

Romance scams online hit hundreds of thousands of victims

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New online research led by the University of Leicester reveals that over 200,000 people living in Britain may have fallen victim to online romance scams – far more than had been previously estimated. The study is believed to be the first formal academic analysis to measure the scale of this growing problem.

In the 'online romance scam' criminals set up fake identities using stolen photographs (often of models or army officers) and pretend to develop a romantic relationship with their victim. This is often done using online dating sites and social networking sites. At some point during the relationship they pretend to be in urgent need of money and ask for help. Many [victims](#) have been persuaded to part with large sums of money before their suspicions are aroused.

Researchers found that 52% of people surveyed online had heard of the online romance scam when it was explained to them, and that one in every 50 online adults (2%) know someone personally who had fallen victim to it.

This confirms the belief held by law enforcement agencies that this type of [crime](#) is often not reported by those affected, in many cases due to embarrassment at having been duped, or through a continuing hope that there will eventually be a genuine romance

The study led by Professor Monica Whitty, a psychologist and Professor of Contemporary Media at the University of Leicester, and Dr Tom

Buchanan, a psychologist at the University of Westminster. It aimed to investigate the prevalence of victims in Great Britain and learn how widely the crime is known, as well as how people are learning about it.

Action Fraud, the national fraud reporting and advice centre run by the National Fraud Authority, identified 592 victims of this crime between 2010-11. Of these victims, 203 individuals lost over £5,000.

According to the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) romance fraud is organised crime, usually operating from outside the UK. Criminal groups make initial contact with potential victims through online dating sites and social networking sites, and will try to move the 'relationship' away from monitored online space before defrauding people of what can amount to large sums of money.

In some cases, even when victims cannot, or will not, send money, scammers involve them instead in money laundering by asking them to accept money into their bank accounts.

Investigations by SOCA have seen financial losses experienced by victims of online romance scams of between £50 and £240,000. Scammers' victims also suffer what is effectively a bereavement, from the loss of a relationship they believed to be genuine.

The researchers surveyed over 2,000 people through an online YouGov survey and estimated from the results that over two hundred thousand British citizens have fallen victim to the crime. They further estimate over 1 million people personally know someone who has been scammed.

Professor Whitty, said: "Our data suggests that the numbers of British victims of this relatively new crime is much higher than reported incidents would suggest. It also confirms law enforcement suspicions that this is an under-reported crime, and thus more serious than first

thought.

"This is a concern not solely because people are losing large sums of money to these criminals, but also because of the psychological impact experienced by victims of this crime.

"It is our view that the trauma caused by this scam is worse than any other, because of the 'double hit' experienced by the victims – loss of monies and a 'romantic relationship'.

"It may well be that the shame and upset experienced by the victims deters them from reporting the crime. We thus believe new methods of reporting the crime are needed."

Professor Whitty added that the results of the research suggest warnings about the fraud are reaching about half of the British population: "This provides us with a marker for future research in preventive measures. It may well be, of course, that knowledge of the crime does not prevent it. However, it is important to compare knowledge of the crime and number of victims in future studies."

SOCA's Colin Woodcock, Senior Manager for Fraud Prevention, said:

"SOCA has worked hard to understand the nature of this crime and how it can be tackled, and this study provides further insights into the extent to which it is affecting people in the UK. The fact that 52% of respondents were aware of romance scams shows that progress has been made in raising awareness, but also that millions of people in the UK remain at risk of being successfully targeted by the crime groups committing this type of fraud.

"The perpetrators spend long periods of time grooming their victims, working out their vulnerabilities and when the time is right to ask for

money. By being aware of how to stay safe online, members of the UK public can ensure they don't join those who have lost nearly every penny they had, been robbed of their self-respect, and in some cases, committed suicide after being exploited, relentlessly, by these criminals. It is crucial that nobody sends money to someone they meet online, and haven't got to know well and in person."

Provided by University of Leicester

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