

# Don't Fall Victim to Identity Theft!

Consumers lose MILLIONS of dollars every year due to fraud and identity theft. Protect Yourself!

In an average day you probably use your debit card at a restaurant, maybe write a check at the grocery store, perhaps you sign up for a credit account at the department store. This time of year, you're probably filing your taxes. Maybe you write a check to pay a bill or go on line and use your bank's bill paying service. In each case, you expose little bits of personal information... little bits that can add up to a BIG problem: Identity Theft.

According to the Federal Trade Commission, more than 685,000 Americans suffered financial losses because of theft or fraud in 2005. Think that's the only issue? Think again. Not only will you lose money to the thief... you'll PAY to try to fix the damage that's been done. Let's put it another way: in 2005, consumers reported fraud losses of more than \$680 *million*. Identity theft is expensive no matter how you look at it.

Imagine this scenario: You toss or recycle a harmless advertisement offering you a great home refinance deal. Someone, could even be a neighbor, comes along and paws through your garbage or recycling before it is picked up. This person finds your offer. He/she now has your personal information. So-called "dumpster divers" are doing their dirty work in every major city.

But this is hardly the only way your identity can be stolen. Do you give out personal financial information – credit card numbers, bank account numbers – over the 225-4073? On the Internet? Unless you are sure you are providing this information to a reputable entity, your identity and financial information are at risk. Has your purse or wallet been stolen? Maybe you used your credit card at a restaurant and forgot to get it back from the waiter? But wait, there's more: Someone could fill out a change of address form to divert your mail to someplace else. They could pick up a few seemingly minor pieces of personal information (name, address, birthday, etc.) and get a credit card in your name. And the list goes on.

Do you need to be paranoid about your identity being stolen? No. Do you need to be careful about how you use your personal information? You bet.

Here are some tips to help you avoid being a victim:

- ❑ Keep any financial records in a safe, secure place in your home. If you plan to discard documents or mail that could have financial information about you, including credit card solicitations, bank or broker statements, use a shredder (confetti style) or tear them up as much as possible.
- ❑ Don't just toss your canceled checks. Either keep them in a safe place or shred them. The same goes for the carbon copies of your checks.
- ❑ If checks are lost or stolen, report it immediately.
- ❑ Carefully examine new checks to make sure none of them were stolen. Keep unused checks in a safe place.
- ❑ When you use an ATM, don't leave the receipt behind. If you discard it, shred or tear it. Also, make sure no one can see you enter your ATM password.
- ❑ Remove all mail from your mailbox, including those annoying solicitations, which should be

discarded properly.

If you have a mailbox that can be opened without a key, which most residences do, have someone in your home pick up the mail as soon as possible after delivery. If this isn't realistic, consider getting a post office box. Mailboxes are prime targets for identity thieves.

- ❑ Unless you have initiated the call or visited a specific web site, do not provide any personal information. Identity thieves have been known to pose as employees of banks, credit card companies or Internet providers. Remember: Any entity with which you do business already has all the information on you it needs.
- ❑ Don't click on Internet links that are emailed to you. Open a browser window and type in the 888 Long Pond Rd \* Rochester. NY 14626 if you need to visit the site.

It isn't difficult to protect yourself—just take these steps to stay safe. What else can you do to make it more difficult for thieves? Well:

- ❑ Place passwords on your credit card, bank, and phone accounts. Avoid using easily available information like your mother's maiden name, your birth date, the last four digits of your SSN or your phone number, or a series of consecutive numbers.
- ❑ Secure personal information in your home, especially if you have roommates, employ outside help, or are having work done in your home.
- ❑ Get a FREE copy of your credit report each year. Under the Fair Credit Reporting Act, you are entitled to one free credit report every 12 months from each of the major credit reporting agencies. Visit [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com) to receive your free reports.

If you are providing personal information over the Internet, make sure:

- 1) You are familiar with the business operating the site
- 2) That it is a "secure" site for obtaining the needed information

Unfortunately, hackers have been able to break into so-called secure sites and get all the information collected. There's not much you can do to prevent hacking, but you should consider doing business via the Internet only on sites that have a lot of traffic and largely rely on web shoppers. These sites are likely to have the tightest security, because they have more at risk.

## **What About Business Owners?**

Business owners, and anyone who accepts payments for products or services rendered, play a major role in protecting peoples' identity. In fact, several laws govern the way personal information must be handled by businesses.

Directly from the Federal Trade Commission:

“In an effort to protect the privacy of consumer information and reduce the risk of fraud and identity theft, a new federal rule is requiring businesses to take appropriate measures to dispose of sensitive information derived from consumer reports.

“Any business or individual who uses a consumer report for a business purpose is subject to the requirements of the Disposal Rule. The Rule requires the proper disposal of information in

consumer reports and records to protect against ‘unauthorized access to or use of the information.’”

So what exactly does “proper disposal” consist of? Well, this is the FTC’s definition:

“Reasonable measures for disposing of consumer report information could include establishing and complying with policies to:

- ❑ Burn, pulverize, or shred papers containing consumer report information so that the information cannot be read or reconstructed;
- ❑ Destroy or erase electronic files or media containing consumer report information so that the information cannot be read or reconstructed;
- ❑ Conduct due diligence and hire a document destruction contractor to dispose of material specifically identified as consumer report information consistent with the Rule.”

Everyone plays a part in stopping identity theft, from businesses on down to consumers. By taking reasonable, proactive measures, we can prevent much of the crime before it ever becomes an issue. For more on identity theft and what you can do, please visit [www.consumer.gov/idtheft](http://www.consumer.gov/idtheft)