

ID Theft Can Haunt Victims for Years to Come

Many Are Unable to Recover Identity or Finances, Survey Says

TULSA, Okla., Aug. 1, 2005 — - Cynthia Berry still remembers the day five years ago when her identity was stolen.

"It's just as if it happened yesterday," she said. "I have forgotten none of it. I remember it as well as the day my children were born. It's got that much stature in my life."

In 2004, an estimated 10 million people fell victim to identity thieves, according to a survey conducted by Nationwide Mutual Insurance Co. Most victims -- according to the survey -- spend an average of 81 hours trying to clear their names. Worse yet, nearly a third of those surveyed are unable to repair the damage.

Berry was home from her work as a pediatrician at a Tulsa, Okla., hospital, when she got a call from her bank, tipping her off to the criminal activity

"A bank in town called and said your nanny is here and she says that you've authorized a \$23,000 cash advance on your credit card for her to open an account," Berry said. "And I said, 'I don't know what you're talking about. I don't have a nanny.'"

That call turned out to be the tip of the iceberg.

Armed with Berry's birth certificate and Social Security number, the thief had applied for 30 credit cards, nine cell phones, several bank loans, bought an SUV, a motorcycle and a new wardrobe -- making off with about \$75,000 in less than two weeks.

As a doctor with good credit, Berry says she was a goldmine for a potential criminal.

"Boy, I was the ticket," she said.

The thief turned out to be a nurse at Berry's hospital. She was caught, convicted and served 23 months in jail.

Berry Could Be Victimized Again

Berry doesn't know where her identity thief is now. She could still be living in Tulsa, and she still has all the information she needs to steal from Berry again.

Authorities say there is little they can do to help Berry. She has been told a new Social Security number would only make it harder to prove her identity.

"It's a helpless feeling," Berry said.

She says she still gets calls from collection agencies demanding payment on things she never bought. She needs a new car but is afraid to apply for a car loan. She's afraid most days to even answer the phone.

Berry says the worst part is "just the idea that it [identity theft] is a violation, of your person, your life. You can't get rid of it. It's everywhere. It never goes away."

ABC News' Betsy Stark filed this report for "World News Tonight."