

## What is Identity Theft?

There are various types of scams and ways that a criminal may use account information fraudulently, normally for account takeover only. Account takeover occurs when a fraudster obtains account information to perpetrate fraud on existing accounts. Account takeover is very different from identity theft. Identity theft occurs when someone uses personal identifying information, like name or Social Security number without permission to commit fraud or other crimes, such as opening new accounts, taking out credit, and/or purchasing good or services in the victim's name. Identity theft is a crime that can have substantial financial and emotional consequences. Act immediately to minimize the damage.

## Ways that identity theft is perpetrated:

- **Dumpster Diving/Shoulder Surfing.** Fraudsters rummage through trash looking for bills or other paper with personal information on it. Fraudsters also look over someone's shoulder while on the computer or completing documents with personal information.
- **Phishing.** Fraudsters pretend to be financial institutions or companies and send spam or pop-up messages to get victims to reveal their personal information.
- **Old-Fashioned Stealing.** Fraudsters steal wallets and purses, bank and credit card statements, pre-approved credit offers and new checks or tax information. They steal personnel records or bribe employees who have access.
- **Pretexting.** They use false pretenses to obtain your personal information by posing as financial institutions, telephone companies and other sources.

## What can I do to protect myself?

It is very important for consumers to take action to protect their identity. Below are the most common suggestions. However, it is important to research all alternatives and make sure to stay up to date with the latest trends.

- **Protect your Social Security number.** Don't carry social security numbers in wallets or write social security numbers on a check.
- **Take advantage of Internet security features.** Passwords and other security features add layers of protection if used appropriately. Maintain anti-virus software and firewalls on your computer.
- **Treat your trash and mail carefully.** A thief may pick through trash and recycling bins to capture personal information: always shred charge receipts, copies of credit applications and personal documentation.
- **Select intricate passwords.** Place passwords on credit cards, bank accounts and phone accounts. Avoid using easily available information.
- **Verify sources before sharing information.** Don't give out personal information on the phone, through the mail or on the Internet unless you initiate the contact and verify with whom you are communicating.
- **Safeguard your personal information.** Protect your purse or wallet at all times. Keep personal information in a safe place at home or while traveling.
- **About identity theft insurance.** Although insurance won't deter identity thieves, it can, in certain circumstances minimize losses if an identity theft occurs.

## What can be done if I think, or know, that my identity has been stolen?

To minimize the extent of the damage, you should take action as soon as possible:

- **Contact companies and banks where you have accounts.** Inform them that someone may be using your identity, and find out if there have been any unauthorized transactions. Close accounts so that future charges are denied.
- **File a report.** File a report with the police so you have an official record of the incident. You can also file a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission.
- **Contact credit reporting companies.** Check your credit report with Equifax, Experian and TransUnion to see if there has been unexpected or unauthorized activity. Have fraud alerts placed on your credit reports to prevent new accounts being opened without verification.
- **Consider other information that may be at risk.** Depending on what information was stolen, you may need to contact other agencies; for example, if a thief has access to your social security number, contact the Social Security Administration. If your driver's license or car registration has been stolen, contact the Department of Motor Vehicles.

## The following sites offer additional information and guidance to protect from identity theft:

[Federal Trade Commission](#)  
[United States Department of Justice](#)  
[Social Security Administration](#)