

Burglars

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Burglars who break into your home this summer may be after more than your jewelry and electronic equipment—they may also steal your identity. As you prepare to leave on vacation, it is important to protect yourself against both a physical and a virtual break-in.

Most burglaries occur in July and August and homeowners insurance claims due to theft total about \$1 billion annually, with the average claim around \$2,500. Identity theft is one of the fastest growing white collar crimes in the country, according to the Federal Trade Commission, with more than nine million victims annually. The crime takes many forms. Identity thieves may rent an apartment, obtain a credit card, or establish a telephone account in a person's name. The victims may not find out about the theft until they review their credit report or a credit card statement and notice charges they did not make—or until they are contacted by a debt collector. Losses to credit cards average \$7,000, and while victims are generally only liable for the first \$50 for each card, they may also end up spending hundreds of dollars and many days repairing damage to their good name and credit record. Some victims may lose out on job opportunities, or be denied loans for education, housing or cars because of negative information on their credit reports. In rare cases, they may even be arrested for crimes they did not commit.

The I.I.I. recommends following these preventive measures to keep your home safe:

- **Keep your home well lit.** Mount exterior lights in your yard or on your house so that they are out of reach of would-be burglars. Put indoor lights on a timer.
- **Make it time-consuming to break into your home.** Dead-bolt window and door locks can slow a burglar down. You may qualify for a discount of 2 to 5 percent on your insurance policy for installing these devices.
- **Make it noisy to break into your home.** Invest in a burglar alarm. The most effective systems

ring at an outside service, which alerts the police, fire or other emergency service. A sophisticated alarm system could result in insurance discounts of 15 to 20 percent.

- **Make sure you have strong doors.** Outside doors and frames should be made of metal or solid hardwood and be at least 1¾-inches thick and each door must fit its frame securely. Even the best lock will not deter a burglar if it is installed in a weak door. Garage doors also need strong locks. If you have a tool shed, keep it locked since burglars can use the tools to break into your home.
- **Turn off your computer and disconnect it from the Internet.** If you save personal information in your computer, make sure it is difficult to access. You do not want a hacker at work while you are on vacation.
- **Keep valuables in a secure location.** When possible, do not leave personal documents in your home office or desk—burglars know to look for them there. Keep important documents, expensive jewelry and other items in a safety deposit box in a bank or other secure location.

As you prepare to leave on vacation follow these additional steps:

- **Have mail and packages picked up, forwarded or held by the post office.** Also, stop newspaper deliveries and ask a neighbor to pick-up circulars for you.
- **Leave blinds or curtains open in their usual position.** This will make it appear that you are at home.
- **Ask a neighbor for help.** Ask a neighbor you trust to keep an eye on your home while you are away. Make arrangements for your lawn to be mowed. Only tell people you know and trust that you are going away.

Insurance is available for identity theft, providing reimbursement to victims for the cost of restoring their identity and repairing credit reports. Some companies include it as part of their homeowners insurance policy. Others sell it as a stand-alone policy or as an endorsement to a homeowners or renters insurance policy. Typical policies cost between \$25 and \$65 a year for \$25,000 to \$30,000 worth of coverage, but vary by company. Identity theft insurance provides reimbursement for expenses such as phone bills, lost wages, notary and certified mailing costs and sometimes attorney fees with the prior consent of the insurer. Some companies offer resolution or restoration services that will guide you in the process of recovering your identity.

Standard homeowners insurance policies provide coverage for theft of personal possessions and damage to the home caused by the break-in. With replacement cost coverage, which is only about 10 percent more than actual cash value coverage, damaged property is replaced without deducting for depreciation.

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