

Tips You Can Use: An Update on Identity Theft

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Shakespeare said it well in *Othello*: "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 now the fastest growing crime in America. It happens when a criminal wrongfully obtains and uses the personal information belonging to someone else—perhaps to you. Such personal information may include your Social Security number, credit card numbers, or the Automated Teller Machine PIN code for your bank account. Although you may think you are careful with this information, identity thieves are clever and can obtain this information in any number of ways.

A popular method is "shoulder surfing" where the thief just stands near the ATM and watches as you key in your PIN. Or the thief may listen in on your phone conversation as you make hotel reservations with a credit card.

Many of us have gone fishing at one time or another. Well, ID thieves utilize "phishing" as a way to get your personal information. They send out fake e-mails, purportedly from banks or credit card companies, indicating that there is a problem with your account. In order to "verify" your account, they ask for your Social Security number and other information. Many people respond in good faith to these inquires. As a result, their identities are often stolen.

While most people would not be caught dead going through a trash bin, "dumpster diving" has become a new sport for ID thieves. They go through dumpsters looking for things such as bank statements, checks, or credit card statements--items that contain your address and account number.

We could go on and on with examples of identity theft, but you get the picture. There are several things you can do to protect yourself.

- If you have to give out personal information over the phone, make sure you know who is at the other end of the line. Also, make sure no one is close by listening to your conversation. When using an ATM, ensure that no one is watching you.
- Shred all bank statements and credit card bills before you throw them away.
- Do not respond to any e-mail inquiries for your information without first calling the sender.

You can also now purchase an endorsement to your homeowners insurance policy to cover expenses you incur in case your identity is stolen. For just a few dollars a year, you may purchase up to \$15,000 of such protection. Please call your insurance agent for more information.

[Return to index](#)