

What Is a Burner Phone (And When to Use One)?

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Cell phones, smart or dumb, are helpful and even essential to modern life, but also a privacy nightmare. Burner phones let you make and receive calls anonymously. Although, as you'll see, they aren't entirely anonymous.

Prepaid phones, known as "Burners," are a common feature in movies and TV shows like *The Wire*, which coined the term. Whether a crime drama or a spy thriller, a burner phone is the preferred solution whenever a character doesn't want to be tracked but still wants to stay in touch.

The term "burner phone" usually refers to an inexpensive feature phone or "dumbphone" that does not connect to the internet and has no smartphone features. A phone does not have to be such a cheap phone to be a burner phone. But since the idea is that the phone can be discarded anytime, people usually want the most inexpensive phone possible. The intention is to only use the phone for a limited period after activation, so quality matters much less than price.

Burner phones have long battery life and are mainly used to make phone calls, given that they don't support apps or only support limited apps. A cheap burner with a new number is desirable for various reasons.

Why Use a Burner Phone?

Burner phones are primarily associated with use cases where people want to avoid law enforcement. Smartphones collect massive amounts of trackable information linked to your real-world identity.

There are also legitimate uses for these phones, such as using them to be an anonymous whistleblower or evading a repressive government. In other words, criminality is not the only reason to want a burner phone.

iOS or Android smartphones often require registration with companies like Apple or Google, and even if you use false information, there are still data breadcrumbs that can be linked to you. Smartphones contain wireless technologies that can be traced. Bluetooth and Wi-Fi can leave a trace with other devices as you pass by them, which can later be extracted through data forensics.

The phone itself is only part of a burner phone solution. Using a prepaid [SIM card](#) is the other part of the burner lifestyle. At least in the USA.

How to Get a Burner Phone (The Right Way)

Getting a burner phone is not just about the type of handset or SIM card you buy. It also

matters how you get your hands on it in the first place.

First, both the phone and SIM cards must be purchased using cash. You can also pay with cryptocurrency, but be aware that currencies such as Bitcoin aren't truly anonymous. Buying anything with a credit card or bank transfer can be easily traced.

Regardless of how you pay, don't order your phone and SIM from an online service like Amazon or Walmart since this creates a record of the purchase. If you buy your burner phone and SIM from a physical store, choose a store you never usually frequent. It's best to pick up your burner gear at a store that does not have cameras.

Finally, you'll need to load the prepaid SIM with airtime or (maybe) data. You don't want to pay for that using your credit card, so the best solution is to use a prepaid debit or credit card purchased cash from a store.

Burner SIM Cards Are Illegal in Most Countries

Since anonymous SIM cards play an important role in criminal activity, most nations have made them illegal. Except for the USA, Canada, and a small handful of other countries, you must [register your prepaid SIM](#) in most of the world.

This registration requires an official ID and proof of residence. Providing false information to complete the registration generally counts as a criminal offense. This measure has been implemented to reduce certain types of crime and terrorism.

As you might imagine, syndicates that deal in SIM cards with fake registrations exist, but buying such a SIM card would also be a crime.

Burner Phone Privacy Can Be Defeated

The biggest problem with burner phones is the idea that they offer complete privacy. Although there's no official paper trail between yourself, the phone, and the SIM card, you still use the cellular network. That network keeps logs that can be accessed by law enforcement.

Moreover, voice calls and text messages sent using a burner phone aren't encrypted. So the service provider can record and keep records of everything. In other words, the content itself can be used to expose your identity.

Sophisticated voice recognition and identification software can match your voice or listen for keywords spoken during calls or written in text messages. To communicate anonymously via text or voice, burner users must apply additional measures such as voice changers or codewords.

Burner phones can also have their approximate location traced using triangulation between cell towers within the handset range. So even without a GPS or Bluetooth, it's still possible to track burner phones to some degree.

Using a Burner Phone App

Because buying a new phone is a hassle and burners are illegal in much of the world, burner phone apps have risen in popularity. These apps give you access to a new burner phone number quickly, easily, and for even less money than buying a disposable handset.

The best-known app is probably Burner ([iOS](#) & [Android](#)), which gives you access to a US phone number that you can use to communicate within the USA and Canada.

Hushed ([iOS](#) & [Android](#)) is another popular option and stands out from Burner by offering numbers in the UK, the USA, and Canada.

While burner apps like these are perfect for protecting your actual phone number from telemarketers or separating business from private calls, they probably aren't as secure as a true burner when it comes to law enforcement and privacy.

Signal Blocking Bags

If your primary concern is that you're being tracked during certain times when you have your phone with you, consider using a signal-blocking bag. This applies both to a burner phone and your primary phone. While the phone is in the bag, it cannot send or receive anything, but once you remove it from the bag, it will return to normal.

Assuming it's made correctly, a signal-blocking bag assures that your phone won't betray your location or activity until you're ready to do so.

Using a VPN Instead of a Burner

Suppose your main reason for having a burner phone is to hide your location while communicating with someone. In that case, a VPN (Virtual Private Network) is a more convenient and effective solution than using a second phone.

By setting the VPN to tunnel to a server from another region or country, you can make VOIP (Voice Over IP) calls while hiding your actual location. You can combine a VPN with a burner number app for even better security.

End-to-End Encrypted Apps

There are many fantastic options for messaging apps with end-to-end encryption. This means that only the participants in the chat or call have access to the message contents; not even the app provider knows what's being said. [Signal](#) is the best overall choice for most people; it's used by Edward Snowden, after all!

Use a Dual-SIM Phone

If all you want is two separate phone numbers, one for private use and one for business, for example, then you don't need two phones. By buying a dual-SIM handset, you can run two SIM cards in the same phone and selectively silence the one you don't want to use at the moment. This does nothing for privacy other than keeping your personal number away from

telemarketers, but it can be a more elegant solution for some people.

If your phone has an eSIM feature, you might have the option to sign up with multiple numbers using the built-in eSIM or to use a traditional SIM and eSIM in parallel. Dual-SIM phones are usually not sold as part of phone plans since it's not in a mobile phone provider's interest to give subscribers access to a competitor's SIM. Dual-SIM phones are almost always network-unlocked since they wouldn't be very useful.

Should You Use Burner Phones?

While using a burner phone might make you feel like James Bond or Jason Bourne, there are better and more secure ways to communicate anonymously without being tracked or spied on. The phones themselves can be great, lasting forever on a single charge long after your iPhone dies. A [Nokia 225](#) is a great phone to take with you on a hike or to keep in your car for an emergency, but it's not the best way to hide from anyone, least of all the government!

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