

Modesto police investigate 600 ID theft cases

By **BEN van der MEER**
BEE STAFF WRITER

More than 600 customers of a Modesto-area business have had at least \$500,000 stolen by an identity theft ring, police said Thursday.

From June 12 through Wednesday, thieves used personal identification numbers and duplicated ATM cards to withdraw money from accounts, in some cases using terminals as far away as the Bay Area and Fresno.

"It's probably the most sophisticated and largest identity theft case I've ever seen," said Rick Applegate, a spokesman for the Modesto Police Department. "It's possible there are more victims out there."

Applegate said the victims used ATM cards within the past two to three months at a Modesto-area business, which he would not identify.

He said someone used information gleaned there to make the withdrawals, although police are not sure exactly how.

In one case, a thief used duplicated cards from 12 people to withdraw \$5,000 in less than 10 minutes, he said.

Police have yet to arrest anyone but are looking at ATM surveillance videos and working with the Secret Service, Applegate said.

Hilary Boyd of Modesto said she was one of the victims. Earlier this week, she said, she noticed that she had a negative balance on her Washington Mutual account, even though she'd just deposited her husband's paycheck.

When she checked with the bank, she discovered that more than \$500 had been withdrawn from her account — in Fresno on Tuesday, in San Jose on Wednesday.

In both cases, she said, she was nowhere nearby. In fact, she'd made an ATM purchase in Modesto a few minutes before the Fresno withdrawal.

"I felt personally attacked," said Boyd, 32. "We are told how secure these items are, and how the banks are spending millions of dollars to keep it safe.

"If that's so, how is this happening?"

Boyd said the thief used an older ATM card with different numbers than the one she has now.

She said her co-worker also was a victim, but they haven't figured out at which business their information was compromised.

"We eat at the same places and we get gas at the same places," she said. "There are too many common threads."

\$1,000 pilfered in Foster City

Modestan Dawn Boss said she believes she was a victim, after \$1,000 was withdrawn from her account this week in Foster City, near San Francisco.

She said officials at Bank of America told her an employee at a business she went to copied her ATM information when she used her card.

They recommended that she not use her ATM card for debit purchases, she said.

Applegate said people who think they were victims should check their accounts for recent transactions, and file a police report if they were victimized.

They also should check with their bank for ATM fraud policies, he said.

Applegate said the frightening aspect of the thefts is how unaware the victims were. "They did nothing wrong. They were taken advantage of," he said.

Boyd said she was so shaken that she began smoking again. She unplugged her computer because she was afraid of identity theft.

"You're not really as safe as you think," she said.

Bee staff writer Ben van der Meer can be reached at 578-2331 or bvandermeer@modbee.com.

Posted on 06/23/06 00:00:00

<http://www.modbee.com/local/story/12357664p-13086997c.html>