

Romance Fraud Scams

Five Key Indicators and Strategies for Uncovering Victims

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Crime prevention is regularly focused on statistics and numbers. High dollar losses make for eye-catching headlines, sometimes making it easy to forget that fraud has a very human impact. If there is one thing we know about criminals, it's that profit supersedes any concern about the feelings of others.

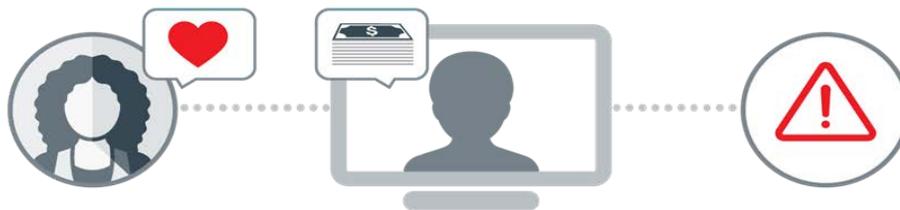
While all financial crime can claim victims, romance fraud scams are one form of fraudulent activity that is particularly heartbreaking. "Romance scams are particularly heinous in that they prey upon a person's need for companionship, and can damage a victim on emotional and financial levels," said Captain Chris Cahhal of the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department's Fraud and Cyber Crimes Bureau.

What is a Romance Scam?

Romance scams target victims, who may be emotionally vulnerable, with companionship and friendship. The goal of the criminal(s) perpetrating the crime is to get the victim to send them funds, which they claim are for a wide range of necessities such as travel, medical care, or a business opportunity.

How does it happen?

The fraudster, who is often located internationally but portrays themselves as American, will contact the victim through social media networks, online forums, or dating sites. After making contact, the fraudster will attempt to develop a deeper relationship with the victim.



The Internet is fertile ground for this scam. FBI Special Agent Christine Beining, a financial fraud investigator in the FBI's Houston Division points to the advantage fraudsters gain from the inherent anonymity of the web. "The Internet makes this type of crime easy because you can pretend to be anybody you want to be. You can be anywhere in the world and victimize people." Beining also notes how the web provides a fraudster with an ocean of potential victims, "The perpetrators will reach out to a lot of people on various networking sites to find somebody who may be a good target. Then they use what the victims have on their profile pages and try to work those relationships and see which ones develop."

Romance scams are an emotionally devastating crime that impact victims far beyond monetary damages.

While the fraudster may attempt to quickly deepen the relationship, it can also develop over months as the fraudster works to build the victim's trust. At some point in the "relationship" the fraudster will make a financial request. Any number of reasons may be used, but the fraudster will claim to need the money for:

- funds to cover the cost of traveling to see the victim;
- emergency medical expenses for the fraudster or a family member — typically a child; or
- a business opportunity that will allow them to live together comfortably.

In the beginning, the amount of money requested will often be small but increases as the fraudster becomes more and more successful in building the "relationship" and tricking the victim.

Who is targeted?

While men can be targets, the victims of romance scams tend to be women over the age of 50. The criminals tend to target widows, retirees, divorcees, or single women. Very often victims are emotionally vulnerable.

In early 2017, Scott Augenbaum, a special agent with the FBI in Nashville, TN, described the typical victim targeted in his state, "There's been a lot of women between the ages of 50 to 60 years old, divorced, and really involved with their church." Augenbaum also touched on the emotional damage inherent in the crime, "The people are humiliated, and they're embarrassed, because besides losing money, they actually believed that they were in love, and when they find out the person is a West African cybercriminal, it's very, very embarrassing."

The size of the problem?

There were almost 15,000 complaints categorized as romance scams/confidence fraud reported to the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) in 2016, with the victims suffering over \$230M in losses.