



NEWS FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
OC Sheriff Public Affairs, 714-904-7042

OC Sheriff arrests suspects in distraction theft crimes

SANTA ANA, Calif. (Feb. 4, 2026): Orange County Sheriff investigators have arrested three suspects allegedly running an ATM distraction theft operation involving multiple counties and at least a dozen victims across the state of California.

North Operations investigators on Jan. 6 arrested three Romanian nationals on suspicion of multiple distraction thefts after a multi-week investigation.

On Nov. 22, a 66-year-old victim reported his ATM card had been compromised at a bank in the 17000 block of Santiago Boulevard in the city of Villa Park.

On Nov. 18, the victim used the ATM while one suspect watched him enter his PIN. While finishing his transaction and with his ATM card still in the machine, one of the suspects dropped money at the victim's feet, causing the victim to bend down and pick it up. While the victim was distracted, a second suspect swapped the victim's ATM card with a fraudulent one. The suspects then used the victim's ATM card and PIN code to make purchases and withdraw cash.

The victim realized his ATM card had been compromised the following day, Nov. 19, and reported it to the Sheriff's Department on Nov. 22.

Using video surveillance footage from the bank, investigators identified a grey SUV they believed was associated with the crime. With assistance from the OC Sheriff Crime Analysis Detail, investigators identified the vehicle and possible suspects. Through weeks of investigation using search warrants and other investigative techniques, North Operations investigators identified a pattern of distraction thefts that occurred in multiple locations across Southern California.

On Jan. 6, investigators arrested Romita Achitei, 61, Paul Agafitei, 43, and George Asafiei, 46, on multiple felony charges, including grand theft, identity theft and forgery. Investigators linked the suspects to multiple additional distraction thefts that occurred in Orange, San Bernardino, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Sacramento counties.

The investigation is ongoing, and investigators believe there are more victims unaccounted for with substantial losses. Anyone who believes they are a victim of distraction theft can call the OC Sheriff's Department at 714-647-7000.



ORANGE COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT

SHERIFF-CORONER DON BARNES

NEWS RELEASE

The OC Sheriff's Department is sharing this important information to raise community awareness about these types of distraction thefts. Criminals who engage in this unlawful activity often are well-rehearsed and convincing. Distraction theft is not limited to ATM transactions. Criminals may also attempt to steal a victim's PIN code while in line at the grocery store or a retail business.

In these cases, the suspects typically follow the victim to the parking lot and attempt to distract them by dropping cash on the ground and insisting it belongs to the victim. This ultimately causes enough of a distraction to allow the suspects to steal the victim's debit card and make numerous bank withdrawals prior to the victim having knowledge of the theft of the debit card.

It is important to remain vigilant when at the ATM or any time you are using a debit card. Always cover the keypad when entering your pin and avoid engaging with strangers while completing your transaction. In addition, be wary of strangers approaching you for any reason while walking to your car or leaving a retail store. If someone approaches you, make sure to keep your distance and do not allow any stranger within arm's reach.

If you believe you are a victim of a distraction theft or any type of crime, please report it to the OC Sheriff's Department or your local law enforcement agency immediately.

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