



Identity Theft is Still a Booming Business

You're a good solid law-abiding citizen, work at a steady job, pay your taxes and your bills on time and suddenly you find yourself receiving calls from debt collection agencies, unable to get a loan for that new car or have a warrant out for your arrest. What happened? You may be the latest victim of identity theft.

Over the past few years, we've all heard about the growing problem of identity theft. Trying to keep a step ahead of the identity thieves has become increasingly difficult.

Eight years ago, Congress passed legislation to combat the rising tide of identity theft. But identity thieves don't rest. They are always looking for new victims and finding new ways to steal. You go out to a nice restaurant for dinner. The waiter brings your bill. You give him your credit card and he disappears. A few minutes later, he returns with your receipt. You give him a nice tip, not knowing that he has already helped himself to your credit card information until you see thousands of dollars worth of charges on your next bill.

You receive your tenth credit card solicitation for the week in the mail. Frustrated, you throw it in the trash, along with the others, and wheel your trash cart to the curb. While you're sleeping or at work, an identity thief goes through your trash, takes the credit card solicitations with your name on them and tries opening new accounts. It would be advisable to invest in a paper shredder. Anything with personal identity information should be shredded prior to disposal.

Your phone rings and it is someone claiming to be from your bank telling you that they have had some computer problems and that your account may have been compromised. They need you to verify your bank account and social security numbers. They also tell you it might be a good idea to give them your personal identification number for your debit card so they can check as well. You comply and the next thing you know is that all of the money in your account has been withdrawn. A word of advice: No legitimate banker will ask you for this information over the phone or over the Internet!

It sometimes takes years before individuals realize that they have become a victim of identity theft. You may not find out until you are denied credit, denied a job or hear

from debt collectors asking for payment on debts you did not incur.

How can you combat identity theft on your computer? The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation suggests the following steps:

- Be sure your virus protection programs on your computer are updated regularly.
- Do not open files sent to you by someone that you do not know.
- Use firewall protection on your computer.
- Use a secure browser.
- Do not store personal financial information on your laptop computer in case it is stolen.
- Before disposing of an old computer, be sure to delete personal information.

Credit bureaus can sell information to credit card companies or other lenders who might use the information in deciding whether to send you a solicitation for a credit card offer. This is called prescreening. One way to cut down on the amount of these types of offers you receive in the mail is to opt out of such offers by calling 888.567.8688.

A report issued by the President's Identity Theft Task Force in April 2007 suggests that while social security numbers are necessary for use by the federal government for purposes of employment, taxation and sharing of information with law enforcement, the government should seek alternatives to using social security numbers as identifiers in the public sector.

Until that time, we, as consumers, must continue to be vigilant in protecting our private information. If, after all of your best efforts, you do find yourself a victim of identity theft, immediately contact the three credit reporting bureaus and the local police.

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