

Identity Theft and You

When your name and credit

History are on the line

The FBI says identity theft is the fastest growing white-collar crime in the nation. It involves criminally using another individual's personal identifiers, which are acquired through various means, including your own mail box. Identity thieves need only obtain your name, address, and bank or credit card account numbers, or your social security number, etc., to take over your identity. The crooks can then change your address, open new accounts at banks and credit card companies in your name, deplete your funds, running up huge credit card balances and generally creating havoc with your good name and credit rating.

Identity theft affects not just the wealthy. It can impact anyone. Identity theft results in job turn-downs, denied loans and impaired credit history. Repairing the damage from identity theft may take months, even years.

There are ways to help protect against identity theft. Some of this is accomplished when a bank asks you for identification on your credit card company calls to verify a recent purchase. Banks and law enforcement will do what they can, but identity theft is often very difficult to detect.

Protecting Yourself Against Identity Theft

This is chiefly your responsibility. You are in the best position to protect your own identity by taking some basic precautions. The list that follows suggests some of the things you can do.

- Use passwords on all accounts and your PC that are difficult to guess – and don't use the same password for everything. Don't use passwords that relate to

family names, birthdates, your SSN, addresses or your job.

- Do not keep passwords on you, and don't write such information on debit or ATM cards.
- Be careful of items you throw in the trash, such as bills, cancelled checks, account statements, marketing solicitations and similar documents.
- Shred or tear up your charge receipts, credit card solicitations, expired cards, statements, checks and other sensitive personal information.
- Carry only the identification and bank/credit cards you actually need.
- Review your monthly statements promptly and carefully and immediately report anything that you question, or if the bill does not arrive on time.
- Call your credit card company immediately if your new card has not arrived.
- Destroy and cancel old, unwanted or unused credit cards. Cutting them up is not enough.
- Don't give private information to anyone unless you are positive who the person is and that there is a legitimate need for the information.
- Never lend your password to anyone – you will probably be responsible for everything that results.
- Guard your mail. Deposit outgoing mail at the post office rather than in your mailbox and promptly remove mail from your mailbox.

- Be absolutely positive of the identity of anyone telephoning you to request personal information. Be especially cautious of anyone claiming to be law enforcement official. Arrange to call the person back, using a phone number you can verify in the phone book.
- Do not give out personal data over the phone, through the mail, or on the internet unless you have initiated the contact.
- Periodically check your credit report to see if there are loans or credit cards outstanding that you don't know about.
- Never write down PINs – memorize them and do not use any part of your social security number, mother's maiden name, birth date or address.
- Guard your social security number. Never carry it in your wallet or write it on checks.
- Give your social security number only when absolutely necessary. Ask to use other identifiers.
- Be careful and mindful of who is around you at ATMs and when using phone cards. "Shoulder surfers" can get your PIN number and gain access to your account.

Identity Theft: When Bad Things Happen to Your Good Name, February 2002, contains many useful tips such as:

- How identity theft occurs
- How identity thieves use your personal information
- Minimizing your risk

If You Become A Victim

- First, contact the fraud departments of each of the three major credit bureaus.
- Second, contact the creditors or bank for any accounts that have been tampered with or opened fraudulently.
- Third, file a report with your local police or the police in the community where the identity theft took place.

The telephone numbers of the three major credit reporting agencies are:

Equifax – To order your report, call: 800-685-1111, or to report fraud, Call: 800-525-6285 TDD: 800-255-0056

Experian – To order your report, call: 888-397-3742, or to report fraud, call: 888-397-3742 TDD: 800-972-0322

TransUnion – To order your report, call: 800-916-8800, or to report fraud call: 800-680-7289

Sources for Assistance

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) is the Federal government's primary agency for dealing with identity theft matters. They operate a hotline devoted only to identity theft. The toll-free number is 1-877-438-4338. FTC website is www.ftc.gov. The FTC publication