SEASON’S CHEATINGS:
BEWARE OF HOLIDAY SCAMS
AN AARP VERMONT SURVEY OF ADULTS 18+

December 2019
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BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

‘Tis the season…to be on the lookout for possible scams and fraud. It’s during this time of year that individuals are more focused on the spirit of the holidays and less focused on what may be happening with their pocketbook. For example, typically, consumers purchase gift cards as presents for people they know. But scammers have found a way to drain gift cards as soon as they are purchased. And, over the past several years, scammers have been demanding gift cards as payment by impersonating a government official or a utility company.[1] Also, it’s not uncommon for someone to receive a call from a cause or organization asking for a donation this time of year. In fact, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) reported that California residents should be on the lookout for scams asking for donations for victims of the wildfires across the state.[2] And we should all be aware that an email from a package delivery service about a delivery problem could actually be a scam intended to pry sensitive information from us or unleash malicious software on our devices.[3]

AARP conducted a survey of 419 Vermont adults ages 18 and older to understand people’s awareness of and experience with a variety of scams that are common around the holidays. The study explored experiences with purchasing gift cards, shipping and receiving packages, and charitable giving. In addition, the survey tested the knowledge of adults about several specific scams. This survey has a sampling margin of error of ± 5.9 percent. This survey was also conducted nationally and in three other states: Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and Washington.

The national report, all four state reports, and their respective annotated questionnaires and full methodology reports may be viewed at www.aarp.org/seasonscheatings.
Key Findings

- **More education is needed to raise awareness of scams that are common during the holidays.** This survey tested respondents’ knowledge about scams during the holidays with a ‘quiz’ of five true or false statements. About one in six (16%) Vermont adults failed the quiz.

- **One in seven Vermont adults have given and/or received a gift card that had no funds on it.** Two-thirds (66%) of Vermont adults plan to buy gift cards as presents for family and friends this holiday season. The majority (74%) plan to purchase gift cards on a rack at a big box store, pharmacy or grocery store.

- **Only half (51%) of Vermont adults conduct research before making a monetary donation to charitable causes or organizations.** Of those who do check out a charity first, about two in five (42%) did not make a donation based on what they found on charity rating sites.

- **Vermont adults say that packages are left outside of their home without requiring a signature.** Over half of Vermont adults (56%) say they never require a signature when shipping packages to home addresses while one in 10 (10%) always require a signature. When receiving packages, about one in five (21%) will provide the package delivery company with specific delivery instructions on where to leave the package.
FRAUD SAFETY QUIZ
About 1 in 6 Vermont adults failed the fraud safety quiz, answering two or fewer of the five questions correctly.

The average score of respondents was 3.54 out of five questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Correct</th>
<th>Incorrect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gift cards are a legitimate form of payment to settle debts with a government entity, like the IRS or local sheriff's office. [F]</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In most states, professional fundraisers must be registered with the government, report how much they raise and goes to the charity. [T]</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gift cards purchased from a gift card rack at a store are safe from hackers or thieves while gift cards purchased from an online retailer are not. [F]</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you receive an email from a shipping company that a package could not be delivered, it's always safe to click on a link for more information regarding delivery. [F]</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional fundraisers are allowed to keep most of the money they raise for charity as long as they don't lie about how much they keep. [T]</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q24 – Q29. Please select your best guess for each of the following True/False statements. 
Base: All respondents
2 in 3 Vermont adults plan to buy gift cards as presents for family and friends this year.

Younger adults are more likely to say that they plan to buy more gift cards whereas those ages 50+ are more likely to say they will buy fewer or no gift cards at all this year.

Future Plans to Buy Gift Cards During the Holiday Season

- Buy more gift cards
- Buy about the same amount of gift cards
- Buy fewer gift cards
- Do not plan to buy any gift cards

Q2. And would you say you plan to buy more, about the same, or fewer gift cards this year as presents for family and friends during the holidays? Base: Those who purchased gift cards during the last holiday season, n=419
The majority of Vermont adults plan to purchase gift cards at a big box store, pharmacy or grocery store.

One-third say they will purchase gift cards directly at the location of the issuing merchant/retailer.

Q3. And where will you purchase your gift cards this year? Will you buy them…? Select all that apply. Base: Those who plan to buy gift cards during the holidays, n=288.
1 in 7 have given and/or received a gift card that ended up having no funds on it.

The majority say they have never given or received a gift card with no funds on it.

Q4. Have you given or received a gift card that ended up having no funds on it? Base: All respondents

- Yes, have given one: 4%
- Yes, have received one: 7%
- Yes, have given and received one: 3%
- No: 85%
A small percentage of Vermont adults report that they have been asked to purchase gift cards to pay money owed to a government authority.

However, among those who were asked to purchase gift cards, one third say they made the payment by gift card.

Q5. Have you ever been asked to purchase gift cards in order to pay money owed to a government authority like Social Security, the IRS or to pay delinquent utility bills?  Base: All respondents Q5A. Did you make the payment by gift card?  Base: Those who answered “Yes” to Q5, n=25.  *Note: Extremely small base.  Use caution when generalizing to the larger Vermont population.
We need you

CHARITABLE GIVING
Half of Vermont adults report that they always or sometimes conduct research before making a donation.

About one in six say they never conduct research.

How Often Adults Conduct Research Before Making a Donation

- Always: 12%
- Sometimes: 39%
- Rarely: 31%
- Never: 18%

Q10. In general, how often do you research an organization or cause before you make a donation? Base: Those respondents who made a donation to a cause or organization, n=179
3 in 5 Vermont adults made monetary donations after receiving a request from a cause or organization.

Among the requests received from children’s cancer and animal protection or welfare causes or organizations, over two in five Vermont adults made monetary donations to them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause or Organization</th>
<th>% Requests Received</th>
<th>% Donations Made</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children's cancer</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal protection or welfare</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disaster relief</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabled or wounded veterans</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other cancer-related causes or research</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breast cancer</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local firefighters</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local police or sheriff departments</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church or faith community</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabled and handicapped workers</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing children</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other, please specify</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data suppressed due to small base.

Q6. In the past 12 months, or since last October, have you received a request by phone, email, or in-person to make a monetary donation to...? Base: All respondents
Q6AA. And did you make a monetary donation to [this cause or organization / these causes or organizations]? Base: Those who provided a response to Q6, n=280
Based on the donation requests received, nearly 3 in 10 Vermont adults have looked up the cause or organization on a charity rating site.

Interestingly, few have looked up local firefighter or police or sheriff departments on charity rating sites.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% REQUESTS RECEIVED</th>
<th>% LOOKED UP ON CHARITY RATING SITE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children’s cancer</td>
<td>29%</td>
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<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other, please specify</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q6. In the past 12 months, or since last October, have you received a request by phone, email, or in-person to make a monetary donation to…? Base: All respondents

Q6A3. Some may research charitable organizations they are considering donating to, while others may not. Thinking about the donation requests you received in the past 12 months, which ones did you look up on charity rating sites (i.e., Charity Watch or Charity Navigator), to find out how much of their budget is spent on serving the intended groups or causes versus on fundraising and/or administration costs? Base: Those respondents who provided a response in Q6, n=280.

Q6A4. Was your reason for not making a donation to the following causes or organizations based on what you found on the charity rating site? Base: Those who responded “No” to making a monetary donation to at least one cause or organization, n=47. *Note: Extremely small base. Use caution when generalizing to the larger Vermont population.
The majority of Vermont adults made a donation *after looking* at a charity rating site to find out how much of their budget is spent on serving the intended groups or causes.

In addition, most made a donation *after verifying* that the fundraiser or charity was legally authorized to raise money in their state.

Q7. Again, some may ask about how much of the donation goes directly to a charity, while other do not. Thinking again about those donations you made during the past 12 months, which ones would you say were made after you looked them up on a charity rating site to find out how much of their budget is spent on serving the intended groups or causes versus on fundraising and/or administration costs? Base: Those who responded “Yes” to making a monetary donation to at least one cause or organization, n=67. *Note: small base. Use caution when generalizing to the larger Vermont population.

Q8. And which causes or organizations did you donate to after you verified that the fundraiser or charity requesting funds was legally authorized to raise money in your state? Base: Those who responded “Yes” to making a monetary donation to at least one cause or organization, n=67. **Note: small base. Use caution when generalizing to the larger Vermont population.
About 3 in 10 Vermont adults turn to the Better Business Bureau to verify that a charity or fundraiser was legally authorized to raise money in their state.

However, almost a third say that they are *not sure* where to go.

Q9. If you wanted to verify that a charity or fundraiser was legally authorized to raise money in your state, where or to whom would you turn? Base: Those who said “Yes” to making a monetary donation or did not make a donation based on what they found on a charity rating site, n=185.
The majority of Vermont adults have not developed a written charitable giving plan.

But among those who have, nearly all stick to it either completely or somewhat.
Almost 3 in 10 Vermont adults say that they have received a request for a donation to a charity or cause that was likely a fake or fraudulent solicitation.

Those ages 50+ are more likely than younger adults to report that they have received a fake or fraudulent solicitation.

Q14. In the past 12 months, have you received a request for a donation to a charity or cause that you felt was likely a fake or fraudulent solicitation? Base: All respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Received a Request for a Donation that was Likely Fake or Fraudulent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL (n=419)</td>
<td>28% Yes, 72% No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-49 (n=207)</td>
<td>20% Yes, 80% No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50+ (n=212)</td>
<td>34% Yes, 65% No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SHIPPING PACKAGES
Few report that they have had a package stolen from their home.

Younger adults are more likely than older adults to report having a package stolen.

Q19. Have you ever had a package stolen from your home? Base: All respondents

- **TOTAL (n=419)**
  - Yes: 85%
  - No: 9%
  - Not sure: 6%

- **18-49 (n=207)**
  - Yes: 79%
  - No: 14%
  - Not sure: 7%

- **50+ (n=212)**
  - Yes: 91%
  - No: 5%
  - Not sure: 5%
About half of Vermont adults plan to mail or ship gift packages to friends or family during the upcoming holiday season.

Even more (78%) expect to receive packages at their home.

Q15. This holiday season, do you plan to mail or ship any gift packages to friends or family members?
Base: All respondents
Among those who plan to mail or ship gift packages to friends or family, over half of Vermont adults report that they *never request a signature*.

About one in 10 say they request a signature *all of the time*.

Q16. *When you ship packages to a home address, how often do you typically request a signature from someone receiving the package?* Base: Respondents who plan to mail or ship gift packages to friends or family, n=226
Most Vermont adults report that packages are left outside of their home without requiring a signature all or some of the time.

Very few say that packages are never left outside of their home without requiring a signature.

Q17. Thinking about the past 12 months, how often would you say packages have been left outside your home, say on a front porch or near the front door, without requiring a signature?

Base: All respondents

- All of the time: 53%
- Some of the time: 36%
- Never: 6%
- Not applicable: 4%
Half of Vermont adults say that they will not take any actions when receiving packages at their home address this holiday season.

Interestingly, over three in five say they will not take any action because they live in a safe area.

**Q18A.** Will you take any of the following actions when receiving packages during the holiday season? Base: All respondents

**Q18B.** What is your primary reason for not taking any of the listed actions when receiving packages this holiday season? Base: Those who said, “I will not take any actions” in Q18A, n=166
Methodology

- **Objectives**: To explore scams faced by Vermont consumers ages 18 and older during the holidays

- **Methodology**: Online survey via NORC’s AmeriSpeak® Panel, a probability-based panel, and from Dynata’s non-probability online opt-in panel, with sample targeting Vermont adults ages 18 and older. The AmeriSpeak panel is designed to be representative of national general household population, with the Vermont AmeriSpeak cases being a subsample from a national general population survey.

- **Qualifications**: Ages 18 or older; resides in Vermont; goes online or accesses the Internet (e.g., sending or receiving email)

- **Sample**: NORC’s AmeriSpeak® Panel, n=419 adults ages 18 and over

- **Interviewing Dates**: November 4-15, 2019

- **Weighting**: Sample were weighted to the population by age, gender, gender, race/ethnicity, and Census division.

- **Margin of error**: ± 5.9 percent at the 95 percent confidence level
APPENDIX
About AARP

AARP is the nation’s largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to empowering Americans 50 and older to choose how they live as they age. With nearly 38 million members and offices in every state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Vermont Virgin Islands, AARP works to strengthen communities and advocate for what matters most to families with a focus on health security, financial stability and personal fulfillment. AARP also works for individuals in the marketplace by sparking new solutions and allowing carefully chosen, high-quality products and services to carry the AARP name. As a trusted source for news and information, AARP produces the nation's largest circulation publications, AARP The Magazine and AARP Bulletin. To learn more, visit [www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org) or follow @AARP and @AARPadvocates on social media.
CITATIONS

https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/paying-scammers-gift-cards


https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/blog/2014/12/package-delivery-scam-delivered-your-inbox
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