

IDENTITY THEFT: PART I HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Your most important possession is your identity. However, there are criminals who want to steal it, so they can apply for loans and credit cards, buy cars and other expensive items, all using your identity. They may even drain your bank accounts.

They do this by stealing the information that establishes your identity in the financial world. These items include your name, address, social security and drivers license numbers, mother's maiden name, date and place of birth, account and credit card numbers, and others. The criminals use this information to convince banks, car dealers, stores, etc. that they are you.

You can make it harder for these thieves by protecting your personal and financial identifying information. There are both actions to take, and actions not to take which will make it difficult for a thief to obtain all the information they need.

Actions to take:

- DO put only minimal information on your checks, no social security, drivers license or phone numbers
- DO shred all credit card invoices, bank statements, bills, etc. that contain account numbers. Also shred pre-approved credit card applications.
- DO pick up new checks at the bank, and mail all your payments directly from a locked post office mailbox.
- DO check all bank and credit card accounts at least weekly using the phone or on-line for unauthorized access.
- DO use a separate, low limit, credit card, not tied to any other account, for all on-line or phone purchases.
- DO hide all financial records, credit cards, blank checks, etc, since burglars look for these.
- DO check credit reports annually.

Actions to avoid:

- DO NOT give any identifying information to anyone who asks you over the phone, on-line, or in the mail. If they claim to be from someone you use (bank, insurance, credit card) verify it by contacting them using the normal phone number or in person.
- DO NOT use easy-to-guess passwords or PINs (birthday, mother's maiden name,...). Change regularly.
- DO NOT carry birth certificates, social security card, passport unless needed. Do NOT carry credit cards you do not use.
- DO NOT put extra information such as address or telephone, social security, or drivers license number on a credit card receipt.

Seniors as a group are trusting. We want to help those we deal with, and usually believe what they say. However, when it comes to our key identifying information, we have to go against our natural trust, question every request, and put up barriers to protect it.

The Part II will deal with how to tell if you have a problem and what to do about it.

*Written By: Chuck Joseph- Racine TRIAD
Racine Journal Times September 2005*

