularly during the tax filing season, we want to make sure that innocent taxpayers are alert to this scam so they are not harmed by these criminals. Do not become a victim."

The inspector general's office started receiving complaints about the scam in August last year. Immigrants were the primary targets. But the scam has since become widespread.

The scam has hit taxpayers in nearly every state in the country. Callers tell intended victims they owe taxes and must pay using a pre-paid debit card or wire transfer. The scammers threaten those who refuse to pay with arrest,



A victim of the scam explains her plight to a neighbor as Yonkers police officers look on.

deportation or loss of a business or driver's license.

Important details to note from the inspector general's statement:

- The IRS usually first contacts people by e-mail — not by phone — about unpaid taxes, the statement noted.

- The IRS won't ask for payment using a pre-paid debit card or wire transfer. It also won't ask for a credit card number over the phone.

- The callers who commit this fraud often: Use common names and fake IRS badge numbers; know the last four digits of the victim's Social Security Number; make caller ID information appear as if the IRS is calling; send bogus

IRS e-mails to support their scam; call a second time claiming to be the police or department of motor vehicles, and the caller ID again supports their claim.

The inspector general's office is working with major phone carriers to try to track the origins of the calls.

The scam has been effective in part because the fake agents mask their caller ID, making it look like the call is coming from the IRS.

They request prepaid cards because they are harder to trace than bank cards.

If you get a call from someone claiming to be with the IRS asking for a payment, here's what to do:

If you owe Federal taxes, or think you might owe taxes, hang up and call the IRS at 800-829-1040.

If you don't owe taxes, call and report the incident to TIGTA at 800-366-4484.

You can also file a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission at [www.FTC.gov](http://www.FTC.gov) Add 'IRS Telephone Scam' to the comments in your complaint.

The IRS will never request personal or financial information by e-mail, texting or any social media. You should forward scam e-mails to [phishing@irs.gov](mailto:phishing@irs.gov).

Don't open any attachments or click on any links in those e-mails.

Taxpayers should be aware that there are other unrelated scams (such as a lottery sweepstakes winner) and solicitations (such as debt relief) that fraudulently claim to be from the IRS.

Read more about tax scams on the IRS Web site [www.irs.gov](http://www.irs.gov)

## Despite awareness, fake calls continue

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Anju Bhargava, founder, Hindu American Sewa Communities, who is coordinating with IRS officials in spreading awareness about the scam, revealed she too received a call a few months ago.

"The first voice message I got was in January. The next one was in February. And I came to know of many more. And so I contacted the New Jersey Homeland Security office," she said.

Anjali Mathew from Yonkers, New York, got a call March 20.

The caller allegedly from the IRS, 'Officer Kevin John,' said Mathew needed to pay \$170,000 in fines within 45 minutes or face arrest. He said the IRS has identified four charges against her, including tax fraud, sending money secretly to India and hiding information about property in India. He also offered her the opportunity to pay part of the fine immediately. If she did not, he said, she faced arrest, imprisonment for five years, and, finally, deportation.

Mathew frantically called her father, Thomas Koovalloor, a community activist, who was in New Jersey. He alerted her about the scam and reassured her that if she were arrested he would take care of things.

Koovalloor called the Yonkers police and they said there was no arrest warrant against his daughter. They sent two officers

to Mathew's house to take down the facts as part of a routine exercise.

Koovalloor also met the police commissioner and complained, who sent the officers again and they made a detailed report.

"The police promised to send the report to the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other authorities. They also noted the large scale scam going on. It is sad the authorities cannot nab these criminals," he said.

Monika Joshi, a former *India Abroad* correspondent, who now lives in Texas, got her third call March 27.

"This is so spooky. I just got a call," she said. "The guy had an Indian accent. He asked me to call back at 914-612-7258," she said. "When I started asking questions, he hung up."

She got the first call in January. On February 21 she got another call. She then e-mailed *India Abroad*.

"The scam *India Abroad* wrote about (*India Abroad, February 14*) is still going on. I got a call again today, from a woman posing as an Officer Laura Wood of the Office of Federal Crime Investigation Department. She had an accent, probably Indian or Latin American, asked for my husband's cell number. She gave her number as 202-800-8443," Joshi wrote.

"I called the number. A lady, with a Spanish accent picked it up. She said it was the FBI office in DC. I asked her to give the phone to her supervisor. An argu-

ment followed and she hung up the phone."

March 6, Saju Das, a medical resident in New York City got a call from 509-592-9455 demanding that he pay \$3,000 as arrears to the IRS.

They said they had sent 14 letters for the money. If the money was not paid within 48 hours, he and his father Mathai P Das in Rockland County, New York, would be arrested and would end up in jail for 18 months, he was told.

Mathai Das called the police who advised him not to reply to the call. They also advised to check his bank accounts to verify if any fraud had been committed.

The Parsippany, New Jersey, police last year warned the Indian community about the ongoing scam and asked them to be vigilant. Police chief Paul Philips explained the *modus operandi*: "In May, a victim was led to believe that he was under investigation for violating federal and state tax laws, and he subsequently paid approximately \$4,000 to 'settle out of court and avoid arrest.'" He later learned he was the victim of a scam. Two similar incidents occurred in June 2013,' Philips said.



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