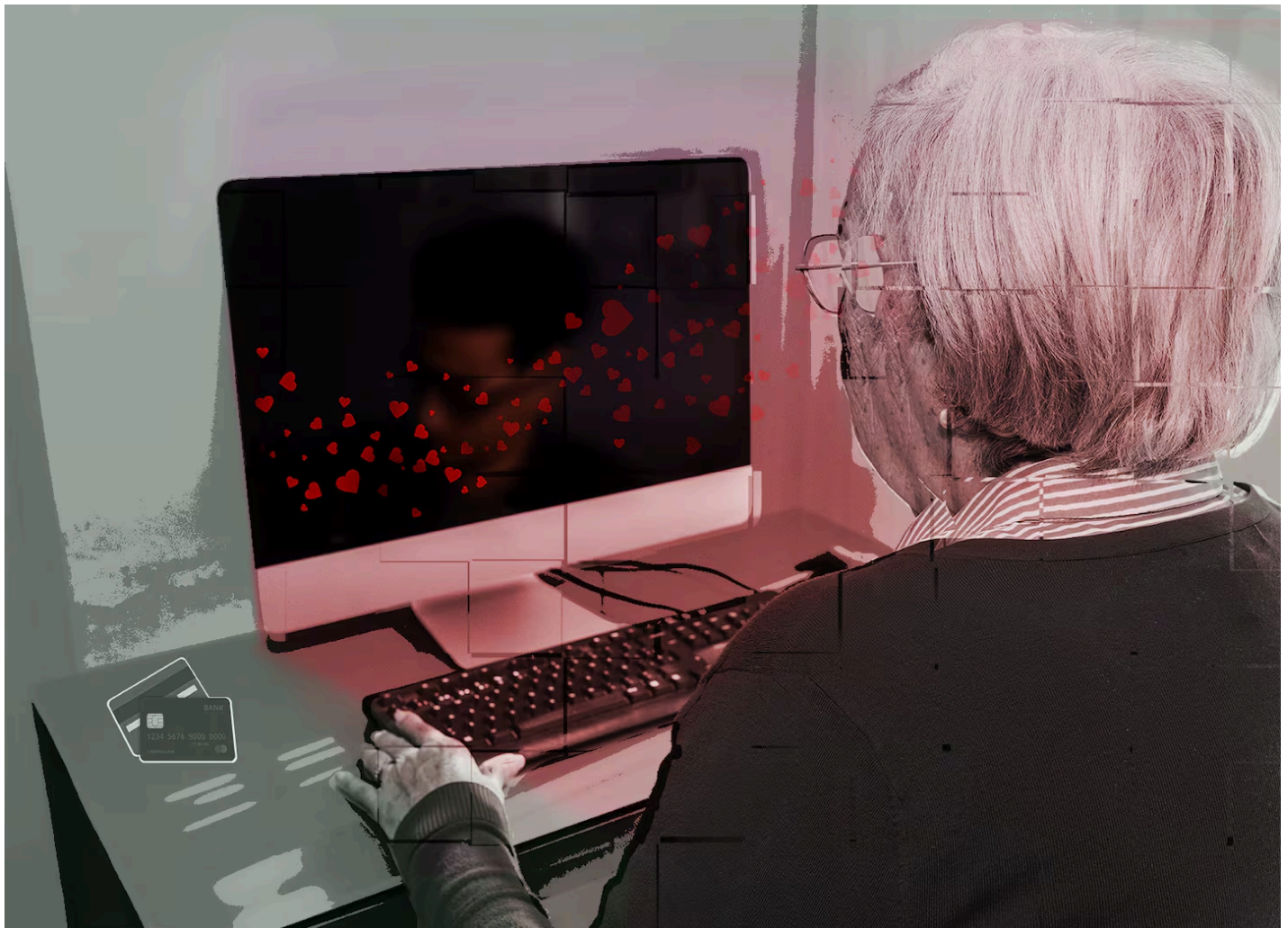


'They steal people's money and their hearts': Romance scams targeting Mass. seniors on the rise

By **Scooty Nickerson** Globe Staff, Updated February 14, 2025, 6:03 a.m.



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The retired public school teacher's life was thrown into chaos after she went looking for love on the internet back in 2021.

Nancy was in her 70s, lonely and beset by a handful of health issues, when she found what she was looking for while perusing WhatsApp and Facebook.

A charming man called Will Joshua, who claimed to be a military general in Afghanistan, chatted with her via WhatsApp and filled her with confidence — then convinced her to send him thousands of dollars, police reports show.

	NEWTON POLICE DEPARTMENT NEWTON, MA			
	<u>INCIDENT # / REPORT #</u> 22011269 / 1	<u>OFFICER</u> OCONNELL J	<u>RANK</u> SGT	<u>REVIEW STATUS</u> APPROVED
INCIDENT #22011269 DATA As Of 03/31/2022 08:43:57				
NARRATIVE On 03/29/2022 I received a call from Scott [REDACTED] in regards to his mother Nancy. Scott has power of attorney in regards to his mothers financial affairs. Nancy continues to send money to people she meets through on line dating scams. S. [REDACTED] took control of her finances due to the large amounts of money N. [REDACTED] has been scammed out of. Since S [REDACTED] has taken over her finances N. [REDACTED] has started to sell off property including silver. S [REDACTED] stated that N. [REDACTED] sold a large amount of silver to Marquis Jewelers on Winchester St in Newton. S [REDACTED] learned of the sale on the same day and was able to get in touch with Mark [REDACTED] of Marquis Jewelers but was informed that the silver had already been melted down.				

Police report of the romance scam targeting Nancy. OMAR VEGA

Then there was Dr. Wesley Robeson, a “diplomatic surgeon” who, according to police and neighbors, professed his love to Nancy — at least online. He promised to set her up in a New York penthouse if she helped fund his travel from overseas. She did her part, but he vanished. There were others, too, like the supposed military surgeon, who made off with her cash.

Time and again, Nancy’s friends, neighbors — even police — warned her. But love supposedly knows no bounds, especially in the digital age, where deception is often just a

direct message away. The Globe is withholding Nancy’s last name because she was the victim of multiple crimes and has died.

As more people go online to seek romantic relationships, and transferring money has gotten easier and less traceable, an increasing number across the country — particularly older people — have fallen victim to fake romance schemes in which scammers convince their targets to sign over their fortunes under the guise of a romantic relationship. These online schemes have increasingly targeted older people, who are often socially isolated and more vulnerable, experts say.

Massachusetts is part of that trend. Yearly reports of romance scams for victims 60 and older jumped from 66 in 2020 to 166 last year, according to data obtained exclusively by the Globe from the Federal Trade Commission. In 2024, the estimated damages of romance scams against seniors in the state totaled \$7 million.

Massachusetts romance scams spike for elderly victims



Data shows reports for victims aged 60 or older.
Chart: SCOOTY NICKERSON/GLOBE STAFF • Source: The Federal Trade Commission

Nationally, romance scams were the third most costly crime committed against older Americans in 2023, behind only investment scams and business impersonation scams, according to the FTC. Older Americans reported losing \$277 million to romance scams that year, up 330 percent since 2019.

The figures are also likely but a small glimpse into the true total number of cases, as authorities say many victims forgo reporting the crimes out of fear or shame.

The trend has gotten out of control since the pandemic, and has law enforcement on high alert.

“There were groups who understood, ‘Hey there’s money to be made here — it’s quick and easy,’ ” said Stephen Kelleher, an assistant special agent who oversees white collar crime investigations at FBI Boston.

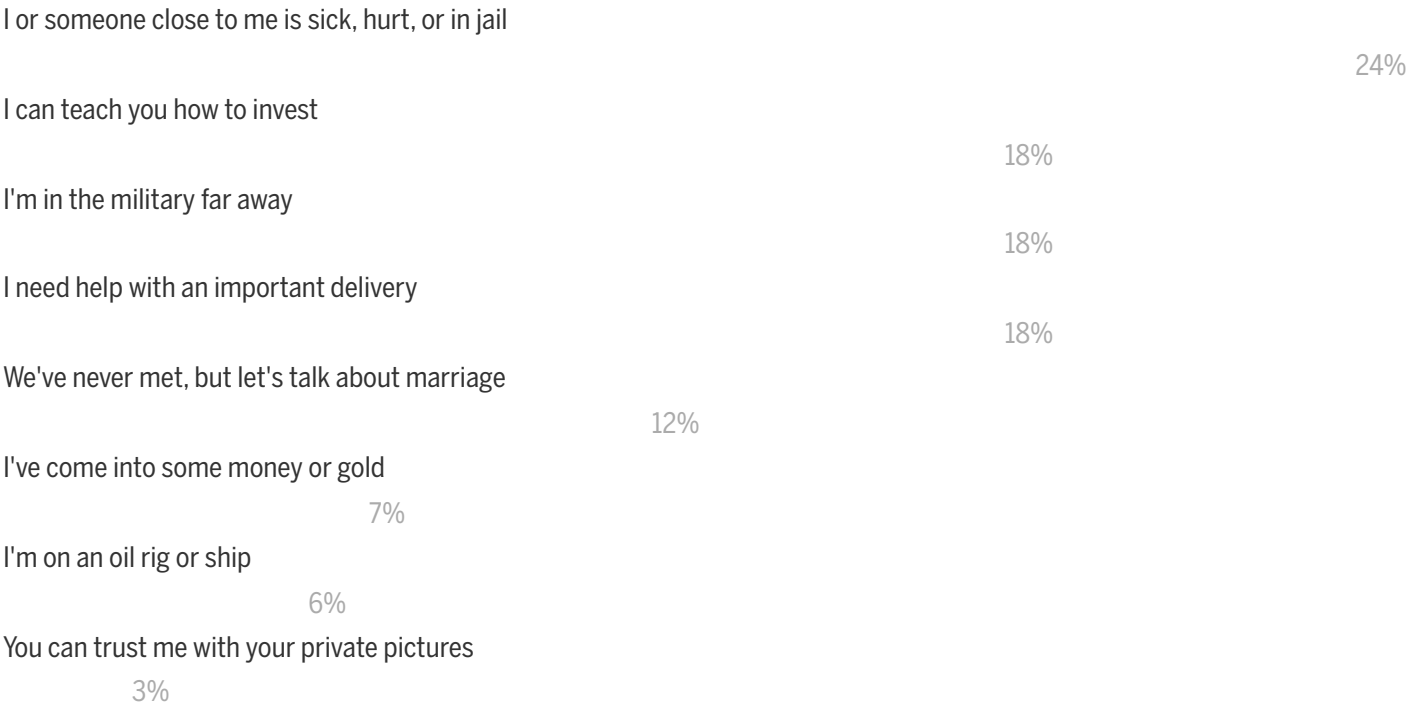
Scammers often first approach victims with seemingly nonromantic messages on apps like Facebook or Words with Friends, and only turn more flirty as things develop, said Amy Nofziger, the director of the American Association of Retired Persons’ Fraud Watch Network.

“Often it starts out benign, but then it turns, and they utilize love bombing,” she said. That means conversations suddenly become highly romantic at an unnatural pace.

When scammers first lure in their victims, the most common lie they use involves the claim that “I or someone close to me is sick, hurt, or in jail,” which appeared in 24 percent of cases, according to an analysis by the FTC.

The top lies of romance scammers targeting Americans in 2022

A single scam can fall into several categories.



Based on a subset of scams that had narratives at least 2,000 words or more and had a reported dollar lost value.
Chart: SCOOTY NICKERSON/GLOBE STAFF • Source: The Federal Trade Commission

Scammers, like in Nancy's case, also often claim to be from the military living in some far-flung country. That story is useful for explaining why the scammers cannot meet their victims in person.

And during the COVID-19 pandemic, Nofziger said, many scammers pretended to be doctors living abroad fighting the virus, also much like Nancy's case.

Revan Miles, Nancy's neighbor down the street, said she tried to convince Nancy that she had fallen victim to a scam after she borrowed \$20 to buy what Miles suspected was a burner phone. But Nancy wouldn't hear it.

"She was not to be deterred in this," the neighbor recalled.

Even the police had no luck.

"Usually a police officer or a family member can get through to the people," said Eric Rosenbaum, an elder affairs officer with Newton police who is familiar with her case. "With this one, there was no getting through to her."

Alice Diamond, a volunteer with the AARP fraud help line who lives in Arlington, has heard from victims all over the country, like Nancy, who struggled to accept that their online romance wasn't real.

One woman told Diamond that she sent \$150,000 to a man she met online after borrowing money from her friends and family. "She thought she was paying for cancer treatment for his very close friend," Diamond recalled — another common tactic by scammers.

Alice Diamond works for the AARP fraud line, where she has answered many calls from victims of romance scams. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Then there was the older man with a doctorate who Diamond said refused to believe he was being duped by his online "girlfriend" even after he had lost \$800,000 and was being evicted from his home.

“They steal people’s money and their hearts,” she said. “There’s just something really evil about that.”

Since Nancy’s death in August 2022, none of the money she sent out to the various scammers has been recovered.

While the total financial damage is still unclear, at one point, she was unable to pay her mortgage, was borrowing money from friends and neighbors, and was pawning silver flatware.

The last entry on her police case file before her death was in April 2022. In it, a police officer noted that Nancy had once again returned to the jewelry shop where she had pawned so much flatware, trying to sell yet more. The store, at the urging of the police, finally barred her.

So far, no arrests have been made in Nancy’s case. Her scammers could still be out there, investigators say, looking for their next victim.

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