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## **Ashley Madison Cheats Exposed**

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Ashley Madison is the premiere website for the married who wanted to cheat on their spouses. The worst has happened for members of the web site. Its database has been hacked and has been posted online for all to see. With a quick search of an email address, spouses can find out if their other halves have been trying to cheat on them.



### **Ashley Madison**

Ashley Madison is an online social networking service aimed at people who are married or who are in a committed relationship. Its slogan is "Life is short. Have an affair."



It describes itself on its home page:

"Ashley Madison is the most famous name in infidelity and married dating. Have an affair today on Ashley Madison. Thousands of cheating wives and cheating husbands sign up every day looking for an affair... with our affair guarantee package, we guarantee you will find the perfect affair partner."

Of those registered on the site, 70% are male and 30% are female. However, those who have studied the hacked data indicate that many of the female members are false. The ratio of actual men to women is more like 6:1.

Membership for women is free. However, men pay for every message they send or receive. Ashley Madison made it a practice to send men phony messages to increase revenue and to generate interest.

### **The Data**

The data stored in the Ashley Madison membership database includes names, email addresses, street addresses, phone numbers, and sexual fantasies. There were no credit card numbers.

Several thousand of the entries had .gov and .mil email addresses – addresses of members of government and the military. Adultery is a crime in the military, subject to a year in prison and dishonorable discharge (terminating the military pension).

A member could terminate his membership for \$19. However, unbeknownst to those who ended their membership, their data was not deleted from the Ashley Madison database.

## The Hack

On July 15, 2015, a team of hackers calling themselves the Impact Team broke into the Ashley Madison database and stole the entire set of data. According to the hackers, the breach was a protest of the company's encouragement of adultery. They demanded that Ashley Madison be closed down or they would release all of the data. Ashley Madison's response was that it had incorporated fully effective security measures.

To demonstrate that they possessed the database, the Impact Team began releasing data on July 22<sup>nd</sup>. With Ashley Madison still in business, the hackers continued to release more data until on August 20<sup>th</sup>, they released everything. The information, going back to 2007, comprises 60 gigabytes exposing 37 million members. The data even includes those customers who had paid the deletion fee.

The data is posted on the Dark Web via an "Onion" address. This is a facility called Tor (The Onion Ring) that is accessible only through a Tor browser that is made available only to those who have proven that they are successful and dedicated hackers.

## How to Find Out If You Have Been Exposed

Though a Tor browser is needed to access the database posted by the Impact Team, as soon as some data was posted, several sites immediately came online and published the posted data on the public-facing Internet. These sites included CheckAshleyMadison.com, Trustify, and Have I Been Pwned, among others. Anyone now could search these databases to see if their email addresses, names, or phone number were present.

However, the Ashley Madison legal team shut down these sites, serving them with a DMCA takedown demand. DMCA is the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. Avid Life Media, the company that owns Ashley Madison, claims that it owns the copyright data to the database contents and that no one else can publish access to it.

One avenue remains for the curious. A programmer has provided a site in which you can enter your email address or that of another individual and see if it is in the database. The site can be accessed at <https://ashley.cynic.al/>.

Just because you may find your spouse or any other person in the database does not mean that they were a legitimate member of Ashley Madison. Many of those registering used phony or hijacked email addresses to sign up. Ashley Madison did not verify email addresses by sending a confirmation request to the email address. Typically, data such as name, street address, or telephone number would identify a hijacked email address as being associated with a phony registration.

## Where Is Ashley Madison Now?

Ashley Madison temporarily closed its web site on August 21. Other associated web sites were also shut down as per the hackers' demands. All web sites are now back up and operational.

Unfortunately, the Ashley Madison member database still is posted on the Dark Web. There are bound to be those in the Dark Web that are free to browse the database. A major concern is that this will lead to extortion or blackmail of former members.

## Summary

The Ashley Madison hack should be a reminder to all that the Internet is public and perpetual. Whatever you do on the Internet is likely to remain accessible for years to come, whether it's a membership in a secret society or a posting on a Facebook page.

## Acknowledgements

Information for this article came from the following sources:

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Ashley Madison is Sending Out Bogus DMCA Takedown Notices, *Gizmodo*; August 20, 2015.

Wikipedia – Ashley Madison