

Sim swap scam costs victims £9m as con artists gain their data on social media

By Mike Wright, Social Media Correspondent and Helena Horton

BANK customers have lost more than £9.1 million in “Sim swapping” scams over the last five years, The Sunday Telegraph can reveal, as police warned people not to share details such as pet names on social media.

New figures from the City of London Police’s Action Fraud division show 4,495 people have fallen for the scam, in which phone companies are duped into switching a person’s number to a fraudster’s phone.

Victims lost on average just under £4,000 as the scam enables criminals to transfer large sums out of a target’s bank account undetected.

Police data also showed that the numbers of people falling victim have risen dramatically over the last five years, with 3,111 in 2018 compared with 144 cases in 2015 – a more than 20-fold increase. Sim swapping works by scammers convincing phone companies to “port” the victim’s number to a new phone, often by posing as a customer wanting to switch to a new provider.

Police said fraudsters often needed to control a victim’s phone number to wire money out of bank accounts they had hacked, as most banks now require new transfers to be confirmed with a call or text. Phil Keating, a senior crime reviewer at the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau, said scammers often scoured social media feeds for personal information that is often used as passwords, such as a mother’s maiden name. They could then use this to convince phone companies they were the victim when requesting the swap.

Mr Keating said: “Be very conscious of not putting personal identifiable information in the public domain, such as date of birth, mother’s maiden name, names of their pets – the common things that usually are used as memorable information and passwords.”

Police said signs a Sim swap had taken place included not getting messages for an unusually long period and receiving a message from the phone company about a PAC code or saying they were sorry they were leaving.

The new figures come as a number of high-profile people have recently had their phone numbers Sim swapped. Last month, the pro-Brexit campaigner Arron Banks had his Twitter account hacked. A spokesman for Mr Banks later said police were investigating the matter. Officers told the businessman’s representatives they suspected his account had been hacked via a Sim swap.

In October, the food writer Jack Monroe said she was “living in a nightmare” when hackers stole £5,000 from her bank account after swapping her Sim.