

Meth-fueled ID thieves are out for receipts

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Guest Commentary

From explosive labs to crazed users, weapons, porn, violence, and toxic sludge dumped carelessly in places where children play, San Diegans already know that the ravages of meth extend beyond the individual user. To those familiar with the meth lifestyle, it will come as no surprise that the intense stimulant now is fueling another crime: identity theft. Last year, local prosecutors witnessed a 30 percent jump in identity-theft cases involving meth. An informal survey of local district attorney investigators indicates that 75 percent of suspects in local identity theft cases showed evidence of meth use.

Powerful and highly addictive, meth lends itself to identity theft in the way it affects the body. It revs up the central nervous system and rockets users on sleepless benders for days, sometimes weeks, on end. In the "tweaking phase" of the meth high, it's not uncommon for users to become fixated on repetitive tasks. Investigators who specialize in identity crime say that hacking into computers, stealing mail, counterfeiting checks, and forging documents are the favorite pastimes of the new meth user.

To the addict rooting through a trash bin, your personal information is a ticket to the next high. Each time you use your credit card to buy gas, groceries or pay bills, a little-known State law

is working to protect your personal information from these thieves. The Truncation Law requires merchants to block out all but the last few digits of your credit card number on your receipt.

Most merchants are in compliance with the law and have updated their equipment to protect your account number. Others however, are unwittingly aiding thieves.

You can help the Meth Strike Force thwart these crimes and protect your good name by taking a closer look at your next credit card receipt. If your card number is printed in its entirety, that merchant is putting you and other businesses at risk of devastating financial loss.

On average, an identity theft victim will spend 330 hours and \$1,400 in out-of-pocket expenses to regain control over his or her financial situation, according to the San Diego-based Identity Theft Resource Center (ITRC). That figure does not include time lost from work.

The business community loses an average of \$15,000 per compromised identity, according to the ITRC. Federal statistics indicate that identity theft costs the national economy upward of \$53 billion annually.

By using the anonymous Meth Hotline or the Meth Strike Force website to report businesses that print your credit card number in full, you

can help educate those who don't truncate. The Strike Force will contact the owners and help them to comply voluntarily with the law.

Last year, Strike Force officials surveyed recovering meth users in San Diego County to learn more about the connection between the drug and identity theft. One user estimated that 95 percent of addicts traded stolen information for drugs. Another meth user offered this advice to those seeking to protect themselves: "A Dumpster is a box of presents. Shred everything," she warned.

Because the craving for the next fix of meth is so intense, addicts don't think twice about destroying the good names of others. The public must be equally as determined to stop identity thieves by making certain that important barriers to the crime, such as the Truncation Law, are firmly in place.

The Meth Hotline is 1-877-No2Meth. The Meth Strike Force website is www.no2meth.org. Both are anonymous.

Dianne Jacob is a member of the San Diego County Board of Supervisors and initiated the Meth Strike Force in 1996. Bonnie Dumanis is the district attorney of San Diego County. Greg Cox is a member of the Board of Supervisors and has been active in the fight against identity theft.