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Low-tech identity theft: it's in your mailbox. Jan 13, 2009.

1. Low-tech identity theft: it's in your mailbox

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Uncle Sam is supposed to be sending you something important. Aunt Sarah's birthday check went out days ago. The concert tickets for that band you're dying to see should have arrived by now. And ditto on that new credit card.

You reach inside your mailbox, wave your hand around, hoping what you've been waiting for is merely out of sight. But none of those items are there when you trudge out to your mailbox.

Mail theft is nothing new as a crime. In fact, it's quite low-tech. But with the economy worsening, the Connecticut Better Business Bureau fears that the mailbox at the bottom of your driveway will become a more popular target for stealing more than money, but for your very identity.

"Thieves can steal pre-approved credit cards, bank credit cards and other financial statements, as well as a wealth of other material to enable them to ultimately steal your identity," Paulette Hotton Scarpetti, president of the Connecticut Better Business Bureau, said, adding that mailboxes can pose a significant risk for identity theft.

Identity theft had an impact on 8.1 million Americans last year, costing them \$45 billion in financial losses, according to Javelin Strategy and Research.

Connecticut fraud complaints, many of which stem from identity theft cases, cost consumers \$5.8 million last year according to the Federal Trade Commission. That is about \$1,230 per incident.

"Identity theft is a rampant crime. It's not a one-time crime, but a
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faceless one with residual effects that you feel for a long time afterward while you try to sort things out convincing creditors that you are not the person who spent this money," said Fairfield Police Sgt. James Perez, a spokesman for the department, who frequently gives talks to civic organizations. "The first thing I always say is stop putting up that little red flag on your mailbox, the one that's supposed to tell your postal carrier that there's [outbound] mail in your box. They are not the only ones looking out for these red flags. Scammers are too. It's a calling card to them and they are driving around on the prowl for them."

Why? They are after what's inside the mailbox, checks that they can alter, routing numbers, personal data, credit card numbers. "It's an absolute treasure trove" for them, Perez said.

In 2008, Connecticut ranked number 19 nationally, with 68.8 identity complaints per 100,000 residents filed with the Federal Trade Commission, which tracks cases of consumer fraud and identity theft.

The U.S. Postal Inspection Service has about a dozen investigators charged with pursuing mail theft complaints in Connecticut, U.S. Postal Inspection Service Inspector Ken Walker said, adding that his agency has 17 active cases in Connecticut, some of which have resulted in arrests on federal charges.

"If somebody is stealing from the mail or fraudulently obtaining credit through the mail, we are very active pursuing those cases," Walker said "We take these complaints quite seriously" because of the implications of what can be done with the information. If folks do suspect that any of their information has been stolen, we urge them to report these things to us."

Lt. J. Paul Vance, a spokesman for the Connecticut State Police, said that there are a number of common sense strategies residents should take to reduce their chances of having their mail and their identity stolen.

"First of all, if you are traveling and will be away for days, have the post office hold your mail or ask a neighbor you trust to pick it up for you," Vance said. "Nothing says you're not home better to a would-be thief or burglar than a huge pile of mail collecting in your mailbox."

Consumers can limit what gets sent to them in the mail by asking banks and credit-card companies to refrain from sending them junk mail or solicitation letters. Additionally, he said, financial data with account numbers should be shredded so that would-be thieves can't "dumpster dive" and assemble the tossed out mail for financial gain.

To report a case of mail theft, contact the U.S. Postal Inspection Service at 877-876-2455, or by filing a complaint online at <http://postalinspectors.uspis.gov>.

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China post industry increases revenues by 15.9% in 2008
(Xinhua)
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China's post industry received 140.7 billion yuan (\$20.5 billion) in revenue in 2008, up 15.9 percent year-on-year, the State Post Bureau (SPB) said Monday.

The industry includes postal services and postal savings. Revenues of postal services, including express mail and philatelic services, rose 14 percent to 96 billion yuan.

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State Post Bureau head Ma Junsheng said Monday that new services, such as Internet commerce, played a main part in driving the industry.

Express mail, which accounts for more than 43 percent of the postal industry, took in 40.7 billion yuan last year, up 18.8 percent over 2007.

The SPB set a goal in 2009 to increase overall business revenue by 13 percent to 159 billion yuan. The express business was expected to rise 18 percent to 48 billion yuan.

The SPB is the regulator of China's postal industry and manages postal enterprises nationwide. The country's biggest postal service player, China Post, is under the direct administration of the bureau.

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