

ID Theft: What's It All About?

The 1990's spawned a new variety of crooks called identity thieves. Their stock in trade? Your everyday transactions, which usually reveal bits of your personal information: your bank and credit card account numbers; your income, your Social Security number (SSN); or your name, address, and phone numbers. An identity thief obtains some piece of your sensitive information and uses it without your knowledge to commit fraud or theft.

Identity theft is a serious crime. People whose identities have been stolen can spend months or years — and their hard-earned money — cleaning up the mess the thieves have made of their good name and credit record. Some victims have lost job opportunities, been refused loans for education, housing or cars, or even been arrested for crimes they didn't commit.

Can you prevent identity theft from occurring? As with any crime, you cannot completely control whether you will become a victim. But, according to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), you can minimize your risk by managing your personal information cautiously and with heightened sensitivity.

How Identity Theft Occurs

Skilled identity thieves use a variety of methods to gain access to your personal information. For example:

- They get information from businesses or other institutions by stealing records from their employer; bribing an employee who has access to these records; or hacking into the organization's computers.
- They rummage through your trash, or the trash of businesses or dumps in a practice known as "dumpster diving."
- They obtain credit reports by abusing their employer's authorized access to credit reports or by posing as a landlord, employer, or someone else who may have a legal right to the information.
- They steal credit and debit card numbers as your card is processed by using a special information storage device in a practice known as "skimming."
- They steal wallets and purses containing identification and credit and bank cards.
- They steal mail, including bank and credit card statements, pre-approved credit offers, new checks, or tax information.
- They complete a "change of address form" to divert

your mail to another location.

- They steal personal information from your home.
- They scam information from you by posing as a legitimate business person or government official.

Once identity thieves have your personal information, they may:

- Go on spending sprees using your credit and debit card account numbers to buy "big-ticket" items like computers that they can easily sell.
- Open a new credit card account, using your name, date of birth, and SSN. When they don't pay the bills, the delinquent account is reported on your credit report.
- Change the mailing address on your credit card account. The imposter then runs up charges on the account. Because the bills are being sent to the new address, it may take some time before you realize there's a problem.
- Take out auto loans in your name.
- Establish phone or wireless service in your name.
- Counterfeit checks or debit cards, and drain your bank account.
- Open a bank account in your name and write bad checks on that account.
- File for bankruptcy under your name to avoid paying debts they've incurred, or to avoid eviction.
- Give your name to the police during an arrest. If they are released and don't show up for their court date, an arrest warrant could be issued in your name.

How Can I Tell if I'm a Victim of Identity Theft?

Monitor the balances of your financial accounts. Look for unexplained charges or withdrawals. Other indications of identity theft can be:

- Failing to receive bills or other mail signaling an address change by the identity thief;
- Receiving credit cards for which you did not apply;
- Denial of credit for no apparent reason; or
- Receiving calls from debt collectors or companies about merchandise or services you didn't buy.

Are There Any Other Steps I Can Take?

If an identity thief is opening new credit accounts in your name, these accounts are likely to show up on your credit report. You can find out by ordering a copy of your credit

report from any of three major credit bureaus. If you find inaccurate information, check your reports from the other two credit bureaus. Of course, some inaccuracies on your credit reports may be because of computer, clerical, or other errors and may not be a result of identity theft. Note: If your personal information has been lost or stolen, you may want to check all of your reports more frequently for the first year. Federal law allows credit bureaus to charge you up to \$9 for a copy of your credit report. Some states may allow a free report or reduced rates.

To order your credit reports:

Equifax—www.equifax.com
1-800-685-1111

Experian—www.experian.com
1-888-EXPERIAN (397-3742)

TransUnion—www.transunion.com
1-800-916-8800

Managing Your Personal Information

So how can a responsible consumer minimize the risk of identity theft, as well as the potential for damage? When it involves your personal information, exercise caution and prudence.

Do It Now

Place passwords on your credit card, bank and phone accounts. Avoid using easily available information like your mother's maiden name, your birth date, the last four digits of your SSN or your phone number, or a series of consecutive numbers. When you're asked for your mother's maiden name on an application for a new account, try using a password instead.

Secure personal information in your home, especially if you have roommates, employ outside help, or are having service work done in your home.

Ask about information security procedures in your workplace. Find out who has access to your personal information and verify that your records are kept in a secure location. Ask about the disposal procedures for those records as well.

Everyday Diligence

Don't give out personal information on the phone, through the mail, or over the Internet unless you've initiated the contact or are sure you know who you're dealing with. Identity thieves can be skilled liars, and may pose as representatives of banks, Internet service providers (ISPs), or even government agencies to get you to reveal identifying information. Before you divulge any personal information, confirm that you're dealing with a legitimate representative of a legitimate organization. Double check by calling customer service using the number on your account statement or in the telephone book.

Guard your mail and trash from theft. Deposit outgoing mail in post office collection boxes or at your local post office instead of an unsecured mailbox. Remove mail from your mailbox promptly. If you're planning to be away from home and can't pick up your mail, call the U.S. Postal Service at 1-800-275-8777 to ask for a vacation hold. To thwart a thief who may pick through your trash or recycling bins, tear, shred or cut up your charge receipts, copies of credit applications or offers, insurance forms, physician statements, checks and bank statements, and expired charge cards.

Before revealing any identifying information (for example, on an application), ask how it will be used and secured, and whether it will be shared with others. Find out if you have a say about the use of your information. For example, can you choose to keep it confidential?

Keep your Social Security card in a secure place and give your SSN only when absolutely necessary. Ask to use other types of identifiers when possible. If your state uses your SSN as your driver's license number, ask to substitute another number.

Limit the identification information and the number of credit and debit cards that you carry to what you'll actually need. Keep your purse or wallet in a safe place at work.

Consider Your Computer

Your computer can be a goldmine of personal information to an identity thief. Here's how you can safeguard your computer and the personal information it stores:

- Update your virus protection software regularly. Computer viruses can have damaging effects, including introducing program code that causes your computer to send out files or other stored information. Look for security repairs and patches you can

A Special Word About Social Security Numbers

Very likely, your employer and financial institution will need your SSN for wage and tax reporting purposes. Other private businesses may ask you for your SSN to do a credit check, such as when you apply for a car loan. Sometimes, however, they simply want your SSN for general record keeping. If someone asks for your SSN, ask the following questions:

- Why do you need it?
- How will it be used?
- How do you protect it from being stolen?
- What will happen if I don't give it to you?

If you don't provide your SSN, some businesses may not provide you with the service or benefit you want. Getting satisfactory answers to your questions will help you to decide whether you want to share your SSN with the business.

- download from your operating system's Web site.
- Don't download files from strangers or click on hyperlinks from people you don't know. Opening a file could expose your system to a computer virus or a program that could hijack your modem.
- Use a firewall, especially if you have a high-speed or "always on" connection to the Internet. The firewall allows you to limit uninvited access to your computer. Without a firewall, hackers can take over your computer and access sensitive information.
- Use a secure browser — software that encrypts or scrambles information you send over the Internet — to guard the safety of your online transactions. When you're submitting information, look for the "lock" icon on the status bar. It's a symbol that your information is secure during transmission.
- Try not to store financial information on your laptop unless absolutely necessary. If you do, use a "strong" password — that is, a combination of letters (upper and lower case), numbers, and symbols. Avoid using an automatic log-in feature that saves your user name and password; and always log off when you're finished. If your laptop gets stolen, the thief will have a hard time accessing sensitive information.
- Delete any personal information stored on your computer before you dispose of it. Use a "wipe" utility program, which overwrites the entire hard drive and makes the files unrecoverable.
- Read Web site privacy policies. They should answer questions about the access to and accuracy, security, and control of personal information the site collects,

as well as how sensitive information will be used, and whether it will be provided to third parties.

If Your Identity's Been Stolen

Even if you've been very careful about keeping your personal information to yourself, an identity thief can strike. If you suspect that your personal information has been used to commit fraud or theft, **take the following four steps right away**. Remember to follow up all calls in writing; send your letter by certified mail, return receipt requested, so you can document what the company received and when; and keep copies for your files.

1. Place a fraud alert on your credit reports and review your credit reports.

Call the toll-free fraud number of any one of the three major credit bureaus to place a fraud alert on your credit report. This can help prevent an identity thief from opening additional accounts in your name. As soon as the credit bureau confirms your fraud alert, the other two credit bureaus will automatically be notified to place fraud alerts on your credit report, and all three reports will be sent to you free of charge.

- **Equifax** — To report fraud, call: 1-800-525-6285, and write: P.O. Box 740241, Atlanta, GA 30374-0241
- **Experian** — To report fraud, call: 1-888-EXPERIAN (397-3742), and write: P.O. Box 9532, Allen, TX 75013
- **TransUnion** — To report fraud, call: 1-800-680-7289, and write: Fraud Victim Assistance Division, P.O. Box 6790, Fullerton, CA 92834-6790

Once you receive your reports, review them carefully. Look for inquiries you didn't initiate, accounts you didn't open, and unexplained debts on your true accounts. You also should check that information such as your SSN, address(es), name or initial, and employers are correct. Inaccuracies in this information also may be due to typographical errors. Nonetheless, whether the inaccuracies are due to fraud or error, you should notify the credit bureau as soon as possible by telephone and in writing. You should continue to check your reports periodically, especially in the first year after you've discovered the theft, to make sure no new fraudulent activity has occurred. The automated one-call fraud alert process only works for the initial placement of your fraud alert. Orders for additional credit reports or renewals of your fraud alerts must be made separately at each of the three major credit bureaus.

2. Close any accounts that have been tampered with or opened fraudulently.

Credit Accounts

Credit accounts include all accounts with banks, credit card companies and other lenders, and phone companies, utilities, ISPs, and other service providers.

If you're closing existing accounts and opening new ones, use new Personal Identification Numbers (PINs) and passwords.

If there are fraudulent charges or debits, ask the company about the following forms for disputing those transactions:

- For new unauthorized accounts, ask if the company accepts the ID Theft Affidavit (available at www.ftc.gov/bcp/online/pubs/credit/affidavit.pdf). If they don't, ask the representative to send you the company's fraud dispute forms.
- For your existing accounts, ask the representative to send you the company's fraud dispute forms.
- If your ATM card has been lost, stolen or otherwise compromised, cancel the card as soon as you can. Get a new card with a new PIN.

Checks

If your checks have been stolen or misused, close the account and ask your bank to notify the appropriate check verification service. While no federal law limits your losses if someone steals your checks and forges your signature, state laws may protect you. Most states hold the bank responsible for losses from a forged check, but they also require you to take reasonable care of your account. For example, you may be held responsible for the forgery if you fail to notify the bank in a timely way that a check was lost or stolen. Contact your state banking or consumer protection agency for more information.

You also should contact these major check verification companies. Ask that retailers who use their databases not accept your checks.

TeleCheck —
1-800-710-9898 or 927-0188

Certegy, Inc. —
1-800-437-5120

International Check Services —
1-800-631-9656

Call SCAN (1-800-262-7771) to find out if the identity thief has been passing bad checks in your name.

3. File a report with your local police or the police in the community where the identity theft took place.

Keep a copy of the report. You may need it to validate your claims to creditors. If you can't get a copy, at least get the report number.

4. File a complaint with the FTC.

By sharing your identity theft complaint with the FTC, you will provide important information that can help law enforcement officials track down identity thieves and stop them. The FTC also can refer victim complaints to other appropriate government agencies and companies for further action. The FTC enters the information you provide into our secure database.

To file a complaint or to learn more about the FTC's Privacy Policy, visit www.consumer.gov/idtheft. If you don't have access to the Internet, you can call the FTC's Identity Theft Hotline: toll-free 1-877-IDTHEFT (438-4338); TDD: 202-326-2502; or write: Identity Theft Clearinghouse, Federal Trade Commission, 600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20580.

This information is provided by the Federal Trade Commission
www.consumer.gov/idtheft
and the Mesa Police Department Crime Prevention Unit
www.cityofmesa.org/police