



**AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION**
SERVICES, INC.

Written Testimony for the Record Submitted by:

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to the United States Senate Special Committee on Aging

Hearing

"The AI Deception Machine: Deepfakes, Chatbots, and the New Frontier of Senior Fraud"

July 29, 2026

On behalf of the American Psychological Association Services (APA Services), please accept the following written comments for the consideration of the Senate Special Committee on Aging for its Hearing titled "The AI Deception Machine: Deepfakes, Chatbots, and the New Frontier of Senior Fraud". APA Services is the companion organization of the American Psychological Association, which is the nation's largest scientific and professional nonprofit organization representing the discipline and profession of psychology, as well as over 190,000 members and affiliates who are clinicians, researchers, educators, consultants, and students in psychological science. Through the application of psychological science and practice, our organization's mission is to have a positive impact on critical societal issues.

Dementia, also known as major neurocognitive disorder, is a leading cause of cognitive and functional decline among older adults worldwide; the rates of mild cognitive impairment, otherwise known as mild neurocognitive disorder, may be twice as high as dementia.¹ At the same time, the manifestations of these cognitive impairments and the overall progression of the disease vary widely among individuals. Unfortunately, too often there are instances of scams targeting older adults who may be experiencing some degree of aging-related cognitive impairment. Through this testimony, APA Services hopes to inform the committee about the role that psychologists play in identifying and mitigating the risk of older adults engaging with scams and provide an overview of what the science of psychology tells us and does not yet tell us about the intersection of aging and susceptibility to financial fraud. Finally, we outline some concrete policies that the Committee and its members can support to better protect all seniors—including those with and without diagnosable cognitive impairments—from financial scams.

Psychologists Play a Key Role in Detecting Early Signs of Dementia and Mitigating the Risk of Older Adults Falling Victim to Fraud Schemes

Psychologists and psychological science serve as a vital resource in understanding exactly how these financial scams influence older adults, as well as the development and deployment of

¹ American Psychological Association, APA Task Force for the Evaluation of Dementia and Age-Related Cognitive Change. (2021). Guidelines for the Evaluation of Dementia and Age-Related Cognitive Change. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/>.

mechanisms to prevent or mitigate the impact of these scams. For example, false sweepstakes scams, which are among the most common forms of financial scams,² draw upon the popularity of legitimate sweepstakes contests by mimicking their language and/or logos to get individuals to engage with them in some way. When victims are later asked to pay some type of advance or fee, fraudsters exploit the natural inclination of their victims to continue sending money because they have either invested time, money, and effort into the sweepstakes already, or because they want to avoid the psychological impact of accepting a financial loss.

Unfortunately, the individuals behind these financial scams are often well aware of the circumstances of their intended targets and deliver their solicitations when their targets are at their most vulnerable.³ Fraudsters are able to gain confidential or private information about individuals from publicly available resources such as social networking sites—where individuals freely share personal information—as well as by utilizing more sophisticated methods by hacking into servers, purchasing information on individuals from data brokers, or by utilizing advances in artificial intelligence to fit their objectives and create more convincing scams.⁴

By accessing this information, scam artists may discover highly personal information about the victim's individual circumstances and adapt their strategy to obtain better results. For example, knowing that their victim is experiencing some degree of social isolation, a common phenomenon among many older adults,⁵ fraudsters may deploy a so-called “romance scam” to have a better chance of success. In these scams, the scammer typically creates a dating profile, grooms the victim through increased degrees of contact, and requests ever-increasing amounts of money to resolve various “crises”.⁶ As emerging forms of technology such as artificial intelligence are utilized in these scams, the more information the AI product has about a person and is trained on to mimic human behavior, the more it can be perceived as trustworthy by the victim and more effectively lure the victim.

Through extensive biomedical research, psychologists have also obtained a better understanding of the biological mechanisms that may place older adults at higher risk of becoming susceptible to financial scams. For example, an emerging body of research suggests that falling victim to financial scams may be a predictor of preclinical Alzheimer's disease. The entorhinal cortex, which mediates between different regions of the brain responsible for drawing on experiences and for values-based decision-making, is also one of the first parts of the brain to be affected in early-stage Alzheimer's disease.⁷

² Federal Trade Commission. (2024a). Consumer Sentinel Network.

https://www.ftc.gov/system/files/ftc_gov/pdf/CSNAnnual-Data-Book-2023.pdf.

³ Hanoch Y., et. al. *The Scammers' Psychological Warfare: A Call to Arms*, Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 2025, Vol. 26(3) 136–177. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15291006261431553>.

⁴ European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation. (2025). *The changing DNA of serious and organised crime*. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2813/0758057>.

⁵ Malani PN, Solway E, Kirch M, Singer DC, Roberts JS, Kullgren JT. Loneliness and Social Isolation Among US Older Adults. *JAMA*. 2025;333(3):254–257. doi:10.1001/jama.2024.23213.

⁶ Whitty, M. T. (2015). Anatomy of the online dating romance scam. *Security Journal*, 28(4), 443–455. <https://doi.org/10.1057/sj.2012.57>.

⁷ Laura Fenton, Lauren E Salminen, Aaron C Lim, Gali H Weissberger, Annie L Nguyen, Jenna Axelrod, Daisy Noriega-Makarsky, Hussein Yassine, Laura Mosqueda, S Duke Han, Lower entorhinal cortex thickness is

Finally, clinical psychologists are instrumental in helping older adults, caregivers, and families address the emotional and psychological impact of falling victim to financial fraud. Many victims of fraud report that the emotional impact of victimization is worse than the pecuniary loss itself.⁸ While the exact impact of victimization is not consistent among individuals, reviews of multiple studies highlight common themes among victims of fraud in terms of mood changes, trauma-like symptoms, and negative beliefs about oneself, including blaming oneself, losing trust, and having lower confidence overall, which can also worsen the individual's physical condition.⁹

Much is Left to Be Discovered About the Intersection of Aging and Susceptibility to Financial Scams

To be clear, not all adults experience cognitive decline as they age, and not all cognitive decline looks the same among individuals. However, we know there are some common strategies to preserve brain health with the hope of delaying more severe manifestations of the disease. According to recent meta-analyses¹⁰ of multiple studies, lifestyle factors such as physical activity, social connectedness, and diet are all important factors in slowing the progression of the dementia-causing disease itself, though it may be of limited utility to someone already in more advanced stages of dementia.

Many believe that older adults tend to be more susceptible to financial fraud, often due to assumptions about their degree of cognitive functioning, social isolation, and technological ability.¹¹ However, analyses of current data yield inconclusive results in this regard. According to the U.K. Office for National Statistics,¹² for example, adults aged 45 to 54 were most likely to be victims of fraud; on the other hand, other studies utilizing law enforcement data have found higher rates of victimization among older adults.¹³ Susceptibility may also be highly dependent on the nature of the scam itself, with younger and middle-age adults more susceptible to certain

associated with greater financial exploitation vulnerability in cognitively unimpaired older adults, *Cerebral Cortex*, Volume 34, Issue 9, September 2024, bhae360, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cercor/bhae360>.

⁸ Modic, D., & Anderson, R. (2015). It's all over but the crying: The emotional and financial impact of Internet fraud. *IEEE Security & Privacy*, 13(5), 99–103. <https://doi.org/10.1109/MSP.2015.107>.

⁹ Candeias, A. A., Galindo, E., Reschke, K., Bidzan, M., & Stueck, M. (2024). Editorial: The interplay of stress, health, and wellbeing: Unraveling the psychological and physiological processes. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1471084>.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Van Asbroeck S, Köhler S, van Bortel MPJ, et. al.; Lifestyle and incident dementia: A COSMIC individual participant data meta-analysis. *Alzheimers Dement*. 2024 Jun;20(6):3972-3986. Italian. doi: 10.1002/alz.13846. Epub 2024 Apr 27. PMID: 38676366; PMCID: PMC11180928.

¹¹ Ross, M., Grossmann, I., & Schryer, E. (2014). Contrary to psychological and popular opinion, there is no compelling evidence that older adults are disproportionately victimized by consumer fraud. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 9(4), 427–442. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691614535935>.

¹² Office for National Statistics. (2016). *Overview of fraud statistics: Year ending Mar 2016*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/overviewoffraudstatistics/yearendingmarch2016>.

¹³ DeLiema, M., Li, Y., & Mottola, G. (2023). Correlates of responding to and becoming victimized by fraud: Examining risk factors by scam type. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 47(3), 1042–1059. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12886>.

kinds of scams such as employment scams¹⁴ and older adults more likely to respond to sweepstakes scams.¹⁵

There are a number of factors that could explain these inconsistencies. For example, older adults may be less likely to report falling victim to a scam in surveys and to government officials, particularly when they perceive it may threaten their autonomy and financial independence. Additionally, doing so requires the victim to recognize the experience as a scam and confront the psychological experience of being a victim. Finally, some of these studies exclude especially vulnerable adults, such as those with active dementia, which would likely understate the prevalence of fraud amongst the population as a whole.

The Senate Aging Committee Is a Key Partner in Combating Financial Fraud Targeting Seniors with Dementia

The Senate Special Committee on Aging and its members can serve as critical allies in the fight against online fraud targeting older adults. One of the most effective ways to combat fraud is to inoculate our seniors from engagement in fraudulent schemes through awareness and educational programs¹⁶ that enable participants—whether an older adult, their family and friends, or their caregivers—to identify features of common scams, including those that utilize artificial intelligence and other emerging forms of technology with which they otherwise may not be familiar. Giving seniors the tools to recognize scams and distinguish them from legitimate communications is a proven method of reducing the risk of becoming a victim.¹⁷ Federal support for the funding, development, and dissemination of such programs would serve as a critical boost for their success. Additionally, reauthorization of Older Americans Act programs that serve as hubs of support for older adults—including, but not limited to, Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) and Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs)—would provide much-needed support in the dissemination and delivery of these educational programs.

Further research is also a necessary means of developing new mechanisms to minimize the effectiveness of financial scams targeting older adults. The National Institute on Aging (NIA) was founded in 1974 within the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to support research on the health of older adults. NIA-supported research provides the foundation for scientific advancements in the field of gerontology, and APA Services asks members of the Committee to support robust funding for NIH along with commensurate increases in NIA funding as Congress completes its FY2027 appropriations work. Additionally, as noted above, disparate conclusions have been reached concerning the factors affecting an individual's susceptibility to financial fraud schemes. Better quality data is urgently needed to aid researchers in pinpointing risk

¹⁴ Better Business Bureau Institute for Marketplace Trust. (2024). BBB scam tracker: Risk report. <https://bbbmarketplacetrust.org/riskreport2024>.

¹⁵ DeLiema, M., & Witt, P. (2024). Profiling consumers who reported mass marketing scams: Demographic characteristics and emotional sentiments associated with victimization. *Security Journal*, 37(3), 921–964. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41284-023-00401-5>.

¹⁶ DeLiema, M., Li, Y., & Mottola, G. (2023). Correlates of responding to and becoming victimized by fraud: Examining risk factors by scam type. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 47(3), 1042–1059. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12886>.

¹⁷ Yu, L., Mottola, G., Kieffer, C. N., Mascio, R., Valdes, O., Bennett, D. A., & Boyle, P. A. (2023). Vulnerability of older adults to government impersonation scams. *JAMA Network Open*, 6(9), Article e2335319. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.35319>.

factors for fraud victimization. APA Services asks this Committee to aid in the convening of stakeholders towards the goal of developing recommended standards of data collection, as well as identifying improved opportunities, methods, and incentives for reporting of data.

APA Services appreciates the Committee's recognition of the unique impact that emerging forms of financial fraud may have on adults as they age. We hope to work with this Committee and its members to develop policy that would protect vulnerable older adults from an array of financial scams. If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to Andrew Strickland, JD, Senior Legislative and Regulatory Officer, at astrickland@apa.org.