



Is Your Refrigerator Running?

By Charles Smith



Pranks are mischievous acts that carry no element of threat or significant intended adverse consequences. On the other hand, a threat is an expression of an intention to inflict evil, injury or damage. Anytime a prank contains a threat, however, veiled or clever, it constitutes a crime known as a hoax threat.

According to the FBI, hoax threats are serious federal crimes that drain law enforcement resources and cause distress or injury to victims of the hoax as well as to first responders. Hoax threats also cost the taxpayers, you and me, a lot of money. Perpetrators of hoax threats may be sentenced up to five years in person for making the threat.

The internet has brought many positive changes in our ability to communicate and gather information. Unfortunately, there are those who feel empowered by assumed anonymity and who utilize this ability to prey on others by making threats or perpetrating hoaxes. Whether one's intention is to be a prankster, or whether there are more sinister motives, real harm comes to innocent people. We can all be thankful that the FBI takes these threats seriously, and investigates and aids in the prosecution of cybercriminals.

Hoax threats come in all shapes and sizes, whether they are by telephone, social media, text message, fax or email. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in hoax threats to schools and other public places. Another version of the hoax threat is making "swatting" phone calls in which the perpetrator falsely reports a hostage situation, prompting the response of any available SWAT or hostage rescue team. The potential for loss of life is serious.

Hoax threats are federal crimes but are also prosecutable on a state level. Laws vary by jurisdiction but are typically chargeable as a felony. The severity of the crime to be charged will vary by the circumstances of the threat made.

We can all assist in combating the hoax threat epidemic by educating our children, coworkers, and others with whom we have contact about the devastating consequences of hoax threats, including a felony conviction to the perpetrator and harm to individuals and society. Most educators and school systems have an active program to combat hoax threats, but they cannot do this alone. It is in all of our best interest to work together for education and prevention.

The FBI advises the public to avoid hoax threats by never posting or sending any threats under any circumstances. If you become aware of a threat, alert your local law enforcement immediately. If you see a threat posted on social media, immediately contact local law enforcement or your local FBI office. Members of the public can always submit a tip to the FBI at <https://tips.fbi.gov>.