

Preventing Identity Theft

Identity theft is one of the fastest growing crimes in the nation, accounting for as much as 25 percent of all credit card fraud loss each year. In fact, by the time you finish reading these tips, another 100 American identities will be stolen.

Though victims may not be liable for charges made on fraudulent accounts, it can also be a nightmare to improve credit reports. The theft of your identity can leave you with a poor credit rating and a ruined reputation, which may take months, or even years, to correct.

There are several ways to help prevent identity theft. Here are some things you can do to protect yourself:

Protect personal information. Opt out of mailing lists to keep your mailbox free of identity theft temptations.

- Some credit card companies offer added protection by allowing you to create a password along with the card number when making a purchase. Even if your card is stolen, you can prevent thieves from using it by having it password protected.
- Don't carry your social security card, passport or birth certificate in your wallet. Secure these documents in a safe place at home.
- Shred documents with personal information before throwing them away. It is very common that important account numbers and statements are simply tossed in the trash where they can be easily retrieved.
- Keep documents with personal data secure.
- Choose PINs and passwords that cannot be easily guessed, and do not reveal them to anyone. Be sure to change these codes frequently.

- Never write down PINs and passwords, especially on the outside of envelopes or checks.
- Regularly check your credit report for fraudulent information.
- Don't allow mail to sit overnight in the mail box or you give thieves an easy target. Credit card offers, bank statements and possibly information with your social security number can be used to open new credit in your name or steal from you.
- Be sure your information is not available via online directories and searchable databases.

What to Do if You Are a Victim

- Call credit card issuers and your bank to "flag" or close accounts.
- Cancel all credit cards, passwords and PINs.
- Notify credit bureaus, utility companies and the post office.
- File a police report because creditors may want proof of the crime.
- Take action to remove criminal or civil judgments against you.
- Seek the assistance of a lawyer, if necessary.



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