



# Defending Against Identity Theft

## WHAT IS IDENTITY THEFT?

Identity theft occurs when someone steals an individual's personal information and uses it without his or her permission to open fraudulent accounts and make unauthorized purchases. Identity theft is a serious problem that can ruin a person's credit and good name and can take much time, effort, and money to resolve. The Federal Trade Commission received just under 400,000 reports of identity theft in 2016.

Strategies for defending against identity theft must evolve constantly to keep up with thieves' inventiveness. Useful precautions include:

- Safeguarding mail. The greatest amount of information used in identity theft is found in the garbage and in the mailbox. Consumers should cut down on the amount of junk mail they receive (especially, opting out of unsolicited credit offers), and remember to shred everything that arrives anyway.
- Notifying creditors promptly of address changes, so bills and statements do not fall into the wrong hands.
- Immediately reporting new or replacement credit cards or checks, if they are late.
- Opting out of unsolicited credit offers, which may contain personal information.
- Safeguarding your wallet or purse, identification cards, and debit and credit cards.
- Taking receipts. Buyers should keep receipts to verify on your bank statements and then shred if they are not needed for tax purposes.
- Safeguarding checks, bank statements and pay records, both paper and electronic.
- Placing an active-duty alert on credit reports whenever deployed or away from the service member's usual duty station. An active-duty alert requires creditors to take steps to verify the identity of anyone applying for credit in the service member's name.
- Initiating a credit freeze on credit reports and restricting access to credit reports. This can be done at any time, not just during deployments.



- Closing any accounts that have been tampered with.
- Filing a police report, if victimized. The police report will show that the service member was a victim of identity theft if creditors try to get them to pay for debts they did not incur. Most credit card companies require a police report prior to starting any type of investigation or other action.
- Keeping a written record of who was spoken with, when and what was said when reporting or attempting to recover from identity theft.
- Contacting the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) at 1-877-ID-Theft or [www.consumer.gov](http://www.consumer.gov). The FTC serves as the federal clearinghouse for complaints by victims of identity theft.
- The FTC does not resolve individual consumer problems, but complaints from consumers help the FTC investigate fraud and can lead to law-enforcement action. The FTC enters Internet, telemarketing, identity theft, and other fraud-related complaints into the Consumer Sentinel Network, a secure, online database available to hundreds of civil and criminal law-enforcement agencies worldwide.

## HOW DO I KNOW IF MY IDENTITY HAS BEEN STOLEN?

Most identity theft is detected when consumers see unfamiliar purchases or withdrawals from their credit or checking accounts. Some credit card companies also monitor customers' purchase for activity that seems out-of-the-ordinary and will lock the account until a representative can speak to the cardholder to verify the purchases.

Other indicators of identity theft may include:

- **Missing bills:** Most bills arrive about the same time every month. A missing bill could mean that someone has gotten access to that account and changed the address or has stolen the bill from the mailbox to gain personal information.
- **Mysterious trade lines on a credit report:** Credit reports should be checked regularly to verify that new, unauthorized accounts have not been opened.
- **Unsolicited cards or bills:** Receiving a credit card that was never applied for or a bill for products or services that were never received could be signs of identity theft. The recipient should call the bank or merchant immediately.
- **Credit denial:** Sudden denial of credit (such as a credit-card charge being denied at the point of sale) when they have never had problems could indicate that someone else is degrading the victim's credit record.

