



Report Compliments of **Homes and Lifestyles of Colorado** - *Finding Your Place Called Home*

Denver Office: <http://www.DenverHomeLiving.com> - (303) 816-9199 Office

Preventing Identity Theft



In this fast and shrinking world we live in, we give great thought to where we live--is it safe, is it the environment we want to be in, is it the right size? Then we start to consider the schools our children attend--do we send them to private or public schools? Where do we go to entertain--do we go to the country club or a local restaurant? But how often do we consider being denied access to these wonderful places because something has happened to our identity?

It won't happen to me....

It will never happen to me! How many times have we all either said this to ourselves or at least thought those words? The world is changing so quickly we don't even have time to realize how vulnerable each and every one of us has become. The world of computers, modern technology, and everyday crime makes each of us potential victims of Identity Theft.

In the course of a busy day, you may write a check at the grocery store, charge tickets to a ball game, rent a car, mail your tax returns, call home on your cell phone, order new checks, or apply for a credit card. Chances are you don't give these everyday transactions a second thought. But someone else may!

The Fastest Growing Crime

Identity Theft is when bad things happen to your good name! Shakespeare in his famous play *Othello, Act iii. Sc.3*, said it best, *But he that filches from me my good name, Robs me of that which not enriches him, And makes me poor indeed.*

Identity theft is the fastest-growing crime on the government's list of consumer fraud complaints for the fourth consecutive year. Forty-two percent of all complaints in 2003 related to the theft of personal information such as a Social Security Number (SSN) or credit card information.

You may be careful about locking your doors and windows, and keeping your personal papers in a secure place. Depending on how you use your personal computer, an identity thief may not need to even set foot in your house to steal your personal information. SSNs, financial records, tax returns, birth dates, and bank account numbers may be stored in your computer-- a gold mine to an identity thief.

All it takes is one slip (of paper) for an identity thief to strike. The most obvious way to steal someone's identity is to snatch a wallet, considered common petty crime. Or is it?

While you probably can't prevent identity theft entirely, you can minimize your risk. By managing your personal information wisely, cautiously, and with an awareness of the issue, you can help guard against identity theft.

Some of the methods used by thieves

Here are a few ways identity thieves get your personal information:

- They steal wallets and purses containing your identification and credit and bank cards.
- They steal your mail, including your bank and credit card statements, pre-approved credit offers, new checks and tax information.
- They complete a change of address form to divert your mail to another location.
- They rummage through your trash, or the trash of businesses, for personal data in a practice known as dumpster diving.
- They fraudulently obtain your credit report by posing as a landlord, employer or someone else who may have a legitimate need for, and legal right to, the information.
- They find personal information in your home.
- They use personal information you share on the Internet.

- They scam you, often through email, by posing as legitimate companies or government agencies you do business with.
- They get your information from the workplace in a practice known as business record theft by stealing files out of offices where you're a customer, employee, patient or student, by bribing an employee who has access to your files, or hacking into electronic files.
- Criminals may engage in shoulder surfing--watching you from a nearby location as you punch in your telephone calling card number or credit card number or they may listen in on your conversation if you give your credit card number over the telephone to a hotel or rental car company.

These are some of the more common ways that this type of crime can occur, but in recent days, it has been reported that the new modern cell phones have become a great tool for thieves to take a snapshot of a personal check or credit card and then note the PIN number for duplication. More sophisticated thieves have electronic devices and cameras attached to ATM machines or in your favorite restaurants that are able to record and monitor bank accounts and transactions and make duplicate withdrawals after the customer has left the ATM machine or restaurant, leaving the account balance at zero.

How thieves exploit your information

What they do with your personal information once they have it:

- They call your credit card issuer and, pretending to be you, ask to change the mailing address on your credit card account. The imposter then runs up charges on your account. Because your bills are being sent to the new address, it may take some time before you realize there's a problem.
- They open a new credit card account, using your name, date of birth, and SSN. When they use the credit card and don't pay the bills, the delinquent account is added to your credit report.
- They establish phone or wireless service in your name.
- They file for bankruptcy in your name to avoid paying debts they've incurred under your name, or to avoid eviction.
- They counterfeit checks or debit cards, and drain your bank account.
- They buy cars by taking out auto loans in your name.
- They give your name to the police during an arrest. If they're released from police custody, but don't show up for their court date, an arrest warrant is issued for you.

Identity theft is a serious crime. People whose identities have been stolen can spend months or years and thousands of dollars cleaning up the mess the thieves have made of their good name and credit record. In the meantime, victims may lose job opportunities, be refused loans for education, housing, cars or even be arrested for crimes they did not commit. Humiliation, anger, and frustration are common feelings victims experience as they navigate the arduous process of reclaiming their identity.

What can you do to safeguard your identity?

- Order a copy of your credit report from each of the three major credit bureaus once a year. By checking your report on a regular basis you can catch mistakes and fraud before they wreak havoc on your personal finances.
- Don't give out personal information on the phone, through the mail or over the internet unless you've initiated the contact or are sure you know who you're dealing with. Identity thieves may pose as representatives of banks, internet service providers, and even government agencies to get you to reveal your SSN, mother's maiden name, account numbers and other identifying information.
- Guard your mail and trash from theft.

Deposit outgoing mail in post office collection boxes or at your local post office, rather than in an unsecured mailbox. If you're planning to be away from home and can't pick up your mail, call the U.S. Postal Service to request a vacation hold.

To thwart an identity thief who may pick through your trash or recycling bins to capture your personal information, tear or shred your charge receipts, copies of credit applications, insurance forms, physician statements, checks and bank statements, expired charge cards that you're discarding and credit offers you get in the mail.

- Don't carry your SSN card with you; leave it in a secure place.
- Give your SSN only when absolutely necessary. Ask to use other types of identifiers when possible. If your state uses your SSN as your driver's license numbers, ask to substitute another number.
- Carry only the identification information and the number of credit and debit cards that you'll actually need.

- Pay attention to your billing cycles. Follow up with creditors if your bills don't arrive on time. A missing credit card bill could mean an identity thief has taken over your account and changed your billing address to cover his tracks.
- Be wary of promotional scams. Identity thieves may use phony offers to get you to give them your personal information.
- Keep your purse or wallet in a safe place at all times, especially while at work.
- Change up what you have always done:

Don't put your full name on your personal checks; instead of being Jane Smith use J.Smith. This keeps them from knowing your first name if your checks should fall in the wrong hands, but it also safeguards that they do not know if you are male or female, so they may think twice before they decide to go further and be an intruder in your home.

Instead of writing the full credit card number on your checks when you pay your bills, only write the last four numbers. The credit card company knows the rest.

Don't put your driver's license number on your check.

Don't put your home phone number on your check.

Don't sign your credit cards. Write on the back, please ask for identification.

If possible use a P.O. Box as your address to keep your home address private.

What to do if you suspect identity theft

If you believe you have become a victim of Identity Theft or that your information has been stolen or compromised, immediately do the following:

- Cancel your credit cards.
- File a police report in the jurisdiction where the wallet, cards, etc. were stolen. You will need this information to prove to your credit providers that you were diligent, and it is a first step toward an investigation.

- Call the three national credit reporting organizations to place a Fraud Alert on your name and Social Security Number. This is the one step that many people fail to follow. This one step can prevent a fraudulent application for credit in your name. This alert means any company that checks knows that your information was stolen and that they must contact you by phone to authorize new credit.
- The following numbers need to be kept in a safe place along with your personal records, in the event you ever need them:

Equifax: 1-800-525-6285

Experian (formerly TRW): 1-888-397-3742

Trans Union: 1-800-680-7289

Social Security Administration (fraud line): 1-800-269-0271

Local Law Enforcement Agency (otherwise in the jurisdiction where the crime is committed).

Conclusions

Identity Theft can happen to anyone, but if each of us does our part, this type of crime can be controlled. With terrorism being on the rise and our country being so diverse, each of us needs to help by thinking about what personal information we put at risk each day and doing our part to help control this type of crime.

If we all do our part and help to control Identity Theft then, our name will be everything and our home will truly be our castle.

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