

# Protect Yourself from Identity Theft



By **Greg Abbott**  
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Identity theft is the fastest growing crime in America. The Federal Trade Commission reports that in 2003, more than 20,000 Texans fell prey to identity theft. The results can be devastating, as victims spend large amounts of time and money trying to clear their names.

Identity theft is the theft or misuse of personal or financial information in order to gain something of value or to facilitate other criminal activity. There are numerous types of identity crime, including identity theft, credit card fraud ("skimming"), bank fraud, check fraud and passport/visa fraud. Identity crime can involve multiple victims and often involves a large dollar loss; it may be used by organized criminal groups, and in those instances may be associated with other crimes, such as drug trafficking, mail fraud, terrorism and financial fraud.

Identity theft can begin with what may seem like an unrelated crime, such as a simple theft of a wallet or purse. Victims may not realize their identity has been stolen until they are denied credit, sent a bill for purchases they did not make, or turned down

for a job. We have even received reports of victims being arrested for crimes committed by thieves using their identities.

On September 1, 2003, a State law went into effect that sets the venue for reporting identity crime as the city or county where the victim resides. The new law states that regardless of where the fraudulent transaction originates, it is appropriate for the victim to make a police report wherever he or she resides.

If you are a victim of identity theft, it is imperative that you obtain a police report as soon as possible. Many banks and credit agencies require such a report before they will acknowledge that a theft has occurred.

You should then contact the three primary credit reporting agencies (Experian, Equifax and Trans Union) to have a security alert or freeze placed on your report. Request a copy of your credit report and review it for unauthorized account activity. Report unauthorized charges and accounts to the appropriate credit issuers.

If your wallet or purse is stolen, immediately cancel your credit and debit cards and get replacements. Put a "stop payment" on all lost or stolen checks.

Victims should contact the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which advocates on behalf of identity theft victims. You can also obtain more

information on identity theft by contacting our office.

Check your bank and credit card statements carefully each month. Early detection is extremely important. Discovering identity theft within one month drastically reduces the chances of monetary loss and damage to your credit. When identity theft goes undetected for six months or more, losses often amount to thousands of dollars.

We urge consumers to be very cautious about giving out their personal financial information. Our office has received numerous complaints of scam e-mails ranging from lottery hoaxes and advanced fee fraud to bogus e-mails from what appear to be legitimate businesses requesting personal information. No matter what a caller or e-mailer tells you, do not give out your Social Security number, driver's license number or other personal information over the phone or by e-mail.

Unfortunately, identity crime is here to stay. However, we can fight this menace if consumers and law enforcement agencies work together.

## POINTS TO REMEMBER

### Protect Yourself from Identity Theft

- Safeguard your personal information and documents
- Memorize your PIN numbers and passwords instead of writing them down
- NEVER give out personal financial information over the telephone or by e-mail
- Report ID theft to your local police department
- File ID theft complaint on FTC's Web site at [www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov)
- Contact the major credit bureaus as follows:

EXPERIAN  
P.O. Box 2104  
Allen, TX 75013-2104  
888-397-3742  
[www.experian.com](http://www.experian.com)

EQUIFAX  
P.O. Box 740241  
Atlanta, GA 30374-0241  
800-685-1111  
[www.equifax.com](http://www.equifax.com)

TRANS UNION  
P.O. Box 2000  
Chester, PA 19022-2000  
800-888-4213  
[www.tuc.com](http://www.tuc.com)



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