

IDENTITY THEFT

Introduction

The 1990's spawned a new variety of crooks called identity thieves. Their stock in trade? Your everyday transactions, which usually reveal bits of your personal information: Your bank and credit card account numbers; your income; your Social Security number (SSN); or your name, address, and phone numbers. An identity thief obtains some piece of your sensitive information and uses it without your knowledge to commit fraud or theft.

Identity theft is a serious crime. People whose identities have been stolen can spend months or years, and their hard earned money cleaning up the mess the thieves have made of their good a name and credit record. Some victims have lost job opportunities, been refused loans for education, housing or cars, and even been arrested for crimes they didn't commit.

Can you prevent identity theft from occurring? As with any crime, you cannot completely control whether you will become a victim. But, according to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), you can minimize your risk by managing your personal information cautiously and with heightened sensitivity.

How Identity Theft Occurs

Skilled identity thieves use a variety of methods to gain access to your personal information. For example:

- They get information from businesses or other institutions by:
 - stealing records from their employer,
 - bribing an employee who has access to these records, or
 - Hacking into the organization's computers.
- They rummage through your trash, or the trash of businesses or dumps in a practice known as "dumpster diving."
- They obtain credit reports by abusing their employer's authorized access to credit reports, or by posing as a landlord, employer or someone else who may have a legal right to the information.
- They steal wallets, purses or laptops/briefcases containing identification and credit and bank cards, or vital strategic data.

- They steal credit and debit card number as your card is processed by using a special information storage device in a practice known as “skimming.” Your waiter or waitress may even have a card-swiping device on their person.
- They steal mail, including banks and credit card statements, pre-approved credit offers, new checks, or tax information.
- They complete a “change of address form” to divert your mail to another location.
- They scam information from you by posing as a legitimate business person or government official.
- They steal personal information from your home. Don’t forget about Nannies, or one of the Relatives you really didn’t trust. Also, new romantic interests of friends or family.

How can I tell if I’m a victim of Identity Theft?

Monitor the balances of your financial accounts. Look for unexplained charges or withdrawals. Other indications of identity theft can be:

- Failing to receive bills or other mail signaling an address change by identity thief;
- Receiving credit cards for which you did not apply;
- Denial of credit for no apparent reason; or
- Receiving calls from debt collectors or companies about merchandise or services you didn’t buy.

How can I protect myself?

Agents of Craig Investigations specialize in identity theft protection. Contact us now to see how we can help you protect yourself.