

Identity Theft: The New Threat to Your Credit

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When we think of thieves, images of burglars creeping into homes and apartments come to mind. However, there are new thieves that can take much more than your money or possessions. If your personal information falls into the hands of an identity thief, your credit and finances can be ruined. Identity thieves use your name or personal information, such as your Social Security number, driver's license number, credit card information, or other financial account information without your permission, frequently opening new credit accounts in their victims' names. They apply for credit cards, make charges, and leave the bills unpaid. They set up telephone or utility service and don't pay the bills. Some victims have found that identity thieves have even applied for loans, apartments, and mortgages under an identity other than their own.

Identity thieves are the sneakiest thieves out there, and it's easier than you think for one to get your personal information. They may steal wallets, or take statements, pre-approved credit offers, and tax information from your mail. They'll even do some dirty work and search your trash for personal data. The best protection against identity theft is caution: shred all items that contain your personal information and account numbers, and don't carry your social security card in your wallet. Order your credit report at least once a year to make sure no one is using your identity to open accounts.

Stop an identity thief dead in his tracks by taking immediate action.

Contact the three major credit bureaus. Contact the fraud departments of all of all three major credit departments to place a fraud alert on your credit file. Close accounts. Close the accounts that you know or believe have been tampered with or opened fraudulently. File a police report. Get a copy of the report to submit to your creditors and others that may require proof of the crime. File your complaint with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). The FTC maintains a database of identity theft cases used by law enforcement agencies for investigations. Filing a complaint also helps us learn more about identity theft, and will help others who have been victimized as well.

This article was written by Josh at ACCION USA (<http://www.accionusa.org/>). ACCION USA provides business loans up to \$25,000 to small business owners who need financing to expand their businesses.