

Combating the Identity Thief

Just a few years ago, stealing someone's identity was the kind of bizarre, intriguing scenario that would fascinate sci-fi fans. But real life can be stranger than fiction. In 2012, identity fraud incidents affected 5.26 percent of Americans.¹

Identity fraud typically occurs when thieves obtain an individual's personal information (such as credit card or bank account numbers, a Social Security number, or passwords for electronic online accounts) and use it to make financial transactions under the victim's identity. Identity thieves can charge purchases to your credit card, forge checks drawn on your bank account, obtain official ID in your name bearing their own picture – even give your name to the police during an arrest.

How they do it

Identity thieves access their victims' personally identifying information in many ways. Some methods require some technical expertise – such as hacking into an Internet account or using special electronic “skimmer” devices when a merchant or ATM processes your credit or debit card. But often, scammers use remarkably low-tech means to obtain victims' information.

For example, they can:

- Rummage through trash containers for discarded credit card slips, bills and account statements.
- Steal records from their own workplace (or obtain them from other employees by bribing or conning them).

- Complete a “change of address” form to divert victims' mail to the thief's location.
- Steal personal documents from victims' homes, wallets or mailboxes.

Can identity theft be prevented?

Like most types of crime, identity theft can probably not be completely prevented. But there are several steps you can take to help thwart identity thieves:

- Keep your life out of your wallet. Carrying unneeded credit cards, your Social Security card or other personal documents on your person increases the chances of identity theft. Keep a list (or a photocopy) of your cards and the issuers' customer service numbers in a safe place so you can cancel the cards quickly if they are lost or stolen. Cancel cards you don't use.
- Destroy the evidence. Your credit/debit card and ATM receipts can be invaluable to an identity thief. Keep them safe, and destroy them before throwing them away.
- Protect your Social Security number. Do not give it out to any person or organization unless you trust them and have initiated the communication yourself.
- Avoid posting information online that a scammer may find useful. Examples of such information include your full name, birth date, hometown, email address, phone number, pet's name, mother's maiden name, schools (and graduation dates) and relationship status. On social networking sites, remember to set your privacy controls.

¹“2013 Identity Fraud Report: Data Breaches Becoming a Treasure Trove for Fraudsters.” javelinstrategy.com. <https://www.javelinstrategy.com/brochure/276>.



What if it has already happened?

If you believe you are the victim of identity fraud, there are several steps you should take immediately to reduce damage and minimize your personal liability and risk:

- Call one of the following three national credit reporting companies (Equifax, TransUnion or Experian) and ask for an initial fraud alert on your credit report. (The company you call must notify the other two companies about your alert.) An initial fraud alert can make it harder for an identity thief to open more accounts in your name. Remember to also order a free credit report from each of the three companies.
- Close any affected accounts. This includes any accounts that you know or believe may have been opened fraudulently or tampered with.

- Create an Identity Theft Report. This report gives you some important rights after an identity theft. To create the report, file a complaint with the FTC and print your Identity Theft Affidavit. Use that to file a police report and create your Identity Theft Report.

For further information on identity theft and how to fight it, please visit the FTC identity theft website at www.consumer.ftc.gov/features/feature-0014-identity-theft.

This article is for informational and self-help purposes only. It should not be treated as a substitute for financial, medical, psychiatric, psychological or behavioral health care advice, or as a substitute for consultation with a qualified professional.

Need Help?

Call toll-free, 24 hours a day, seven days a week:

(866) EAP-4SOC | (866) 327-4762

TDD: (866) 726-1785

Or visit us at: eap4soc.mhn.com

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