

IDENTITY THEFT - WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

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Identity theft occurs when an imposter takes your personal data - usually your name, social security number, drivers license number, address and/or birth date - and uses it for his/her own financial gain. This person(s) may apply for telephone service, credit cards or loans, buy merchandise, lease cars or apartments and even use your identity to gain employment - working as you.

You don't have to lose your wallet for identity thieves to drain your bank account or open credit-card accounts in your name. Today, the thieves are doing the stealing, with help of vast quantities of personal information available on the Internet and the rise of instant credit.

Can this happen to you?

Yes, according to the Federal Trade Commission, there are as many as 10 million Americans who have their identities stolen each year. In fact, you or someone you know may have experienced some form of identity theft. The problem is hitting hard close to home. Florida ranks fourth (4) in the country in the number of identity theft victims while Miami ranks one (1) among Florida cities, and number five (5) in the country.

Thieves use your name and good credit to purchase goods and services without paying the price. However, there is a price to pay-for you the victim who can spend hours, weeks or years to undo the damaged caused to your credit and good name.

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.
- 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.

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.

How Can You Prevent Becoming An Identity Theft Victim?



While no one can totally prevent this crime from occurring to you, here are some positive steps to take which will decrease your risk.

- Check your credit reports once a year from all three of the credit reporting agencies listed below. This is one of the best ways to find out if someone is using your information without your knowledge. There may be a small charge for these reports unless you are a victim of financial crime or denied credit in the last 60 days.

- Guard your Social Security number. When possible, don't carry your social security card with you. That includes any cards or badges that may include this number on it. Resist giving it out unless absolutely necessary. Don't put your SSN or drivers license number on your checks.
- Guard your personal information. You should never give a social security number to a sales clerk unless applying for credit. Get credit cards with your picture on them. Cancel any credit cards you no longer use and carry as few as possible in your wallet. Keep confidential information in a locked area in your home. Add passwords to all your credit and bank accounts. Use a random word rather than your mother's maiden name. Don't store account numbers or passwords on your computer. Question why business has requested personal information you think is not appropriate. Ask how they protect you from ID theft.
- Never click on links sent in unsolicited email; instead, type in a web address you know is the real thing. Some computer programs "hijack" you to a look-alike page to try to get you to give your personal information.
- Use firewalls, anti-spyware, and anti-virus software to protect your home computer; keep them up-to-date.

Form W-9095 Application Form For Certificate Status/Ownership For Withholding Tax. The form includes fields for name, address, date of birth, and marital status. It also has checkboxes for 'Resident Alien' and 'Non-Resident Alien' and a section for 'Foreign Identification Number (FIN)'. The form is dated APR-01-2002 and has a form number of 10-21-01.

A good, crosscut paper shredder works best.

- Be suspicious of telephone solicitors. Never provide information unless you have initiated the call. You may choose to block your name from marketing list. If you call 1-888-5OPOUT, you will eliminate most of the pre-approved credit cards offers you receive.

- Watch what happens to your credit card when you give it to a store clerk. Carefully read your monthly statements and immediately report any unauthorized charges.



What Should You Do If You Become An Identity Theft Victim?

1. Contact the credit card companies, banks, utility companies, etc., involved.
2. Contact each of the three credit bureaus listed below and request a copy of your credit report. You should also place a fraud alert with each of these companies so no one can open a new account without your express permission.
3. Contact the police where you live. Make several copies of their report, you'll need it to help clear up your records.
4. Call the Federal Trade Commission at 1-877-IDTHEFT and tell them about the crime.

Credit Reporting Agency Contact Information:

Equifax: www.equifax.com or 1-800-685-1111

Experian: www.experian.com or 1-888-397-3742

TransUnion: www.tuc.com. or 1-800-916-8800

Source: Federal Trade Commission (FTC)