Identity theft

Identity theft refers to all types of crime in which someone wrongfully obtains and uses another person's identifying information for the purpose of fraud or other criminal activity. Such data may include name and date of birth, as well as social insurance, passport, driver's license and credit card numbers.

Once stolen, the personal information can be used to take over or create financial accounts, transfer bank balances, apply for loans and credit or purchase goods and services. Identity thieves may also present or create documents such as birth certificates or immigration documents to obtain benefits such as health care, education, social assistance and public pensions.

Advice for consumers

Identity theft

Identity theft refers to all types of crime in which someone wrongfully obtains and uses another person's personal data in some way that involves fraud or deception, typically for economic gain.

Canadian and United States law enforcement agencies are seeing a growing trend in both countries towards greater use of identity theft as a means of furthering or facilitating other types of crime, from fraud to organized crime to terrorism. Increasingly, identity theft is a cross-border crime issue requiring collaboration of the international community. This public advisory highlights some of the most significant forms of identity theft in Canada and the United States, and explains how to recognize them and respond if you become a victim of identity theft.

Facts

Identity theft has become one of the fastest growing crimes in Canada and the United States. In the United States, identity-theft complaints to the Federal Trade Commission have increased five-fold in the last three years, from 31,117 in 2000 to 161,819 in 2002. In Canada, the Canadian Anti-Fraud Centre received 7,629 identity theft complaints by Canadians in 2002, that reported total losses of more than $8.5 million, and an additional 2,250 complaints in the first quarter of 2003 that reported total losses of more than $5.3 million. In addition, two major Canadian credit bureaus, Equifax and Trans Union, indicate that they receive approximately 1,400 to 1,800 Canadian identity theft complaints per month, the majority of which are from the province of Ontario.

One reason for the increase in identity theft may be that consumers often become victims of identity theft without having any direct contact with the identity thieves who acquire their personal data. Simply by doing things that are part of everyday routine – charging dinner at a restaurant, using payment cards to purchase gasoline or rent a car, or submitting personal

information to employers and various levels of government – consumers may be leaving or exposing their personal data where identity thieves can access and use it without the consumers' knowledge or permission.

How identity theft occurs

Here are just a few examples of how identity theft is committed:

- **Theft of payment cards and documents**
  Identity thieves often steal purses or wallets, and steal newly issued cards or credit card applications from your residential mailbox. Some, known as "dumpster divers," will even rummage through trash to pick out bank and credit card statements. Letters that contain "pre-approved credit-card" offers, if not shredded or destroyed, can be sent back to the issuing bank requesting that the card be sent to the recipient (i.e., you), but at a new address of the identity thief's choosing.
- **"Shoulder surfing"**
  Some identity thieves also engage in "shoulder surfing": looking over your shoulder or from a nearby location as you enter your Personal Identification Number (PIN) at an ATM machine. By installing a fake ATM device that reads your card's encoded data, or by distracting you while your card is taken or switched with another, an identity theft can then use your PIN to drain your bank account without your knowledge.
- **"Skimming"**
  Identity thieves also "skim" or "swipe" customer credit cards at restaurants or cash stations, using an electronic device known as a skimmer. The skimmer records the personal information data from the magnetic stripes on the backs of the cards. Identity thieves then transfer or transmit those data to another location, sometimes overseas, where it is re-encoded onto fraudulently made credit cards.
- **E-mail and website "spoofing"**
  Many criminals who want to obtain personal data from people online use a technique known as "spoofing": the creation of e-mails and websites that appear to belong to legitimate businesses, such as financial institutions or online auction sites. Consumers who receive e-mails claiming to be from a legitimate business are often directed to a website, appearing to be from that business, at which the consumers are directed to enter large amounts of personal data. In fact, the criminals who created these e-mails and websites have no real connection with those businesses. Their sole purpose is to obtain the consumers' personal data to engage in various fraud schemes.
- **Theft from company or government databases**
  Law enforcement agencies in both Canada and the United States have noticed a significant increase in efforts by identity thieves to access large databases of personal information that private companies and government agencies maintain. Criminals have broken into offices to steal computer hard drives, bribed or compromised employees into obtaining personal data for them, and hacked into databases.

Minimize your risk of identity theft today

- Sign all credit cards when you receive them and never lend them to anyone.
- Cancel and destroy credit cards you do not use and keep a list of the ones you use regularly.

- Carry only the identification information and credit cards that you actually need. Do not carry your social insurance card (Canada) or social security card (United States); leave it in a secure place. This applies also to your passport unless you need it for traveling out of country.
- Pay attention to your billing cycles and follow up with your creditors and utility companies if your bills do not arrive on time.
- Carefully check each of your monthly credit card statements. Immediately report lost or stolen credit cards and any discrepancies in your monthly statements to the issuing credit card company.
- Shred or destroy paperwork you no longer need, such as bank machine receipts, receipts from electronic and credit card purchases, utility bills, and any document that contains personal and/or financial information. Shred or destroy pre-approved credit card applications you do not want before putting them in the trash.
- Secure personal information in your home or office so that it is not readily accessible to others, who may have access to the premises.
- Do not give personal information out over the phone, through the mail, or over the Internet unless you are the one who initiated the contact and know the person or organization with whom you are dealing. Before you share such information, ensure that the organization is legitimate by checking its website to see if it has posted any fraud or scam alert when its name has been used improperly, or by calling its customer service number listed on your account statement or in the phone book.
- Password-protect your credit card, bank, and phone accounts, but do not keep a written record of your PIN number, social insurance or social security number, or computer passwords where an identity thief can easily find them. Do not carry such information in your purse or wallet.
- Order a copy of your credit report from the major credit reporting agencies at least once every year. Check with the credit bureaus to see whether there is a charge for this service. Make sure your credit report is accurate and includes only those activities that you have authorized.

If you are a victim

If you are a victim of identity theft, you should take three immediate steps.

1. Contact your bank or credit card company if you have had your checks or credit cards stolen or wrongfully obtained.
2. Report the matter to your local police of jurisdiction. Police authorities often will take police reports even if the crime ultimately may be investigated by another law enforcement agency. In addition, a creditor who mistakenly believes that you are the person responsible for a fraudulent transaction may want to see a copy of a police report before correcting your credit account or credit report.
3. Report your identity theft case immediately to the appropriate government and private-sector organizations listed below. Canadian and American agencies such as these are compiling information on identity theft to identity theft trends and patterns, and using the information to assist law enforcement agencies in possible investigations.

Resources for Canadian victims of identity theft

Canadian Anti-Fraud Centre
Ontario Provincial Police Anti-Rackets

Toll Free: 1-888-495-8501
Toll Free Fax: 1-888-654-9426
Email: info@antifraudcentre.ca

Credit Reporting Agencies
Place fraud alerts on your credit reports by contacting the credit bureaus that operate in Canada.

- Equifax Canada
  Report fraud: 1-800-465-7166
- Trans Union Canada
  Report fraud: 1-877-525-3823

Resources for American victims of identity theft

Federal Trade Commission
Identity Theft Hotline
Toll free: 1-877-IDTHEFT (438-4338)

Credit Reporting Agencies
Place fraud alerts on your credit reports by contacting the credit bureaus that operate in the United States.

- Equifax
  Report fraud: 1-800-525-6285
- Experian
  Report fraud: 1-888-EXPERIAN (397-3742)
- TransUnion
  Report fraud: 1-800-916-8800

Further information

For further information on Identity Theft and how you can protect your valuable personal information, please consult the following sources:

- PNCC, Identity Theft
- Federal Trade Commission, Identity Theft

Advice for retailers

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data from the magnetic stripes on the backs of the cards. Identity thieves then transfer or transmit those data to another location, sometimes overseas, where it is re-encoded onto fraudulently made credit cards.

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- **Theft from company or government databases**
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What businesses can do to reduce the risk of identity theft

- Keep valuable customer data, such as credit-card or bank account numbers, in a secure location in your business so that it is not readily visible to others who may have access to the premises.
- Shred or destroy paperwork you no longer need, such as bank machine receipts, receipts from electronic and credit card purchases, utility bills, and any other document from customer transactions that contains personal and/or financial information.
- If part of your business involves online transactions, check regularly to see whether someone has set up a "spoof site" in the name of your business. If you find a spoof site, check the Uniform Resource Locator (URL) of the site to find the domain name (e.g., "www.what-a-scam.com"), look up that domain name through domain name registrar sites to find out which web hosting service or Internet service provider the spoof site is using, and contact that service or provider immediately.
- If your business has a website that customers can use to order merchandise or enter valuable personal data, have your information technology staff check regularly to ensure that there are no security "holes" through which others can improperly access customer data. This includes all upgrades of software used on your site. Security holes are sometimes inadvertently created as current programs are upgraded or patched, and may expose customer data for long periods of time if they are not found and fixed promptly.
- Regardless of what size your business is, decide on a fraud prevention and detection program that you can afford and implement it promptly. Online businesses, which often depend on credit cards for payment, should consult the financial institutions with which they have merchant relationships, and the major payment-card associations as appropriate, to learn what programs or mechanisms may be most suitable for their businesses.
- Online merchants should be especially vigilant because when they handle "card-not-present" transactions, they may be held financially responsible for a fraudulent transaction even when the card issuer has approved that transaction.
- Merchants who conduct business face-to-face with their customers should consider establishing a uniform policy of requiring more than one form of identification when a customer is paying by

check or credit card. In any event, all card-present merchants also need to ensure that they abide by all operating regulations of their payment-card associations, including taking all necessary steps to ensure, for each consumer transaction involving a payment card, that the card, the cardholder, and the transaction are legitimate.

- Order a copy of your credit report from the major credit reporting agencies at least once every year. There may be a charge for this service. Make sure your credit report is accurate and includes only those activities that you have authorized.
- Should you encounter a fraudulent transaction, and determine that a client's bank or financial account has been compromised, you may want to consider notifying the client directly in addition to the appropriate financial institution.

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- Federal Trade Commission, Identity Theft

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