

SAFEGUARD YOUR SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER Protect yourself from identity theft by keeping a tight rein on your Social Security number. Only a few organizations have the right to demand it. Following is how to fend off all of the rest.

Today schools, phone companies, utilities, health clubs, and even video stores want your Social Security number. Some of the more prevalent uses are to get credit ratings and determine whether you pay your bills. But many companies also use your Social Security number to develop marketing lists, which they can then sell to other companies.

WHY should you care who sees your Social Security number? The more people who see it, the more susceptible you are to identity theft, and the chance you might be victimized by someone fraudulently using your name and number to gain access to both your accounts and your money.

Identity theft costs American businesses billions of dollars each year. This cost eventually is passed along to all consumers. The toll on its victims can be overwhelming. According to a public research group in California, *an identity theft victim will spend, on average, 175 hours and \$800 to clear their record of fraudulent charges.*

WHO HAS THE RIGHT TO ASK YOU FOR YOUR NUMBER??

While any business can ask for your Social Security number, there are very few entities that can actually demand it -- motor vehicle departments, tax departments and welfare departments, for example. Also, Social Security numbers are required for transactions involving taxes, so that means banks, brokerages, employers, and the like also have a legitimate need for your Social Security number.

Most other businesses have no legal right to demand your number. There is nothing to prohibit a business from asking for your Social Security number, but most people are unaware they can just say no. Many businesses will accept your driver's license or some other form of identification in its place.

Social Security numbers exist for the purpose of tracking earnings and paying benefits. Although President Franklin Roosevelt signed an order requiring federal agencies to use Social Security Numbers for record-keeping systems, they were never meant to be used by businesses as an identifier, but many businesses have gone to using these numbers for their tracking numbers since everyone has one.

However, the snowballing problem of identity theft is spurring some governments to now start considering limiting the use of Social Security numbers.

The best way to find out if someone is fraudulently using your Social Security number is to request copies of your credit reports at least once a year. There are three main credit-reporting agencies. It's a good idea to get a copy of your report from each agency so you can check for discrepancies. You can order your credit report from: [TransUnion](#), [Equifax](#) and [Experian](#).