

Substantial Numbers of U.S. Adults Taking Steps to Prevent Identity Theft

Most trust banks, but less than half trust retailers to prevent others from accessing their sensitive personal information or account number

A recent Wall Street Journal Online/Harris Interactive Personal Finance Poll reveals that while relatively few U.S. adults say they have fallen victim to identity theft, substantial numbers have taken specific steps to help prevent it from happening to them. Three in five (60%) adults who have had their identity stolen¹ lost money as a result, and while a majority recovered their losses within three months (57%), one in five (21%) say they have not yet been able to recover their loss. The poll further explores how much adults trust banks, credit card companies, insurance companies, brokers and retailers to prevent others from accessing their sensitive personal information and account numbers, and what they do when they receive a suspicious email from a financial institution or other company with whom they have an account.

These are some of the results of an online survey of 2,120 U.S. adults conducted by Harris Interactive between May 1 and 3, 2006 for The Wall Street Journal Online's Personal Journal Edition.

Personal experience with identity theft

Sixteen percent of adults say they have had their credit or debit card used by someone they don't know without their permission. Smaller numbers say their identity was used to open a phone, utility or other type of account (3%), their personal information was used for non-financial fraud (2%), a mortgage or line of credit they didn't authorize was opened in their name (1%) or their identity was stolen and used in some other way (6%).

Preventing identity theft

In an effort to help prevent identity theft, about seven in 10 adults say they watch for suspicious activity on their accounts (73%), shred mail that contains their account numbers (72%), and/or limit access to their Social Security number (69%) to prevent identity theft. Other steps taken include checking their credit

1 Defined as those adults who said their credit or debit card was used by someone they didn't know without their permission, their identity was used to open a phone, utility or other type of account, their personal information was used for non-financial fraud, such as on tax forms, to gain employment, to obtain healthcare or prescription drugs, to avoid criminal prosecution, or in other ways, a mortgage or line of credit they didn't authorize was opened in their name, and/or their identity was stolen and used in some other way.

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reports (41%), limiting the purchases they make online (30%), limiting their online banking transactions (24%), and signing up for a credit-monitoring service (8%). Some demographic differences exist:

- Those with a college degree or higher are more likely than those with a high school education or less to watch for suspicious activity on their accounts (84% vs. 66%), limit access to their Social Security number (74% vs. 66%), and check their credit reports (54% vs. 31%).
- Those with annual household incomes of \$75K or more are more likely than those with household incomes of less than \$35K to check their credit reports (53% vs. 34%).
- Those ages 18 to 34 are less likely than their older counterparts to watch for suspicious activity (63% vs. 81% of 45- to 54-year-olds), shred mail that has their account numbers (62% vs. 78% of those aged 55 and over), and limit access to their Social Security number (60% vs. 74% of 35- to 44-year-olds and those aged 55 and over).
- Those in the West are more likely than those in the Northeast to check their credit reports (47% vs. 38%).
- Women are more likely than men to watch for suspicious activity on their accounts (78% vs. 68%), shred mail that has their account numbers (76% vs. 68%), limit access to their Social Security number (72% vs. 66%), and check their credit reports (43% vs. 38%).

Anne Aldrich, Senior Vice President of the Financial Services Practice at Harris Interactive comments, "Clearly identity theft is an important issue to the public today, and huge numbers are taking steps to try and avoid becoming victims. Financial institutions can build public trust by educating customers about how to keep their identity secure and by devising better ways for customers to communicate with them about their personal account activity."

When specifically asked about suspicious emails, more than eight in 10 (83%) online adults say they have received emails from a financial institution or other company they have an account with that appeared suspicious. While slightly more than half (52%) say they delete the email, more than a third say they take an investigative approach by reporting the email to or confirming it with the company in question (39%) or go to the company's website on their own to check their account (36%). Few (3%) say they do nothing when they receive a suspicious email.

Who adults trust with their personal information

Banks have been most successful in gaining public trust, as 80 percent of adults say they trust banks a fair amount or a great deal to prevent others from accessing their sensitive personal information or account number. At least half of adults say they trust credit card (64%), insurance companies (62%), and brokers a fair amount or a great deal to protect their personal information. Retailers, however, have some work to do as about half (52%) say they trust retailers very little or not at all to protect their personal information.

Personal Finance Poll

TABLE 1
Personal Experiences

“Which of the following, if any, has happened to you?”

Base: All adults

	Total
	(n=2,120)
	%
My credit card or debit card was used by someone I don't know without my permission.	16
My identity was used to open a phone, utility or other type of account.	3
My personal information was used for non-financial fraud, such as on tax forms, to gain employment, to obtain health-care or prescription drugs, to avoid criminal prosecution, or in other ways.	2
A mortgage or line of credit I didn't authorize was opened in my name.	1
My identity was stolen and used in some other way.	6
None of these	77

Note: Multiple-response question.

TABLE 2A
Steps Taken to Prevent Identity Theft – by Education

“What steps, if any, have you taken to prevent identity theft?”

Base: All adults

	Education			
	Total	High School or Less	Some College	Post Graduate+
	(n=2,120)	(n=258)	(n=819)	(n=1,043)
	%	%	%	%
Watch for suspicious activity on accounts	73	66	75	84
Shred mail that has my account numbers	72	71	71	76
Limit access to my Social Security number	69	66	70	74
Check my credit reports	41	31	42	54
Limit the purchases I make online*	30	34	30	26
Limit my online banking transactions*	24	23	24	24
Signed up for a credit-monitoring service	8	5	10	12
Other	5	5	5	4
I have not taken any steps to prevent identity theft	8	11	9	4

Note: Multiple-response question.

*Data for these responses were weighted to reflect the online adult population.

TABLE 2B

Steps Taken to Prevent Identity Theft – by Income

“What steps, if any, have you taken to prevent identity theft?”

Base: All adults

	Income				
	Total	Less Than \$35K	\$35K-\$49.9K	\$50K-\$74.9K	\$75K+
	(n=2,120)	(n=436)	(n=256)	(n=387)	(n=684)
	%	%	%	%	%
Watch for suspicious activity on accounts	73	64	79	80	78
Shred mail that has my account numbers	72	62	74	77	77
Limit access to my Social Security number	69	66	73	67	68
Check my credit reports	41	34	33	37	53
Limit the purchases I make online*	30	31	41	26	24
Limit my online banking transactions*	24	22	27	24	21
Signed up for a credit-monitoring service	8	6	6	8	11
Other	5	7	6	3	2
I have not taken any steps to prevent identity theft	8	12	4	8	5

Note: Multiple-response question.

*Data for these responses were weighted to reflect the online adult population.

TABLE 2C

Steps Taken to Prevent Identity Theft – by Region

“What steps, if any, have you taken to prevent identity theft?”

Base: All adults

	Region				
	Total	North-east	Mid-west	South	West
	(n=2,120)	(n=553)	(n=501)	(n=602)	(n=464)
	%	%	%	%	%
Watch for suspicious activity on accounts	73	73	70	75	75
Shred mail that has my account numbers	72	70	72	71	77
Limit access to my Social Security number	69	62	72	70	71
Check my credit reports	41	38	37	41	47
Limit the purchases I make online*	30	27	32	33	27
Limit my online banking transactions*	24	20	27	25	22
Signed up for a credit-monitoring service	8	8	7	8	10
Other	5	3	5	6	4
I have not taken any steps to prevent identity theft	8	11	6	8	9

Note: Multiple-response question.

*Data for these responses were weighted to reflect the online adult population

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TABLE 2D

Steps Taken to Prevent Identity Theft – by Age

“What steps, if any, have you taken to prevent identity theft?”

Base: All adults

	Age				
	Total	18–34	35–44	45–54	55+
	(n=2,120)	(n=646)	(n=397)	(n=415)	(n=662)
	%	%	%	%	%
Watch for suspicious activity on accounts	73	63	77	81	76
Shred mail that has my account numbers	72	62	75	76	78
Limit access to my Social Security number	69	60	74	70	74
Check my credit reports	41	42	42	43	37
Limit the purchases I make online*	30	27	30	28	39
Limit my online banking transactions*	24	17	22	30	32
Signed up for a credit-monitoring service	8	6	8	13	7
Other	5	6	4	4	4
I have not taken any steps to prevent identity theft	8	15	5	5	6

Note: Multiple-response question.

*Data for these responses were weighted to reflect the online adult population.

TABLE 2E

Steps Taken to Prevent Identity Theft – by Gender

“What steps, if any, have you taken to prevent identity theft?”

Base: All adults

	Gender		
	Total	Male	Female
	(n=2,120)	(n=1,028)	(n=1,092)
	%	%	%
Watch for suspicious activity on accounts	73	68	78
Shred mail that has my account numbers	72	68	76
Limit access to my Social Security number	69	66	72
Check my credit reports	41	38	43
Limit the purchases I make online*	30	31	30
Limit my online banking transactions*	24	25	22
Signed up for a credit-monitoring service	8	9	8
Other	5	6	3
I have not taken any steps to prevent identity theft	8	11	6

Note: Multiple-response question.

*Data for these responses were weighted to reflect the online adult population.

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TABLE 3
Actions Taken When Faced with Suspicious Email

“What, if anything, do you do when you receive an email from a financial institution or other company you have an account with (i.e., phone company, utility company, etc.) that appears suspicious? Please select all that apply.”

Base: All adults

	Total
	(n=2,120)
	%
Have Received Emails (NET)	83
Delete it	52
Report it or confirm it with the financial institution	39
Go to the company’s website on my own to check my account	36
Click on the link provided in the email to check my account	3
Other	3
Nothing	3
I have never received emails from a financial institution or other company I have an account with	17

Note: Multiple-response question.

Data for all responses in this table weighted to reflect the online adult population.

TABLE 4
Amount of Money Stolen

“How much money, if any, did you lose before attempting to recover it? If you have had your identity stolen on more than one occasion, please think only about the most recent time.”

Base: Those who have had their identity stolen*

	Total
	(n=508)
	%
\$0	40
Lost Money Due to Identity Theft* (NET)	60
\$1–\$100	17
\$101–\$250	9
\$251–\$500	15
\$501–\$1,000	9
\$1,001–\$2,000	5
\$2,001+	6
Mean (for those who lost money only)	\$1,089

Note: Percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding.

*Defined as those adults who said their credit or debit card was used by someone they didn’t know without their permission, their identity was used to open a phone, utility or other type of account, their personal information was used for non-financial fraud, such as on tax forms, to gain employment, to obtain healthcare or prescription drugs, to avoid criminal prosecution, or in other ways, a mortgage or line of credit they didn’t authorize was opened in their name, and/or their identity was stolen and used in some other way.

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TABLE 5
Amount of Time It Took to Recover Loss

“How long did it take to recover your financial loss?”

Base: Those who have had their identity stolen* and lost money

	Total (n=295) %
Less than 3 months	57
3 months to less than 6 months	11
6 months to less than 1 year	6
1 year to less than 2 years	2
2 years or more	3
I have not yet been able to recover my loss	21

*Defined as those adults who said their credit or debit card was used by someone they didn't know without their permission, their identity was used to open a phone, utility or other type of account, their personal information was used for non-financial fraud, such as on tax forms, to gain employment, to obtain healthcare or prescription drugs, to avoid criminal prosecution, or in other ways, a mortgage or line of credit they didn't authorize was opened in their name, and/or their identity was stolen and used in some other way.

TABLE 6
Trust in Preventing Personal Information Access

“How much do you trust each of the following to prevent others from accessing your sensitive personal information or account number?”

Base: All adults

		A Fair Amount/ Great Deal (NET)	A Great Deal	A Fair Amount	Very Little/ Not At All (NET)	Very Little	Not At All	Not Sure
Banks	%	80	44	36	18	12	6	2
Credit card companies	%	64	24	41	31	19	12	5
Insurance companies	%	62	19	43	31	21	11	7
Brokers	%	50	15	35	33	20	14	7
Retailers	%	43	5	38	52	35	17	5

Note: Percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding.

Downloadable PDFs of The Wall Street Journal Online/Harris Interactive Personal Finance Polls are posted at http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/newsletters_wsfinance.asp.

Methodology

This survey was conducted online within the United States between May 1 and 3, 2006 among 2,120 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

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All surveys are subject to several sources of error. These include: sampling error (because only a sample of a population is interviewed); measurement error due to question wording and/or question order, deliberately or unintentionally inaccurate responses, nonresponse (including refusals), interviewer effects (when live interviewers are used) and weighting.

With one exception (sampling error) the magnitude of the errors that result cannot be estimated. There is, therefore, no way to calculate a finite “margin of error” for any survey and the use of these words should be avoided.

With pure probability samples, with 100 percent response rates, it is possible to calculate the probability that the sampling error (but not other sources of error) is not greater than some number. With a pure probability sample of 2,120 adults one could say with a 95 percent probability that the overall results have a sampling error of +/- 3 percentage points. Sampling error for the various sub-samples shown in the tables is higher and varies. However that does not take other sources of error into account. This online survey is not based on a probability sample and therefore no theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.

About the Survey

The Wall Street Journal Online/Harris Interactive Personal Finance Poll is an exclusive poll that is published in the Personal Journal Edition of The Wall Street Journal Online at www.wsj.com/personaljournal.

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