



Bureau of Justice Assistance

Office of Justice Programs ■ U.S. Department of Justice

IDENTITY THEFT PREVENTION

Overview

In 2003 and 2004, more than 19 million Americans—4 percent—of the U.S. population, were victims of identity fraud, with losses to consumers and businesses exceeding \$51 billion in each of those years.

Identity *fraud* is defined as the use of stolen personal information to achieve illicit financial gain, compared to identity *theft* which is defined as unauthorized access to personal information. This type of crime is attractive to criminals because it is a low-risk, high-yield endeavor. The goal of nearly all identity thefts is financial gain. With the digital revolution—interconnected computers, hand-held electronic devices, ATMs, online banking, and electronic commerce—cases of identity theft and credit card fraud have skyrocketed. By stealing identities, thieves and terrorists are able to assume the credit records of victims; start businesses; obtain loans; open utility, cable, and cell phone accounts; receive government benefits; ignore court orders; and obtain additional forms of official identification, including drivers' licenses and passports.

Statistics show that identity victimization is focused in certain geographic areas; the age group most often victimized is 19 - 29 year olds; and the top three types of reported fraud from identity theft are credit card fraud (28 percent), phone and utilities fraud (19 percent), and bank fraud (18 percent). And a new area of concern: anecdotal information, soon to be researched, linking methamphetamine and identity theft. Some police departments have reported that identity thieves hire methamphetamine addicts to sort through trash and stolen mail for identification numbers.

Response

The Office of Justice Programs' Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) has initiated one component in a plan of action to help fight identity theft:

- BJA and the National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC), in partnership with the Ad Council and the National Association of Broadcasters, are airing a TV Public Service Advertising (PSA) campaign starting in June 2005. The PSA will direct viewers to contact NCPC, which provides detailed information and actions to take to reduce and prevent the crime.
- Based on an analysis of these inquiries, BJA and NCPC will focus additional public awareness efforts, training, and technical assistance to respond to the areas of greatest need.
- BJA and NCPC are considering targeted efforts at high school seniors and college students, since they often are victimized.

No single approach to preventing and mitigating identity theft will be effective over time; instead, the best response will be tailored to meet the ever evolving activities of this serious crime.

For more information on identity theft, or BJA, contact Michelle Shaw, BJA Policy Advisor, at michelle.a.shaw@usdoj.gov.