

RESOURCE—Identity Theft

Identity theft is a serious crime that costs American consumers billions of dollars and countless hours each year. It occurs when someone uses your personal information without your permission to commit fraud or other crimes. While you can't entirely control whether you will become a victim, there are steps you can take to minimize your risk. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) encourages consumers to Deter, Detect and Defend to help cut down on identity theft.

Deter

Deter identity thieves by safeguarding your information:

- Shred financial documents and paperwork with personal information before you discard them.
- Protect your Social Security number. Give it out only if absolutely necessary or ask to use another identifier.
- Don't give out personal information via the phone, mail or the Internet unless you know who you are dealing with.

Detect

Detect suspicious activity by routinely monitoring your financial accounts and billing statements. Be alert to signs that require immediate attention, such as: bills that do not arrive as expected; unexpected credit cards or account statements; denials of credit for no apparent reason; and calls or letters about purchases you did not make.

Defend

If you think your identity has been stolen, here's what to do:

1. Contact the fraud departments of any one of the three consumer reporting companies (Equifax, Experian, TransUnion) to place a fraud alert on your credit report. The fraud alert tells creditors to contact you before opening any new accounts or making any changes to your existing accounts. You only need to contact one of the three companies to place an alert.
2. Close the accounts that you know or believe have been tampered with or opened fraudulently.
3. File a report with your local police or the police in the community where the identity theft took place. Get a copy of the report or, at the very least, the number of the report, to submit to your creditors and others who may require proof of the crime.
4. File your complaint with the FTC. The FTC maintains a database of identity theft cases used by law enforcement agencies for investigations. Filing a complaint also helps officials learn more about identity theft and the problems victims are having so that they can better assist you.

To learn more, visit ftc.gov/idtheft.