

Romance Scam Research Center

SOCIAL TECHNOLOGY AND SAFETY FOUNDATION

LIVING EVIDENCE SYNTHESIS

Victim Characteristics

Victim Characteristics in Romance Scams: Evidence Synthesis

Reviewed evidence describes a heterogeneous, non-representative literature that supports context-sensitive claims about who appears in complaint, help-seeker, platform, and purposive-study samples but does not justify a single, general population victim profile. High-quality systematic and scoping reviews converge on three primary conclusions: (1) samples are diverse and frequently self-selected or complaint-derived, limiting population inference; (2) recurring descriptive patterns appear (notably a substantial share of middle-aged or older adults and many female reporters in multiple datasets), but these patterns vary by scam subtype, contact channel, geography, and study recruitment; and (3) psychological and situational themes (loneliness, recent relationship disruption, romantic idealization, willingness to self-disclose) appear repeatedly in qualitative and survey reports as influential in narratives of how scams unfold, though causality and generalizability are not established. Recommendations in the literature emphasize subtype-sensitive, incident-verified, and representative or probability-based sampling, standardized measures of victim attributes, and improved offender-side and longitudinal research.

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PUBLICATIONS	EVIDENCE STATEMENTS	CITED SOURCES	SYNTHESIS VERSION
30	93	30	71

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Scope, sampling frames, and methodological character

Primary empirical work reflects the reviews: many studies analyze administrative complaint datasets, recruit via support forums or social-media advertising, or use small purposive interview series. Authors repeatedly warn that observed demographic compositions chiefly describe sampled reporters or help-seekers and that underreporting, optional fields, and unverified self-reports restrict their generalizability. [\[4\]](#) [\[6\]](#) [\[5\]](#)

Researchers analyzed 15,575 cleaned Action Fraud romance-fraud victim records over a three-year period (15,575 victims, or units of analysis, were left to analyze for the 3-year period). [\[5\]](#)

Sex and gender patterns

Multiple complaint-based and interview datasets show a sizable share of female reporters or interviewees; several studies and reviews therefore describe an overrepresentation of women in many sampled romance-scam datasets, particularly in Western complaint and support-site samples used for qualitative research and help provision. [\[6\]](#) [\[11\]](#) [\[12\]](#) [\[13\]](#) [\[14\]](#)

At the same time, sex composition varies substantially by subtype and sample frame. For example, a dedicated analysis of sextortion-related reports found a majority of complainants were male and skewed young, while pig-butcher/crypto and some regional datasets report different sex proportions and age bands among victims. [\[15\]](#) [\[16\]](#) [\[14\]](#)

Several authors explicitly call for more research on male victims and same-sex victims because the literature historically emphasized heterosexual female victims and often excludes or underreports other groups, limiting understanding of gendered patterns across contexts and scam types. These recommendations appear recurrently in recent systematic mappings and editorial syntheses. [\[17\]](#) [\[2\]](#) [\[18\]](#)

Age distributions, subtype heterogeneity, and contact channel

A repeated descriptive pattern across complaint and many interview samples is substantial representation of middle-aged and older adults (commonly described as roughly 40–69 or 45–74 in multiple datasets). Several national complaint analyses and qualitative series document that these age groups account for a large share of reported losses or in-depth interview participants. [\[19\]](#) [\[6\]](#) [\[7\]](#) [\[12\]](#) [\[8\]](#)

At the same time, other datasets and subtype analyses show younger adults as prominent victims in particular variants: for example, several reports and review syntheses identify romance-baiting or pig-butcher complainants concentrated among younger adult bands (e.g., 25–34 or 30–49) in specific national datasets. Thus age patterns vary by scam subtype, geography, and the reporting mechanism used. [\[14\]](#) [\[20\]](#)

Authors and reviews emphasize that cross-study age differences frequently reflect sampling frame, subtype definition, and reporting behavior rather than definitive susceptibility: reviewers explicitly note that current evidence cannot provide precise, population-general age-risk estimates without representative, incident-verified designs. [\[1\]](#) [\[2\]](#) [\[21\]](#)

Socioeconomic, educational, and psychosocial features

Findings on education and socioeconomic indicators are mixed across the corpus. Multiple studies and syntheses report victims who are relatively well educated or professionally employed (including some multivariable results linking higher education to reported victimhood), while other work documents highly heterogeneous victim profiles across contexts. [\[22\]](#) [\[7\]](#) [\[23\]](#) [\[24\]](#)

Qualitative and survey research repeatedly identifies psychosocial themes common in victim narratives: romantic idealization, investment of trust, social isolation or recent relationship disruption, loneliness, and willingness to self-disclose online. These themes help explain how victims describe grooming and decision points in scams but do not demonstrate causal predisposition. [\[25\]](#) [\[9\]](#)

Multiple studies report that romance-scam victims are often middle-aged and more highly educated, and that increased risk is associated with traits including impulsivity, low self-control, addiction-prone or addictive dispositions, sensation seeking, neuroticism, and a tendency to idealize romantic relationships; one report also characterizes many victims as women with impulsive and addictive dispositions. [\[22\]](#) [\[26\]](#) [\[27\]](#)

Subtype, contact channel, and geographic clustering

Evidence shows meaningful heterogeneity by scam subtype and contact channel: some subtypes (for example, sextortion and romance baiting versus traditional romance fraud or pig-butcher/crypto-investment) display different age and gender compositions in complaint and investigative datasets, indicating subtype-specific victim patterns in the reviewed records. [\[14\]](#) [\[15\]](#)

Geographic analyses of administrative reports identify concentration of reported victims in chronic hot-spot postcodes and social-geodemographic segmentation; authors note these hot-spot results were calculated using absolute counts (not population-adjusted rates) and caution about ecological and classification limitations when using proprietary segmentation data for targeting. [\[5\]](#)

Researchers analyzed 15,575 cleaned Action Fraud romance-fraud victim records over a three-year period. Half of reported romance-fraud victims resided in 17% of the locations where the fraud occurred. In Australia, losses to traditional romance fraud were highest among adults over 45. [\[5\]](#) [\[14\]](#)

Limitations, evidence gaps, and implications

Key gaps explicitly noted in the reviewed evidence include underrepresentation of male and same-sex victim experiences in many studies, geographic skew toward Western samples that may undercount minors or youth experiences in other contexts, and the need to verify complaints against confirmed incidents where possible. [\[17\]](#) [\[28\]](#) [\[29\]](#)

Authors and reviewers further identify a limited empirical base on psychological predictors, inconsistent demographic findings across contexts, and inadequate data for reliable population-level prevalence or regional victimization-rate estimation because of underreporting and unverified self-reports. [\[4\]](#) [\[1\]](#) [\[30\]](#)

Given the current evidence, practitioners and policymakers should treat commonly repeated sample features (for example, frequent appearance of middle-aged women in complaint datasets) as informative for service design and targeted outreach in similar contexts but not as definitive indicators of intrinsic vulnerability across populations or scam subtypes. [\[6\]](#) [\[14\]](#) [\[1\]](#)

Recommendations and research priorities (evidence-linked)

Several systematic reviews and mapping exercises explicitly recommend further research to investigate victim and offender profiles across diverse backgrounds and contexts, and to address sparse and conflicting evidence on demographic patterns such as age and gender across scam types and geographies. [\[2\]](#)

Studies exploring the socio-demographic and psychological factors associated with scammers and victims were limited. [\[1\]](#)

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