

Identity Theft: What you can do to keep your information private



PARKER | SMITH | FEEK

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- “Every 79 seconds, a thief steals someone’s identity, opens accounts in the victim’s name and goes on a buying spree.”
 - CBSnews.com
- “Experts report that a victim can spend anywhere from six months to two years recovering from identify theft.”
 - CNNfn.com
- “More than 27 million Americans have been victims of identity theft in the last five years...To deal with problems, consumers reported nearly \$5 billion in out-of-pocket expenses.”
 - The New York Times
- “In one notorious case of identity theft, the US Department of Justice reported that the criminal incurred over \$100,000 of credit card debt. obtained a federal home loan, and bought homes, motorcycles and hand guns in the victim’s name all the while calling his victim to taunt him.”
 - US Department of Justice Web site

Some pretty startling facts. Just how does this happen so easily, what really can be done to prevent Identity Theft and what to do if you are a victim?

Most people are surprised just how easy it is for a thief to gather personal information. Thieves are clever: they go through your trash and mail looking for bank and credit card statements, pre-approval offers and tax information. They complete change-of-address forms to redirect you mail and some even steal personal information from the work place. And some masquerade as a trusted company web site to trick you into giving them your personal information.

Once a thief has your personal information they can open credit cards, open bank accounts, establish cellular service and take out car loans in your name. Then they do not pay the bills and the delinquency is reported on your credit report. They can also have counterfeit checks and/or debit cards made and drain your bank account(s).

How do you prevent your personal information getting into the wrong hands?

Start by always being very careful about giving out any personal information. Confirm the identity of anyone you give information to via the phone, mail or on the internet. Keep your social security card in a secure place and do not carry it with you.

Protect your mail - incoming and outgoing. Deposit outgoing mail into a post office collection box and remove incoming mail promptly from your mailbox. A lock on your mailbox is advisable.

Be smart, not lazy, about your passwords and PINs. When creating a password avoid using all numbers or all letters, avoid using consecutive letters and/or numbers, use both lower and upper case letters and it is recommended that all passwords have a minimum length of 8 characters. There are actually sites you can go out to that will test the strength of your password, such as <http://www.passwordmeter.com/>.

Finally, always watch your statements for any purchases, charges, etc., that you did not make. If you find anything that you do not recognize, report these charges promptly to the credit card issuer. Shred anything that has your credit card number as well as the credit card offers you receive in the mail.

Does Homeowners Insurance Provide any Coverage?

Many policies now do include coverage for the extra expenses incurred as a result of an Identity Theft situation and most banks and credit card providers will cover the fraudulent charges. According to US law, once you have reported the loss or theft of your credit card, you have no more responsibility for unauthorized charges.