Last week, the Harris County District Clerk alerted citizens about a jury scam making its way around the area. In this scheme, callers posing as law enforcement officers tell unsuspecting people they owe fines for missing jury duty and even risk arrest. Often, the scammers demand immediate payment of hundreds or thousands of dollars – via a totally-not-sketchy prepaid debit or gift card – to avoid jail time.

We talked with Dan Parsons, president of the Better Business Bureau of Greater Houston and South Texas, about the most popular recurring scams in the Houston area. Here are his rankings:
Identity theft. This is by far the most popular type of scam, Parsons says. The crime is so pervasive Parsons believes the day will soon come when governments establish positions solely to address the problem. Identity theft is hard to combat because the victims and scammers are often in different cities or even countries.

Parsons says identity theft scammers target consumers in several ways, but often do so over the phone. And these clever pitches, which last 15 to 20 minutes, start out innocently enough.

"They don't just walk in and say, 'Hi, give me your credit card,'" Parsons says. Instead, scammers often learn what bank a victim uses and pretend to be fraud specialists for that company. Scammers will start by giving the victim confidence, such as by saying the victim's credit card has been compromised, but not to worry, a new card will be on the way soon. Over the course of several minutes, the scammer will tease bits of personal information from the victim until he or she has enough to steal someone's identity and make fraudulent purchases.

Officious oppression. A fancy term that describes a broad array of scams in which a caller impersonates a government official and scares the bejesus out of some law-abiding person. The jury scam and IRS you-owe-Uncle-Sam-lots-of-money scams are classics in this category.

Parsons says wily scammers will use 202 (Washington, D.C.) and 212 (New York City) area codes to appear legitimate. The Houston Chronicle reported that local jury scammers even used names
to appear legitimate. The Houston Chronicle reported that local jury scammers even used names of actual Harris County Sheriff’s Office employees to persuade victims to pay up.

"People who’ve never had a run-in with the law; they’re terrified," Parsons says. "The scam has a degree of legitimacy that they're trying to tie in, but it's all fake."

**Energy reselling.** An unintended consequence of Texas’s decision to deregulate the electricity market, this scam is making its way north as other states follow suit. Here's how it works: Someone who says he works for a utility company shows up at your house, and either says he needs to check your bill for errors or suggests you may be paying too much on electricity. The con can go a couple of ways. The scammer could persuade you to voluntarily switch to a different provider, which is actually more expensive. Or, even worse, the scammer switches you to a different utility, using your account number, without your permission.

"The victims, for the moment, really aren't (in Texas), but have been here and will be back here again," Parsons says. "It's coming."

**Freestanding emergency rooms and urgent care.** These facilities sprung up because traditional hospitals became overcrowded. But Parsons warns these places attract doctors who couldn't hack it at large hospitals and physicians inclined to fraud. Their M.O. is to get patients through the door by promising their insurance is accepted and that they will incur little out-of-pocket costs. Later, these facilities send unsuspecting patients huge bills — even if patients have the foresight to ask about billing beforehand.

"They say your insurance is good, and they lie like the rug," Parsons says. "While you're sitting there with your daughter, who is bleeding."

Parsons suggests planning ahead and designating a medical facility to transport family members to before an emergency occurs. If you have to go to a freestanding ER, he suggests using your phone to record conversations about billing with facility staff.

**Magazine sales crews.** In this scam, canvassers (who "often have the gift of bullshit," Parsons says) go door to door selling subscriptions for magazines. Claiming to be recovering drug addicts or other down-on-their-luck characters, these scammers prey on people's desire to help the less fortunate. Before victims or police wise up, these mobile crews have often moved to new territory. The promise of a discount may lure customers to buy a magazine they might not even be interested in reading. See also: [The White Van Speaker Scam](#).

Scams typically come in waves. A particular type of grift may disappear from an area for years only to return out of the blue. Parsons says these ebbs occur for several reasons: Scammers might get arrested, media coverage of a particular scam gets the public to wise up, or con artists who have turned a profit may head to another city so they don't get caught.