

Identity theft task force investigates nation's fastest growing crime

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Capital Campus News
May 8, 2006*

Identity theft is a sophisticated, complex and time-consuming crime to investigate, and the six detectives in the Identity Theft Task Force of the Sacramento County Sheriff's Department face major challenges in combating the nation's fastest growing criminal activity.

Even as security technologies catch on to theft tactics, surveillance videos capture thieves' faces, and financial institutions monitor customer accounts for unusual spending, the thieves devise new schemes.

Then there are those who make the detectives' jobs easy.

Like the man who paid for his wife's funeral with a counterfeit check.

"How did this guy figure he wasn't going to be caught?" exclaims Detective Jim Clausen, a 10-year veteran of the task force.

Or the thieves who use stolen identification to purchase large-ticket items and have them delivered to their own address. They lead detectives right to their doorstep.

Or when a group of attorneys complained of unauthorized charges on their credit cards. Clausen discovered charges occurred after they paid their Bar Association dues and quickly realized that two young receptionists were paying their utility and other bills with the attorneys' stolen credit card numbers.

Or the young man who impersonated an elderly man to wire-transfer \$100,000 to an offshore account. He introduced himself to the teller using his real name, then quickly corrected himself with the false name. An astute teller picked up on the scam and reported it. DMV surveillance videos verified the young man obtaining identification using the false identity.

"They think the plan is foolproof, and it's usually not," says Clausen.

He says the funniest thing he has seen is the gray tank top found in a home during an investigation, which read, "I was committing identity theft and all I got was this stupid t-shirt." That shirt was used as evidence during the trial.

And there are those who are caught that concern Clausen as well.

He says young people in their late teens to mid-20s are being recruited to pass counterfeit checks and they are the ones arrested -- instead of those he refers to as "the bad guys."

In this scheme, counterfeit check-makers work with "recruiters" who entice the young and vulnerable to cash a paycheck. The recruiters pose as employees who do not have identification and say the bank or check-cashing store will not allow the check to be cashed without it. They only need someone with ID to cash it for them. In return, the cashier (or passer) will be paid a portion of the amount. Usually the check is made out to the person cashing it -- not the employee, which should be a red flag, according to Clausen.

"No company would ever issue a non-employee a paycheck because the employee doesn't have ID," says Clausen. "Besides, you don't need an ID to deposit money into a bank account."

It's those who cash the checks who are arrested, receive jail time, probation and a felony criminal record that follows them the rest of their lives. Young people see the opportunity to make some quick cash, but usually end up taking the fall. Clausen says it's a "stupid" mistake for "quick money" that generally amounts to no more than \$500. Sometimes the passer is not paid.

Counterfeit checks comprise only one-half to one-third of the cases the task force investigates. The six detectives, along with one California Highway Patrol officer and three on-call sheriff's investigators, are responsible for solving the county's identity theft crimes. It's a mighty task for a small group of law enforcement officers.

The task force receives approximately 400 reports each month. Of those, detectives investigate 25 to 30 cases -- including 10 to 16 smaller cases or five to six larger and complex cases per investigator to juggle each day.

When a theft report is taken at the Sacramento Sheriff's service center, the assigned detective stops working on his or her current case to investigate the new one. After reviewing the victim's complaint form, they interview the victim(s) or the person who reported the incident, watch surveillance videos that may have captured the act on film and contact the bank to determine if the crime involved information that is stolen, forged or counterfeit. The suspects are traced from their surveillance video pictures matched to mug shots, or their names.

And yes, some thieves use their real names and addresses when passing stolen credit cards and checks.

Clausen makes his job sound easy. When careless thieves make mistakes leaving a paper trail, cases can be solved in a few days. But many investigations can take months or years depending on the number of suspects and victims. Small cases can turn into a labyrinth of different crimes linking multiple suspects.

For example, a suspect caught with a stolen purse could have obtained identification, credit cards, created counterfeit checks, and opened utilities using the victim's name. Clausen says the task force often uncovers names of other identity thieves during evidence searches. He said his toughest case is one he is working on now which involves more than 40 suspects and at least \$800,000 in counterfeit checks.

"It's quasi-organized crime in some cases," says Clausen.

The bulk of investigators' work is reviewing evidence and preparing reports for the Sacramento County District Attorney's office for prosecution. Eighty percent of cases handled by the task force result in arrest, and arrest warrants are issued in approximately 20 percent of the cases if detectives cannot locate the suspects.

Clausen says many suspects are also drug users living in chaotic conditions. Most of the houses they search for evidence are filthy.

"You don't want to sit anywhere," he said. "Most (suspects) are methamphetamine users, and they're slobs." He laughs and shakes his head.

Clausen says the detectives' secret to getting through each day is a tight bond among his colleagues in the unit. The workload is daunting, but they are motivated by the knowledge they are preventing at least some of the growing number of identity thieves from committing further crimes.

"That, a lot of coffee, and a good sense of humor get us through the day," said Clausen.

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