

Identity Theft : With 9,000,000 Victims Each Year, Are You Next?

Credit Identity Theft has topped the list of Consumer fraud complaints submitted to the FTC for several years in a row with 9 million Americans reporting having their identities stolen each year. Are you the next victim? The crime of credit identity theft takes many forms. Identity thieves may rent an apartment, obtain a Credit Card, or establish a telephone or utility account in your name. Most consumers do not discover the theft until they review a credit report or a credit card statement and notice charges they didn't make—or even worse, receive a call from a Collection agency.

While some identity theft victims can resolve their problems quickly, unlucky others are forced to spend months repairing damage to their good name and credit record. Some victims may lose out on job opportunities, or are denied loans for education, housing or cars because of negative information on their credit reports. In rare cases, they may even be arrested for crimes they did not commit.

Much of the identity thief's criminal activity occurs online or over the phone in a very short time period. Therefore, police and other law enforcement agencies are not always successful in finding and stopping identity thieves. Consumers that don't learn how to protect themselves are tempting fate and could learn an expensive lesson.

Identity theft can happen in a number of ways. Skilled identity thieves have an arsenal of methods used to get hold of your information. Someone may use your unsolicited mail - such as pre-approved credit card applications - sent to you to open accounts in your name.

If your wallet or identity cards are stolen, criminals may use your name, address, and ID to open new accounts in your name. You may also get email or telephone calls offering you special offers or products. Once you provide your credit card information, your card may be charged without your consent.

While shopping at stores, unscrupulous employees may use scanning devices or hidden cameras to your get card, bank, and PIN number information from you without your knowledge.

Tips for protecting your Personal Information from identity thieves:

1. Buy a paper shredder (many cost less that \$25.00). Always shred bank statements, utility bills, pre-approved credit card applications, and other sensitive documents before throwing in the trash. Identity thieves regularly "dumpster dive" in search of these documents.

2. Be wary of "phishing" scams. Some criminals pretend to be financial institutions and will send out fake e-mail messages in an attempt to get you to reveal your account information.

3. Never provide personal information like a social Security number over the phone. Don't give out any of your financial or personal information over the phone unless you have initiated the phone call and you are dealing with a trusted institution or business. Be wary of unsolicited phone calls where you are asked to provide personal information.

4. Do not use easy to guess passwords or PIN numbers. Never use your birthday, spouse's birthday or phone number for a password. Don't use the exact same password for every account.

If you are a victim of identity theft, take the following four steps immediately to protect your Credit History. You should also keep a record of your conversations and copies of all correspondence.

1. File a police report. This document is essential to supporting your fraud claim and disputing any unauthorized charges.

2. Contact the toll-free fraud number of any of the three credit reporting bureaus below to place a fraud alert on your credit report. You only need to contact one of the three companies to place an alert as the company you call is required to notify other two. Follow up in writing, and include copies of supporting documents.

Equifax: 1-800-525-6285 Experian: 1-888-EXPERIAN TransUnion: 1-800-680-7289

3. Close any accounts that you believe have been tampered with or opened fraudulently. Don't rely on a phone call. Always notify credit card companies and banks in writing. Send letters by certified mail, return receipt requested, so you can document what was received and when.

Each company has its own procedures for disputing fraudulent charges. Ask to be sent the appropriate documents when you report the fraud and close the account.

When you open new accounts, use new PIN numbers and passwords. Again, avoid using passwords that are easy to guess.

4. File a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission. You can file a complaint on the FTC website (<http://www.ftc.gov>) or call the FTC's Identity Theft Hotline at 1-877-ID-THEFT.

By filing your complaint with the FTC, you may provide important information that can help law enforcement officials track down identity thieves and stop them. Additionally, a copy of your FTC complaint in addition to your police report are strong documentation that support your fraud claims with creditors.

Credit identity theft is one of the fastest growing crimes in the world. No one is 100% safe from becoming a victim. However, by safeguarding your personal information and taking quick action in response to any problem you can protect your credit history and peace of mind. Copyright 2008 - Jaime Hershman