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New partnership helps police protect victims targeted by fraudsters in gift card scams.

Avon and Somerset Police have identified and supported a number of fraud victims thanks to a new partnership with supermarkets designed to help prevent scams.

Fraud Protect Officers launched the initiative back in April after seeing a noticeable rise in scam cases where victims were being asked to purchase gift cards instead of sending money in the more typical ways. We have since been contacted multiple times by stores who have recognised the signs of customers being coerced into buying gift cards by fraudsters.

In most cases the requests for gift cards have been a part of a bigger scam where victims have unwittingly handed over thousands of pounds to criminals over a period of time.

What are scams involving gift cards?

It normally starts by fraudsters trying to gain the trust of their victim, and this process can happen over a period of weeks or months. It can be via the internet with someone posing as a person they are not, often involving an element of romance, or over the phone with a fraudster who is lying, claiming to be working for a reputable organisation, such as the police or HMRC.

Having gained the victim's trust, they will ask them to purchase gift cards for them and will typically invent a time-critical reason as to why they need the victim to help them.

Once the victim has bought the gift cards, they are then asked to provide the individual number on the vouchers. The fraudsters may drain the value of the card, but typically sell the gift cards on. They will usually then ask the victim to go and buy more for them.

Fraud protect officer Amy Horrobin said: "In a large number of these cases, sadly, the victim is taken in by the scam because they are trying to help others, whether that be someone they believe to be a love interest, or a reputable agency.

"These fraudsters are unscrupulous and are only interested in taking people's money."

"It is brilliant that people are increasingly wary that they shouldn't hand over banking information or transfer money to people they don't know, but it means these fraudsters are coming up with more elaborate ways to steal innocent victims' cash. People don't tend to associate gift cards so readily with scams.

If you have been a victim, please report it."

What are Avon and Somerset Police doing?

We approached several supermarkets in the spring and encouraged them to make their staff aware of these scams and provided them with three simple steps to follow:

- If a transaction seems suspicious, don't be afraid to challenge the customer and what the purchases are for
- Look out for anyone who appears to be nervous or anxious about what they are doing
- Report it to the police if you think someone is in danger, or a crime is being committed

Fraudsters in years gone by have asked victims to buy iTunes or Amazon vouchers, but we have seen an increasing number of crimes involving the purchase of Steam cards. Steam is an online platform where people can download and play games.

Our proactive work has led to staff at Sainsbury's stores across the force area - or at Argos stores based within the supermarkets - to recognise several customers as a potential fraud victim. They have referred those incidents to us, allowing us to investigate and support the victim by firstly helping them to realise that they are a victim of fraud, and then providing them with advice and the tools to keep themselves safe in the future.

The incidents reported to us include:

- Sainsbury's in Taunton contacted us in May amid concerns for a shopper who had made several purchases of Steam cards totalling £140. When we made contact with the victim, it transpired they had been contacted by several people via a gaming app claiming to be single mothers unable to feed their children. In total, he parted with approximately £2,000.
- That same month, a customer who had bought a number of Steam gift cards over a period of weeks then tried to buy a £500 voucher. When approached by staff at Argos in Street, she said she had been asked to buy them for a man living in America who wanted to marry her. We made contact with the victim and established she was the victim of romance fraud. She had been in conversation online with someone with a fake profile and had sent a total of £4,000 to the fraudster.
- In June a shopper in Bridgwater attempted to purchase two £500 Steam gift cards. They had been phoned by someone claiming to be a police officer, claiming a car had been found in Wales with paperwork linking the vehicle to them and that it also contained drugs and guns. The fraudster said that unless gift cards were bought then the woman could be arrested. We're continuing to support the victim with advice to help them deal with any future phone scam attempts.

We have contacted other supermarkets too and hope to extend this initiative further in the future to prevent more people being scammed.

Fraud protect officer Jordan Coates said: "We're really grateful for how seriously Sainsbury's have taken this issue and supported our fraud prevention work. Their staff have allowed us to intervene and almost certainly prevented victims losing out on large sums of money."

How to spot the signs of gift card scams

Key signs of a gift card scam are:

- Someone you don't know, or haven't met in person, asks you to buy gift cards for them
- Often they will claim it is an emergency
- They will often pull at heartstrings and say you are the only person they can turn to

Our advice to anyone who is asked to buy gift cards is to remember that they will never be a legitimate form of payment under any circumstances, so these requests will certainly be part of a scam. Payment in the form of gift cards is convenient for the fraudster, less likely to be intercepted, and difficult to trace back to them, compared with bank transfers.

Victims often feel pressurised into buying the gift cards by the situation the fraudster places themselves in. This is a deliberate ploy to prey on the victim's emotions and seek them to make a decision that rationally they would not make otherwise.

We would urge anyone who finds themselves in this situation to take a step back and think 'could this be a scam?' and to ask someone else's opinion if unsure. If contacted by an organisation saying they need you to buy gift cards, it's safe to assume it's a scam.

The police, bank or other reputable organisation will never ask you to obtain gift cards for them, in the same way they will never ask for your PIN number or you to withdraw money for them. If unsure, find a phone number for them - don't use any number provided by the suspect - and call them to check.

If you are asked to obtain gift cards by someone you have been speaking to online, you are likely a victim of romance fraud."

Advice from victims

Some of the victims we have helped in recent weeks and months have offered the following advice to people.

One female victim said: "Tell someone else about what is being asked of you. I have a carer who could have helped me but the fraudster told me I could not tell anyone. I felt very isolated and frightened."

A male victim advises checking how many profile pictures a new request has and look at their biography or description. He said if he's never met them, they only have two or three photos and minimal personal details he will not engage with them online.

He added: "The language my scammer used was fractured and often did not make sense."

He went on to praise the work of Avon and Somerset Police fraud protect team, saying: "Thank you Amy and Jordan for everything you have done and continue to do. You saved me a lot of money and I hope by speaking out it helps others."

How to report scams

Under-reporting is a real issue with these sorts of crimes as victims wrongly believe they would be wasting our time, there's nothing that can be done or they feel embarrassed by what has happened.

We urge anyone in this situation to report it to Action Fraud on 0300 123 2040 or at <http://www.actionfraud.police.uk>