

Are Sex Offenders Being
Targeted in Romance Scams?

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Looking For Love In All The Wrong Places

Are Sex Offenders Being Targeted in Romance Scams?

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According to Federal Trade Commission (FTC) statistics, in 2022, nearly 70,000 people reported a romance scam, and reported losses that reached \$1.3 billion, with an average reported loss of \$4,400

(<https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/data-visualizations/data-spotlight/2023/02/romance-scammers-favorite-lies-exposed>). Romance scams target both men and women, with a

variety of story twists and colorful descriptors such as “catfishing” and “pig-butcherer”. The goal is the ultimately the same: drain the victim for as much money as possible. The interaction between scammer and victim can begin on an online dating site, but according to the FTC, interaction on social media platforms are more common. “In fact, 40% of people who said they lost money to a romance scam last year said the contact started on social media; 19% said it started on a website or app. Many people reported that the scammer then quickly moved the sweet talk to WhatsApp, Google Chat, or Telegram.”

Men and women looking for love are easy prey for scammers. Many of the victims are lonely and may not be able to see the initial warning signs that the person on the other end is not who he/she claims to be. “Catfishing”, when someone creates a fictitious online identity, is not unique to romance scams. As we have observed in cable television shows like “Catfish: The TV Show” (MTV), there are various reasons why someone may engage in catfishing, from financial gain to revenge to sheer boredom. Romance scams can be traced back to what was referred to as a “419 scam”, also known as the “Nigerian prince scam”, which is a version of an advance-fee scam that took advantage of the ease of sending bulk email to search for victims. The scammer uses various methods, such as representing themselves as connected to Nigerian royalty, to claim to be aware of a large amount of gold or currency that they cannot access directly and elicits the victim’s assistance. The 419 scam can actually trace its origins to the Spanish Prisoner scam that

goes back to the 18th century. The Spanish Prisoner scam had the perpetrators contacting businessmen allegedly trying to smuggle someone who is connected to a wealthy family out of a prison in Spain. In exchange for assistance, the scammer promised to share money with the victim in exchange for a small amount of money to bribe prison guards. There are many resources available to learn about and report romance and other scams. See the links below for information and recent news reports on this topic:

FBI - Common Scams and Crimes: <https://www.fbi.gov/how-we-can-help-you/safety-resources/scams-and-safety/common-scams-and-crimes>

FTC - What to Know About Romance Scams: <https://consumer.ftc.gov/articles/what-know-about-romance-scams>

Woman loses \$450,000 in 'pig butchering' romance scam: <https://mashable.com/article/pig-butchering-crypto-romance-scam>

Influencer is extradited to US in \$2M romance scam targeting older, single Americans: <https://nypost.com/2023/05/15/ghanaian-influencer-charged-in-2m-romance-scheme/>

While romance and other scams target anyone looking for relationships, is it possible that individuals convicted of sex offenses are being specifically targeted? Spotlight is a data analysis service provided by IPPC Technologies that uses a combination of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies and human verification to validate

content captured and flagged by IPPC's monitoring solutions. Spotlight's mission is to provide agencies and officers streamlined and verified leads they need to follow up on concerning behavior, as well as reduce the amount of data officers ultimately need to review. Our highly trained and experienced Spotlight Analysts often spot trends across multiple jurisdictions during their data analysis. Recently, we observed several persons under supervision involved, as a victim, in what appeared to be a typical romance scam. The PUSs began engaging in online conversations with individuals who represented themselves as someone looking for a relationship. The conversations eventually turned either sexual or very "loving". At that point, the individuals began discussing a situation that involved the need for money, small amounts at first and then gradually increasing. The concern came when the individuals reported having a minor child, eventually sharing a photo of the alleged child. Based on the way the children were portrayed in several of the photos, the Spotlight team believes the photos could be classified as child erotica (*content that is sexually arousing to persons having a sexual interest in minors but that is not, in and of themselves, obscene or that do not necessarily depict minors in sexually explicit poses or positions. Includes but not limited to fantasy writings, letters, diaries, books, sexual aids, souvenirs, toys, costumes, drawings, cartoons and non-sexually explicit visual images*). This may be another method of the scammer attempting to strengthen the bond with the victim, or tap into a sexual desire. In at least one case, the PUS disclosed their sex offense

conviction to the other individual PRIOR to that individual sharing the image of their alleged child. As many sex offenders experience mental health issues such as depression and social isolation upon release from custody, they make optimal targets in romance scams. The Spotlight Team is continuing to monitor and track these and similar circumstances to determine if the instances are coincidental or are scammers targeting sex offenders, especially those whose personal information may be publicly available on sex offender registries.

Events validated as "concerning" by Spotlight Analysts are provided to officers and agencies via Spotlight Alert and Daily Summary reports. Each event will contain a "Noted Concern" section which contains descriptors of the event content. The noted concerns currently being used by the Spotlight service are as follows (a brief definition is provided, and used internally by the Spotlight team for consistency):

NUDITY: Content contains partial and/or fully nude individual(s). May or may not be sexually explicit or intended to be arousing.

EXPLICIT LANGUAGE/THREATS: Content contains language that is sexually explicit or contains threatening terms and/or context.

WEAPONS: Content displays or discusses weapons (e.g. firearms, bladed weapons, explosives).

EROTIC: Content intended to be sexually arousing.

CHILD PRESENT: Content contains individual(s) who appear to be under the age of 18.

IMAGE CONTAINS CSAM: Content is considered child sexual abuse material.

TREATMENT-RELATED: Content contains information that may be a treatment concern based on case profile (e.g. drug use; attraction to minors; fantasy; suicidal ideations).

SEE SIMILAR EVENTS: Content is similar to other events occurring this timeframe/date which may not be flagged due to volume and redundancy.

OTHER (see notes): Please see text box for additional information from Spotlight Analyst.

Other Noted Concerns for future development:
Political Extremism; Child Erotica.

IPPC Technologies continues to strive towards predictive and proactive solutions so officers can intervene early, address areas of concern and change behavior. For more information on IPPC's services such as Spotlight, please call IPPC at (888)-WEB-IPPC or contact me directly at bkelly@ippctech.net or by calling (516)341-4201.



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