Underworld marketplace exposed: Fake IDs for sale on the dark web

November 15 2023

Internet crime. Credit: University of Technology Sydney. AI generated.

Counterfeit Australian identity documents, especially driver's licenses, rank among some of the most frequently listed and sold identity documents on anonymous dark web marketplaces, according to new research from the Center of Forensic Science at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS).

These documents are used by crime rings, terrorist organizations and other criminals for a wide range of illicit activities, including identity crime, money laundering, human and drug trafficking, illegal immigration, scams and espionage.

UTS Center for Forensic Science Ph.D. candidate Ciara Devlin shares her research on fake Australian identity documents and how they are sold through cryptomarkets at the International Association of Forensic Sciences (IAFS) conference, held in Sydney from 20–24 November.

"The manufacture and distribution of fraudulent identity documents is a pervasive and prolific crime problem, so much so that Europol has said that fraudulent identity documents are a threat that enables and facilitates most, if not all, other types of serious and organized crime," Devlin said.

"Despite this, most instances of document fraud are treated on a case-by-case basis, meaning the individuals holding the document are charged, with no real attempt to identify the source of the documents, resulting in very limited impact on the overall crime rate."

"Internationally it has been found that the fraudulent document market is very organized, with prolific offenders operating at the core of the market, but in Australia, very little is known about the document fraud criminal environment," she said.

Devlin has been working to fill these gaps in knowledge, approaching the problem from two angles. First, she has profiled the visual characteristics of fake Australian driver's licenses, to see if they share a common source. Second, she is investigating the extent of the fraudulent document market on the dark web, particularly for Australian identity documents.

"From examining the listings and sale data from two cryptomarkets, which have now closed, I have been able to gain an insight into a possible route of distribution for fake identity documents as well as the role Australian documents play within the overall marketplace," Devlin said.

"I found that Australian documents are some of the most common products listed for sale, and sold, second only to the United States, with prolific offenders contributing to the majority of the Australian document sales.

"This research can inform law enforcement and security organizations and help them to target their efforts towards specific types of fraud, such as loan fraud or specific areas, such as mail entering Australia from countries that have a high number of sales of fraudulent Australian documents," she said.

Through visually profiling 43 fraudulent documents, including the way security features are replicated, printing processes used, and even the mistakes made, Devlin found that 88% could be linked to at least one other document, with five clusters of linked documents emerging.

"The results are significant because it suggests that so far, fraudulent identity documents have been an under-utilized source of information in Australia. This information could be captured in a systematic profiling system that could help identify pre-existing crime networks."

A paper on her initial findings, The potential of using the forensic profiles of Australian fraudulent identity documents to assist intelligence-led policing, has been published in the *Australian Journal of Forensic Sciences*.

Devlin says her Ph.D. initially came about because of a partnership

between UTS, the University of Lausanne Switzerland, and the NSW Police Force. These partnerships have expanded to include other organizations within Australia, who are hoping to implement her work within their operations.

"Both aspects of my work highlight the structure of a market that has so far been under-explored. It illustrates that a profiling system for fraudulent identity documents, similar to one that operates in Europe, could be very successful if implemented over here."

Provided by University of Technology, Sydney