

Romance scam exacts devastating personal and financial tolls

Romance scams cause victims severe financial hardship and personal embarrassment, which, despite massive losses, inhibits their decision to report the crime.

Members of the OPP Anti-Rackets Branch say criminals use the romance scam to seek potential victims online, generally single or recently unattached people. Usually this form of mass marketing fraud occurs through singles and dating-related "meet" websites, social media platforms, or email blasts. In some cases, prolonged interaction with individuals has cost some victims tens of thousands of dollars before the "relationship" ends, usually without ever meeting in person. Among the most vulnerable are seniors. In 2015, the romance scam generated 298 complaints and claimed 216 victims in Ontario who lost \$7.9 million. Police admit 95 per cent of the crimes go unreported.

As part of the annual Fraud Prevention Month awareness campaign, OPP and its partners at the Canadian Anti-Fraud Centre have some tips to help people avoid becoming a victim of the romance scam.

"Don't give out any personal information in an email or while are chatting online. Educate yourself. Check the person's name, the company name and the addresses used.

Ask yourself "Would someone I have never met really declare their love for me after only a few letters or emails?" If the answer is no, report it to police.

Never send money, or give personal credit card or online account details to anyone you do not know and trust. A request to send money to a foreign country to someone you have never personally met should be a red flag.

Check website addresses carefully. Scammers often set up fake websites with addresses that are very similar to legitimate dating websites.

If you or someone you know suspect they've been a victim of the romance scam, contact your local police service. You can also file a complaint through the Canadian Anti-Fraud Centre, Crime Stoppers at 1-800-222-8477 (TIPS), or online at www.tipsubmit.com/start.htm

"One of the most devastating fraud schemes in Canada is perpetrated through the romance scam," said acting OPP Deputy Commissioner Fred Bertucca. "It is an emotional roller coaster for victims who deal with emotional and financial losses associated with this deception."

"Despite the cruelties involved and the emotional trauma sustained, it's still important for victims of the romance scam to report the crime," Detective Inspector Mike Bickerton added. "All users of computers and the online world should educate themselves and use best practices to ensure their personal and financial security."