

When Bad Things Happen To Your Good Name, Are You Protected?

Picture yourself walking down the street, all alone. It's late at night. It's a bit brisk, and the wind is blowing through the tall buildings on both sides of you. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, someone runs by you, knocks you over, grabs your wallet and takes off.

It sounds like a scene from a movie, and there may come a time in the future where this type of person-to-person crime is only found in movies. Why would anyone rob a bank, or rob an individual to try to get more cash, when they could simply use a person's information to obtain monetary gain, employment, credit cards, lines of credit and more?

How can it happen?

There are literally thousands of ways your information can be stolen, and, as a county district attorney, Chuck Rosenthal knows, if it can happen to him, it is proof that identity theft and fraud can happen to anyone. "Rosenthal said nearly \$8,000 was stolen from his account before it was discovered. He said that he still has problems because of the crime -- his check was refused when he tried to buy supplies for his daughter."

There are thousands of stories like this one that you've heard about where someone takes any piece of someone's personal information and fraudulently uses it to obtain access to their credit, bank accounts, obtain employment or even get medical treatment.

Identity Theft has been showing up in the news for several years, and there has been a large public awareness campaign since the FTC Report in September 2003.

In their report, the FTC shared that the average Identity Theft victim spends over \$1,400 and more than 200 hours, just to clear their good name. Reports now are saying that victims can end up spending much, much more in terms of time, money, and frustration.

Other people may be willing to spend that kind of time and money, but if you don't have an extra \$1400 or 200 hours to spend, there are now Identity Theft Insurance Programs available to help protect yourself.

What else can you do to protect yourself?

To be proactive, here are what the "experts" are telling you to do:

Avoid giving out your Social Security number..... Shred or destroy bank and/or credit card information..... Shred or destroy any credit card or other direct mail offers..... Call the 1-800 number to "opt-out" of credit card solicitations (1-888-5-OPTOUT)..... Create passwords containing numbers and letters..... Avoid buying or making donations via the phone..... Buy goods online only from a reputable Web site..... Install a computer firewall at home..... Read the privacy statements for all your accounts and your bank's liability clauses..... Check your credit report more frequently..... Use only one credit card for purchases..... Avoid shopping online..... Update your computer virus protection daily..... Install Spyware software on your computer to be sure that you're not accidentally having your keystrokes recorded... Drop your mail in the blue post boxes, not in your mailbox..... Don't leave mail

in your mailbox overnight or on weekends..... While you're at it, sign up for a locked mailbox, because you can't trust that your mail will stay in your mailbox..... The list goes on..... and on..... and on.....

Even though these proactive steps might help, there is no 100% guarantee that your information won't be used. No matter what you do, you are a likely a target for Identity Theft.

Consumer Reports states, "It is an equal-opportunity crime, affecting victims of all races, incomes, and ages. Overall, more than 33 million Americans, about 1 in 6 adults, say they have had their identities used by someone else sometime since 1990."

There is good news.

If you become a victim of Identity Theft, you basically have two choices. You can try to handle it on your own, or you can let a professional help you.

If you try to handle it on your own, you might try to contact the Better Business Bureau (BBB). A visit to the BBB's web site reveals this statement:

"If your complaint is against the identity thief, it is unlikely that the BBB can assist you. We urge you to report the identity theft to the Federal Trade Commission.

So you visit the Federal Trade Commission's (FTC) web site, where you read the statement: "The FTC serves as the federal clearinghouse for complaints by victims of Identity Theft. While the FTC does not resolve individual consumer problems, your complaint helps us investigate fraud, and can lead to law enforcement action."

In other words, the BBB and FTC will give you information on how to spend 200 hours and \$1400, and will let you report information to them which can "lead to law enforcement action."

Beyond that, you're on your own, because they will not work to restore your individual credit. But they will send you a 25 page book with some very helpful information. Good luck.

This is not to fault the BBB or FTC. It's only to say that they do not have the resources to, on a daily basis, help over 27,000 people restore their good name and credit. Clearly, Americans need a different kind of help to resolve this issue.

Identity Theft Protection Service?

Several companies, including the three credit repositories, are offering different kinds of credit monitoring services. Many are offering protection for their credit cards. This is an excellent idea, but credit card fraud only accounts for approximately 40% of Identity Theft cases.

What about the other 60% of identity theft cases? Well, most often, they happen when someone is using your name to obtain credit or employment. The three credit bureaus have stepped in to offer you credit monitoring services, which will let you track what is going on with your credit on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis. This way, if your information is being used by someone you don't know, you will know about it the day it happens and, ideally, you'll be able to do something about it. The cost ranges from

\$4.95/month to \$19.95/month. With these services, you're generally still on your own to get the issue resolved, but hopefully the early detection will help you be able to resolve the issue in less than 200 hours, and with less than \$1,400.

Now American National Bank, in their concern to protect their customers' identity, has taken steps to provide a level of protection, at no charge, for all their personal checking account customers, called IDSafeChoice. The FREE service assigns a Personal Recovery Advocate for the primary account holder. The Advocate will help customize a Recovery Plan, and, with the assistance of a Limited Power of Attorney, the Advocate acts on behalf of the customer, to fully restore the customer's credit and identity if he or she becomes a victim of Identity Theft. This saves the customer valuable time and money. "As crimes of Identity Theft continue to rise, helping protect our customers' identity is extremely important to us so we're pleased to offer this level of protection at no cost to them," said Dennis Nathan, President & CEO.

The bank is also scheduling Free Seminars concerning the issues of Identity Theft to help customers and the public become informed. Local law enforcement, in addition to other guests concerning the threat of identity theft, will be at the seminars to discuss the topic.

Identity Theft shows no signs of slowing down. In fact, many state and federal law enforcement agencies are predicting that the problem will get worse before it gets better.

In this advanced age of rapid and electronic communications, your information is publicly available to anyone who wants to find it.

Identity Theft is a crime and is here to stay.

Becoming aware of the potential threats and changing the way that you do things reduces the likelihood that you will become a victim, but you have no way of being sure that your information will stay your own personal information.

Having Identity Theft protection through American National Bank is like walking down that street, knowing that you have a highly trained personal guard watching your back and walking by your side.