

Beware identity theft

It's the fastest growing crime, and the fallout can be horrendous

By [LINDA LEATHERDALE](#)

They call it the theft that keeps on taking.

That's because once a thug steals your identity, and takes off with your hard-earned cash, even your home -- the crime doesn't end there.

Your credit rating can be ruined. Your home taken away. And you can be left stuck with a mortgage you never took out.

"Only in Ontario, is a victim victimized again and again," says Tory MPP Joe Tascona, who's tabled a private member's bill at Queen's Park, which he says goes far deeper to protect victims than a bill proposed by Government Services Minister Gerry Phillips.

Bottomline is identity theft and mortgage fraud is the fastest growing crime, estimated to be worth \$1.5 billion, and the fallout is horrendous.

Imagine this: A mortgage collector calls to tell you you're three months behind on your mortgage payments for a home you don't own. You investigate, and find out two other properties have been mortgaged in your name, and you're on the hook for \$400,000. That happened to a Brantford woman.

And in Mississauga last year, a man trying to sell his parent's home, discovered someone had already fraudulently sold it for \$400,000. It cost \$11,000 in legal fees to get the home back, and the fraudster is still at large.

Now, go to B.C. There, investigators uncovered a multimillion-dollar real estate fraud case, involving Vancouver lawyer Martin Wirick, which involved hundreds of victims from 1998 to 2002. The list of victims goes on: Like Susan Lawrence and Elizabeth Shepherd, who've lost their homes to identity theft fraudsters and are now fighting in the courts.

"These people have gone through hell," says Tascona, whose bill passed second reading and would not only nullify fraudulent deals, but allow immediate compensation for victims like Lawrence and Shepherd through Ontario's Land Titles Assurance Fund.

The Liberals confirmed they'll study Tascona's bill, and may use some of his recommendations in a clampdown.

But meanwhile, insurers, banks and financial experts are also trying to fight this growing crime by helping consumers to protect themselves.

The latest comes from ING Insurance, which yesterday launched a new product, called *myname* (TM) Identity theft Assistance Plus.

Company vice-president John McArel explains this new product not only reimburses victims of identity theft, but helps to repair damage to credit rating, deal with potential lawsuits and prevent harassment by creditors.

It also covers lost wages and minor costs, like couriers, postage and long-distance phone calls.

"With more than 11,000 reported victims in Canada in 2005 ... the need for this project has never been greater," said McArel.

Title insurer First Canadian Title, meanwhile, has set up a new website, www.protectyourtitle.com, which offers tips and links to the RCMP, OPP, and Phone Busters, an anti-fraud call centre operated by Canada's competition bureau.

Financial expert Stanley Kershman, also known as the Debt Doctor, says the time is now to fight back.

His tips include:

- Don't get up close and personal: Guard information like social insurance numbers, credit card numbers, expiry days, passwords, home phone numbers, etc.
- Trust no one: Know who's looking over your shoulder when making transactions.
- Build online defences, so thugs can't steal your identity through the computer.
- Organize back-ups, just in case your wallet or purse is stolen. And report thefts immediately.
- Check your credit ratings at Equifax and TransUnion.

(www.equifax.com and www.tuc.ca).