

# Guard Against ID Theft

By Kimberly Lankford, June 20, 2005

I just read about the security breach that exposed the credit-card account numbers of more than 40 million people with MasterCard, Visa and other credit card companies. What can I do to make sure nothing bad happens if my information was included?

These types of security breaches show how easily your personal information can be stolen even if you've taken great efforts to protect it yourself. And they're becoming disturbingly common. The Privacy Rights Clearinghouse reports that personal data affecting nearly 50 million individuals have been reported lost or stolen from banks, colleges, hospitals, credit-card processors and other companies since February 2005.

The good news is that some of this stolen data are less dangerous than others. If thieves only stole credit-card numbers but not your social security number and other personal information -- which is the case with the CardSystems breach that affected the 40 million credit-card holders -- then they generally can't do as much damage. "There's very little likelihood someone could parlay your credit-card number into other types of identity theft," says Betsy Broder of the Federal Trade Commission. In that case, your best defense is to monitor your monthly statements for charges you didn't make and contact your issuing bank immediately. Both Visa and MasterCard have a zero-liability policy, where cardholders are not responsible for any unauthorized transactions.

Other types of stolen information are more serious, however. "If your social security number and name are linked together, then you would want to take additional steps -- even if you're one of millions of people affected," says Broder. "That's the information that could allow a thief to open up an account in your name."

In that case, you can make it more difficult for thieves to steal your identity by contacting the three major credit bureaus (Experian, Equifax and TransUnion) and putting a fraud alert on your account, which requires lenders to verify your identification before extending credit in your name. "It puts in place an additional barrier to stop an ID thief," says Jordana Beebe of the Privacy Rights Clearinghouse.

The initial fraud alert lasts for 90 days and entitles you to a free credit report from each of the bureaus. But don't let it drop after that. "Remain vigilant," says Broder. "They may not use the information right away."

Some companies such as CitiFinancial, which lost personal information from about 3.9 million customers in early June, are offering affected customers access to free credit-monitoring services for 90 days. But you also can monitor your credit report on your own.

Starting this year, everyone can receive one free credit report per year from each of the three bureaus. Visit [AnnualCreditReport.com](http://AnnualCreditReport.com) to order. The service is available everywhere except the eastern states, where it will be rolled out in September.

Linda Foley, co-executive director of the Identity Theft Resource Center recommends staggering your credit report requests from each of the bureaus throughout the year so you'll get a free copy every four months. She also recommends taking advantage of any offers by companies to provide free identity-theft insurance, which will cover some expenses if your ID is stolen.

For more information about identity theft, and resources if you believe your ID has been stolen, see the Federal Trade Commission's ID Theft Page or call the FTC's Identity Theft Hotline at (877) 438-4338.



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