

# Identity theft

## Protecting Yourself Against Identity Theft

The Federal Trade Commission reports that more than a half-million Americans are victims of identity theft each year. Identity theft occurs when someone, without your permission, uses your name, Social Security number, credit card number, or other identifying information, to commit fraud.

Today, identity theft encompasses a range of crimes – from credit card theft to intricate schemes in which a victim's personal information is used to set up falsified bank accounts. This fraudulent activity can devastate your credit and require significant time and money to resolve. While it's difficult to prevent identity theft completely, you can minimize your risk by taking the following precautions.

### Monitor credit cards and bank accounts

Pay attention to your billing cycles. Call your credit card company or bank if your statement is late. A missing statement may mean someone called and changed the billing address to prevent you from detecting fraudulent activity.

Review your statements carefully to determine whether unauthorized purchases have been made.

Don't have blank checks mailed to your dorm, apartment, or home. Ask that they be delivered to your bank and pick them up in person.

Don't include extra information, such as your telephone number, driver's license number, or Social Security number, on your printed checks.

### Safeguard personal information

Don't carry your Social Security card, and only give out the number when absolutely necessary.

Never give out personal information of any kind over the telephone or online unless you initiate the contact.

Watch what you throw away. Buy a shredder and use it to shred credit card receipts, old bank statements, bills, pre-approved credit card offers, and other documents showing personal financial information.

### Do away with pre-screened credit card offers

Young adults are prime targets for credit card companies, which also make easy opportunities for identity thieves. To opt out of receiving pre-screened credit card offers, call 1-888-5OPTOUT (1-888-567-8688). The three major credit bureaus use the same toll-free number to allow consumers to choose not to receive pre-screened credit offers.

### Check your credit report regularly

Order a credit report at least once a year from each of the three credit bureaus – TransUnion, Experian, and Equifax. Look for signs of identity theft, such as an unauthorized change of address or new accounts that you didn't open. Monitoring your credit report is the most important step you can take to safeguard your identity.

### Treat mail with care

When you pay bills, do not leave envelopes containing checks in your home mailbox for the mail carrier to pick up. Drop them off at the post office.

### Be computer safety savvy

Delete personal information before disposing of a computer. Use special utilities that overwrite the entire hard drive, making the files unrecoverable. With other methods, deleted files can remain on the computer's hard drive.

Only shop online at Web sites that use a technology known as SSL or Secure Sockets Layer. This encrypts credit card information sent through cyberspace. You'll know you're on a secure site if the Web page begins with "https" instead of the usual "http."

Shop only on Web sites that offer a privacy policy, so you can determine how your personal information will be handled.

Protecting yourself from identity theft is critical to protecting your assets as well as your financial reputation, two things crucial to your financial future.

