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News Release



County of San Diego Methamphetamine Strike Force

Meth-fueled Identity thefts on the rise

San Diego -- A dangerous liaison between methamphetamine users and identity thieves has San Diego County law enforcement warning residents to be on the alert.

So far this year, prosecutors say they've seen a 30-percent jump in cases involving methamphetamine and the so-called "paper crimes" of identity theft, forgery and fraud. Cases involving meth and identity theft alone are up 35 percent over the last three years as well, according to the District Attorney's Office.

"Easily, 75 percent of all paper crimes here in the county are committed by meth users or meth dealers," said Damon Mosler, head of the D.A.'s Narcotics Division. "And believe me, that estimate is low. In many cases, the meth evidence isn't good enough to bring to trial, so its connection to the identity theft falls through the cracks."

A recent development is that drug dealers are directly trading methamphetamine for stolen documents, according to former meth users who spoke to the Meth Strike Force.

"If you want to get high, bringing someone's stolen mail is often part of the price," Mosler said.

On average, victims end up paying about \$1,400 after having their identities stolen, according to the San Diego-based Identity Theft Resource Center.

This fact is staggering when you realize that, according to recent studies, more than 19,000 Americans are victimized by identity thieves each day. The country's total cost for identity theft tops \$53 billion annually, according to federal statistics, with a majority of cases being perpetrated by users in need quick cash for meth or other drugs.

Last year there were some 1,500 reported cases of identity theft in San Diego County, with at least 1,125 of those being meth related, based on prosecutors' estimates.

The good news is that residents need not be victimized in the first place, officials say

Identity theft is often a crime of convenience. People take what they can get their hands on. If residents mail or garbage is easily accessible, so are their social security numbers and credit card applications, experts say.

Businesses are key when it comes keeping private information safe from ID thieves. Experts at the Identity Theft Resource Center (ITRC) say businesses should pay attention to ensure they have secure techniques for acquiring, storing, accessing, disposing and distributing their customer's and employees personal information. In addition, they should run also background checks on all employees who can get a hold of sensitive documents.

Fake employees are sometimes planted by identity theft rings, according to the DA's office. Their sole purpose at the job is to steal documents for the reward of drugs.

Individuals are also at risk. The ITRC is urging people to only release their social security numbers when absolutely necessary.

"Many people know to shred their financial papers before throwing them out, but many people still have way too many credit cards they don't use," said Jay Foley, co-director of the IRDC. "This can make them more vulnerable.

"People should also know to contact the three major credit bureaus each year to ensure no one else is using their good credit at the local mall," Foley said.

The big three are bureaus are Equifax, Experian and Trans Union.

Residents should use cross-cut shredders, Foley says, because meth users have plenty of sleepless nights to spend re-assembling your single-shred documents.

"A trash bin is like a box of presents," said one woman, a former drug user, during a recent focus group discussion.

"If you see something suspicious regarding meth – including meth-related paper crimes – we are asking you to contact the Meth Hotline," Mosler said. "That number is 1-877-No 2 meth. Residents can also reach us through our Web site at www.no2meth.org."

More information about Identity Theft is also available at www.idtheftcenter.org.



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