PROTECT YOUR IDENTITY

Imagine this. Unexpectedly, you get turned down for a loan, you get a call from a collection agency about an account you never opened, or worse yet, a call from the police about a crime you didn't commit. Suddenly, you're a victim of identity theft.

Identity theft is a fast growing crime.

Identity theft is one of the fastest growing crimes in North America. Between September 2001 and April 2002, there were over 3,880 reports of identity theft in Canada alone, with reported losses of over $4.6 million. It happens when someone steals your personal information—your social insurance number, driver's license number, health care number, credit card number, debit card, or your PIN number.

Criminals get this information in a number of ways including stealing your cards, posing as an employer, bank or utility company employee, grabbing information off websites that are not secure, sorting through garbage, or using devious ways to find out your PIN number. It can happen to anyone. In the course of a busy day, people use an ABM to get money for groceries, charge tickets to a hockey game, mail their tax returns, call home on their cell phones or apply for a new credit card. We don't give these everyday transactions a second thought. But someone else does—someone who is interested in using these everyday transactions to steal your personal information and use it to commit fraud or theft.

Once they have your card information and your PIN number, criminals can open a new credit card account or bank account in your name. And the worst thing is, you won't know about it until it's too late.

Here's a sample of how identity thieves can steal your personal information and use it for illegal gains.

How identity thieves get your personal information

- They steal wallets and purses containing your identification and credit and bank cards.
- They steal your mail, including your bank and credit card statements, pre-approved credit offers, telephone calling cards and tax information.
- They complete a "change of address" form to divert your mail to another location.
- They rummage through your garbage or the garbage of businesses for personal data.
- They fraudulently obtain your credit report by posing as a landlord, employer or someone else who may have a legitimate or legal right to the information.
- They get your business or personnel records at work.
- They find personal information in your home.
- They use personal information you share on the Internet.
- They buy your personal information from "inside" sources—e.g. a dishonest store employee.

How identity thieves use your personal information

- They call your credit card issuer and pretending to be you, ask to increase your credit limit and to change the mailing address on your credit card account. The thief then runs up charges on your account and because the bills are being sent to another address, it may take some time before you know there's a problem.
- They open a new credit card account using your name, date of birth and SIN number. When they use the credit card and don't pay the bills, the delinquent account is reported on your credit report.
- They establish phone or Internet service in your name.
- They open a bank account in your name and write bad cheques on that account.
- They counterfeit cheques or debit cards and drain your bank account.
- They buy cars by taking out car loans in your name.

Adapted from *ID Theft: When Bad Things Happen to Your Good Name*, U.S. Federal Trade Commission.