

2021 CONSUMER AFTERMATH[®] R E P O R T

How Identity Crimes Impact Victims,
their Families, Friends, and Workplaces

The logo for the Identity Theft Resource Center (ITRC), featuring the letters 'ITRC' in a stylized, bold, white font with a horizontal line through the middle of the letters.

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RESOURCE CENTER
21 Years of Service

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Letter from the CEO



Eva C. Velasquez
(President & CEO, ITRC)

“It is not resolved.” Out of all the responses to this year’s Identity Theft Resource Center Consumer Aftermath survey, this is the answer that hurts my heart and angers me the most. Our 2021 victim impact study you are about to read captures the emotional, physical, and lost opportunities of identity crime victimization, just as our previous reports have done.

While everyone is living through the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, identity crime victims have the additional challenge of resolving issues created by someone misusing their personal information. Some of the identity fraud victims we assist have jobs, and stable housing, and are better equipped and resourced to face the challenges of having your identity stolen that have become all too common. Many more, though, are the people most in need of critical relief dollars they cannot collect because a criminal has fraudulently applied for funds in their name.

These are not folks who are missing out fun on activities, or “extras” while they jump hurdles to reclaim their identities. They cannot pay their rent or mortgage. They cannot put food on the table or gas in their cars. They cannot afford to pay for internet access or child-care needed to look for new employment. You will see the range of emotions – anger, frustration, fear, hopelessness – in their own words.

We talk to victims every day. In fact, more people than ever are reaching out to us for one-on-one victim assistance and education as a result of a dramatic increase in identity fraud and a shrinking set of resources. The statements you are about to read from the very people that are being harmed make a convincing case as to why we need government agencies, private companies, and charitable foundations to increase the funding available to help victims of identity crimes.

But that is not the course we are charting today. The US Department of Justice has not funded any program aimed at helping identity crime victims in eight of the last 10 budget cycles, including 2019, 2020, and to-date in 2021. That’s despite a nearly 250 percent increase in identity fraud reported to the FTC – from 400,000 in 2016 to more than 1.3 million last year – and a 2x increase in the number of identity crimes reported to the FBI over the same time period.

Without increased financial support from all Public, Private, and Non-profit stakeholders, free victim services like those provided by the ITRC will soon be reduced or disappear. “It was not resolved” today could turn into “it will never be resolved” tomorrow. Join us and other leading organizations in making the victims of identity crimes a priority.

May 2021

2003

Since 2003, the ITRC has periodically surveyed the identity crime victims who have contacted the Center to gauge the impact of identity compromises on individuals. Numerous studies by government agencies and private organizations focus on the financial impacts of identity-related crimes, but the primary purpose of the ITRC Aftermath report is to determine the emotional and practical effects on the day-to-day lives of victims.

In 2019 and 2020, before the global pandemic took hold, the ITRC contacted victims who had sought help in 2018, 2019, and early 2020 before the pandemic. In March 2021, we specifically contacted victims who reported instances of pandemic-related identity fraud between February and December 2020. As a result, this report is based on responses from 427 individual victims of identity crimes out of the 5,571 victims we offered the opportunity to participate. The result is an overall margin of error of +/- 5% with a confidence rate of 95%.

2018

2019

2020

2021

We opted to expand our normal data set and time frame because of the pandemic. When states began to issue shelter-at-home orders, the ITRC Contact Center staff immediately noticed trends that indicated a rapid rise in identity fraud, especially in government benefits programs. Government and private data show the scope of the identity fraud linked to pandemic relief benefits - especially unemployment benefits - but there has been little information about the effects of identity fraud on the victims who have been denied needed benefits.



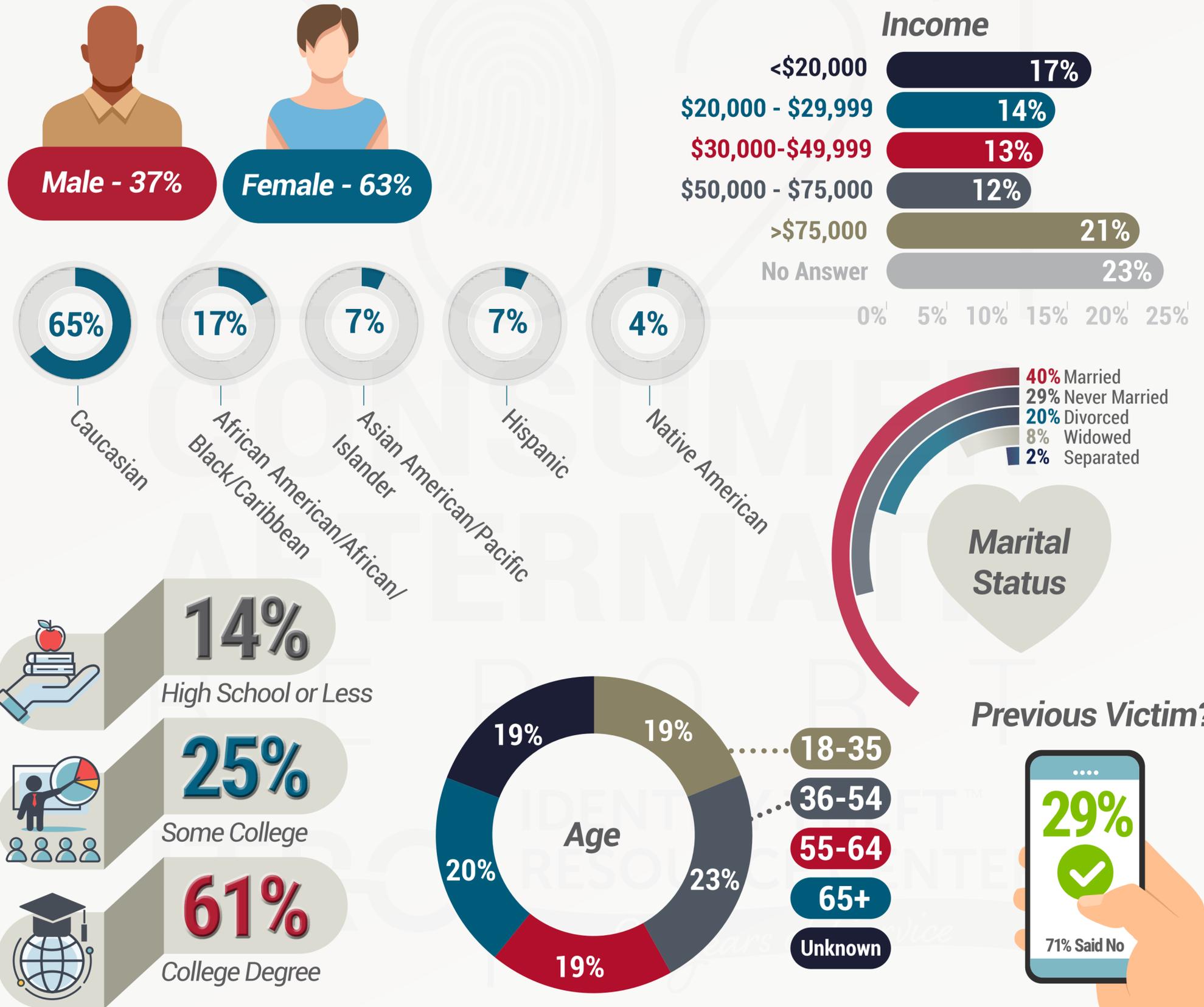
The information presented here shows both the scale and the insidious nature of pandemic-related identity crimes.

We contacted 752 identity crime victims who previously self-identified as being impacted by pandemic-related identity fraud at the time they contacted the ITRC in 2020. We received 63 responses for a margin of error of +/- 12 percent with a confidence level of 95%.

Demographics

The profile of a “typical” identity crime victim who contacts the ITRC is remarkably consistent in most key demographics. Victims are primarily married women spread evenly across all adult age groups. The number of victims who self-report low annual income nearly matches the number of victims who report high annual earnings.

However, victims with college degrees contact the ITRC for assistance far more frequently than victims who do not have degrees. In terms of race and origin, victims skew higher than the US population among White non-Hispanic, African-American, and Native American populations, but slightly lower among Asian Americans / Pacific Islanders and significantly lower among victims of Hispanic origin.



2021 AFTERMATH FINDINGS

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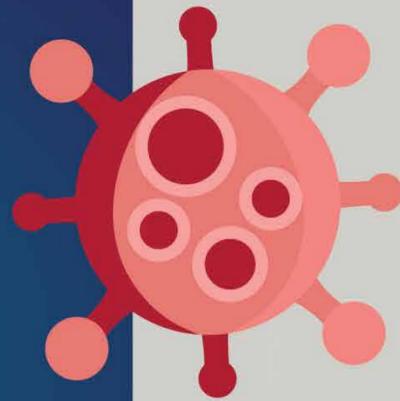


The findings reported here are based on responses from 427 identity crime victims who contacted the ITRC during the 36 months ending December 31, 2020. Sixty-three (63) responses are from victims directly impacted by pandemic-related identity fraud.

These are our findings:

- ↑ The number of repeat victims is increasing.
- 🐛 Victims are struggling more to meet their financial obligations including securing housing, paying bills, and avoiding debt.
- 📊 Satisfaction with key players in assisting ID theft victims is either way up or way down.
- 👤 The demographic profile of victims contacting the ITRC is changing. So is the impact on victims' relationships with family and friends.

Please view our full report for methodology at idtheftcenter.org



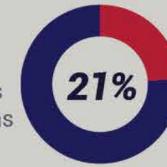
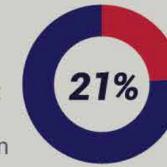
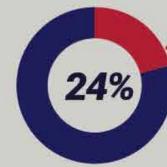
The 2020 COVID-19 Impact

8%
have thoughts of suicide that did not have before



"I am ready to give up altogether"
– Victim Response

Victims who contacted the ITRC in 2020 about a COVID-19 related identity issues reported:



Top Impacts of COVID-19 related identity issues:

40% Victims were unable to pay their routine monthly bills



"I couldn't pay bills ...didn't have enough money to meet our needs..."
– Victim Response



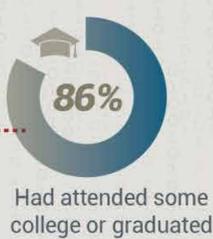
"I am homeless and it devastated my life."
– Victim Response

Victims stated issue as **"not resolved"**

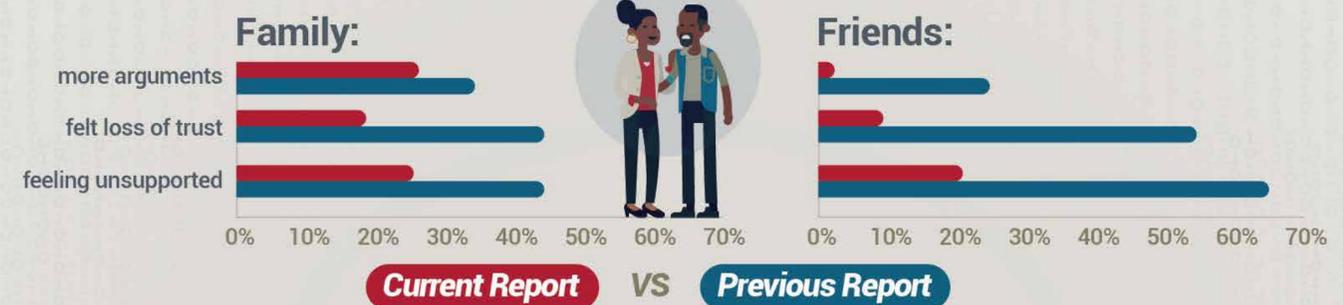
- 82%** of victims who gave a criminal personal information or payment card information
- 75%** victim cases related to fraudulent COVID-related loans/credit lines (PPP, etc.)
- 69%** of victims denied Unemployment Benefits due to fraudulent identity issues



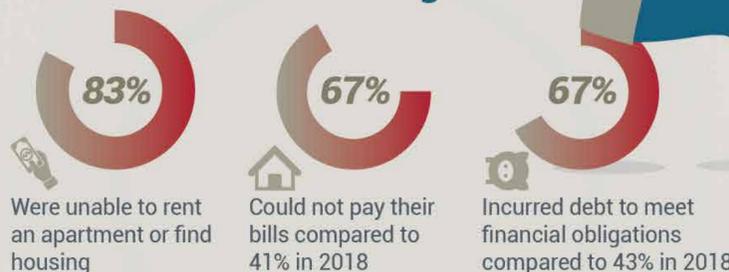
The demographic profile of victims contacting the ITRC is changing



Victims report fewer adverse impacts on...



Victims are struggling more to meet their financial obligations



Satisfaction with key players in assisting ID theft victims is improving for some, but not all.



Most identity crime victims require at least one month and some need one year or more to resolve their identity issues.



Only **1%** of victims who contact the ITRC can resolve their issues in a single day



37% of pre-pandemic identity crime victims said their issues from 2019 were not resolved as of May 2020.



75% of victims of pandemic-related identity fraud in 2020 said their issues were still unresolved as of April 2021

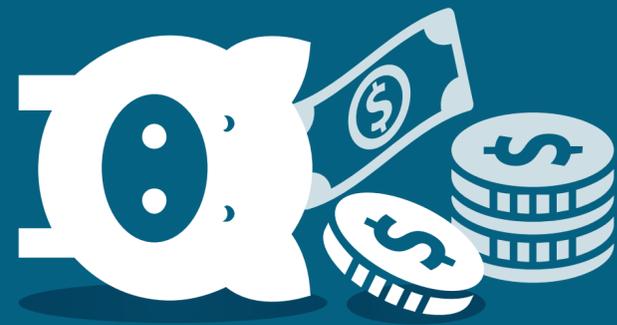
There are a large number of repeat victims

Three out of 10 (29%) of the victims contacting the ITRC have previously been an identity crime victim.



Victims are losing significant sums of money to identity theft and fraud

Most victims lose less than \$500, but **21%** say they lost more than \$20,000 to identity criminals.



The top five changes identity crime victims say they make after an identity compromise:

- 84%** I check my credit reports regularly.
- 77%** I delete scam emails and text messages without answering them.
- 71%** I use numbers and letters in my online passwords and make them at least eight characters long²
- 71%** I am careful not to put personal information on my social networking profiles.
- 68%** I have a security or credit freeze on my credit reports.

² The current password guidance is to use "passphrases" that are at least 12 characters long, are memorable, and are unique to each account.

Pre-Pandemic

Pre-pandemic, identity crime victims were struggling with the financial, emotional, and physical impacts of having their identities misused

100% were contacted by debt collectors or collection departments

83% were unable to rent an apartment or find housing

84% reported being anxious or worried

76% say they felt violated

67% incurred debt to meet financial obligations compared

10% had suicidal thoughts

-VS-

Pandemic

During the pandemic, victims who self-identified as being impacted by unemployment and stimulus identity fraud in 2020 report significant financial and emotional impacts

54% say they feel more stressed than usual

54% say they feel violated as a result of their identity being misused

40% were unable to pay their routine bills

33% did not have enough money to buy food or pay for utilities

14% were evicted for non-payment of rent or mortgage

13% have been unable to get a temp or permanent job as a result of identity misuse



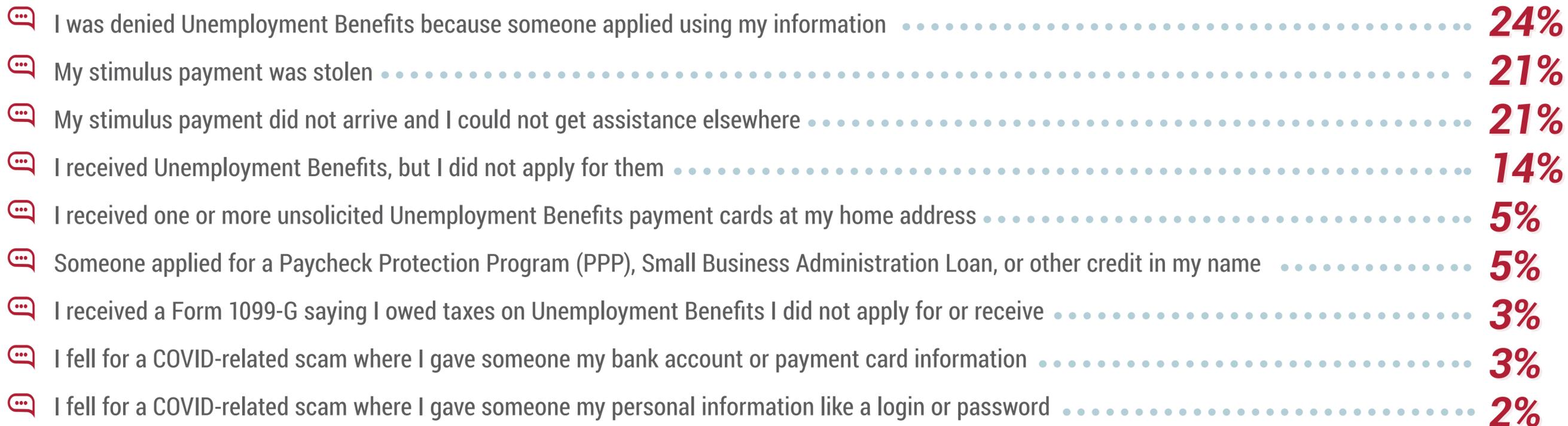
Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic Related Identity Crimes

In 2019 the number of contacts to the ITRC about unemployment benefit fraud totaled .00019% of all contacts. In 2020 that number jumped to eight percent (8%) thanks to the the COVID-19 pandemic. The impacts of government benefit related identity fraud can be severe and long-term as illustrated in the responses from 63 pandemic related identity fraud victims who contacted the ITRC in 2020.



Question #1

You contacted the ITRC in 2020 about a COVID-19 related identity issue. Please select one or more of the following topics:



Victim Comments:

- Someone provided false earnings and applied for unemployment using my information. I was trying to research for information on the subject and stumbled into strange irregularities.*
- I got a letter from the state stating I was eligible for unemployment benefits even though I had not applied for them.*
- My employer notified me of an unemployment claim that was started in my name. I did not start the claim.*
- My identity was stolen and sold to someone in another state.*
- Someone claimed unemployment on my account and I was ordered to pay it back after I reported the fraud.*

Question #2

If you were denied Unemployment Benefits how long did it take to resolve the issue? (data reflects 21% of total respondents)

- It is not resolved **69%**
- Less than seven days **21%**
- Six to nine months **15%**

- Three to six months **8%**
- One to four weeks **8%**

Question #3

If someone applied for COVID-related loans/credit lines (Examples: a PPP Loan or Small Business Administration EID Loan) with your identity information; or, if you gave a criminal your personal information or payment card information as part of a phishing or other scam, how long did it take to resolve the issue? (38% of total respondents)

- It is not resolved **75%**
- Less than seven days **38%**
- One to four weeks **13%**

- Three to six months **8%**
- Six to nine months **4%**



Question #4

If you gave a criminal your personal information or payment card information, how long did it take to resolve the issue?

(27% of total respondents)

- It is not resolved **82%**
- Less than seven days **27%**
- Three to six months **12%**
- One to four weeks **6%**

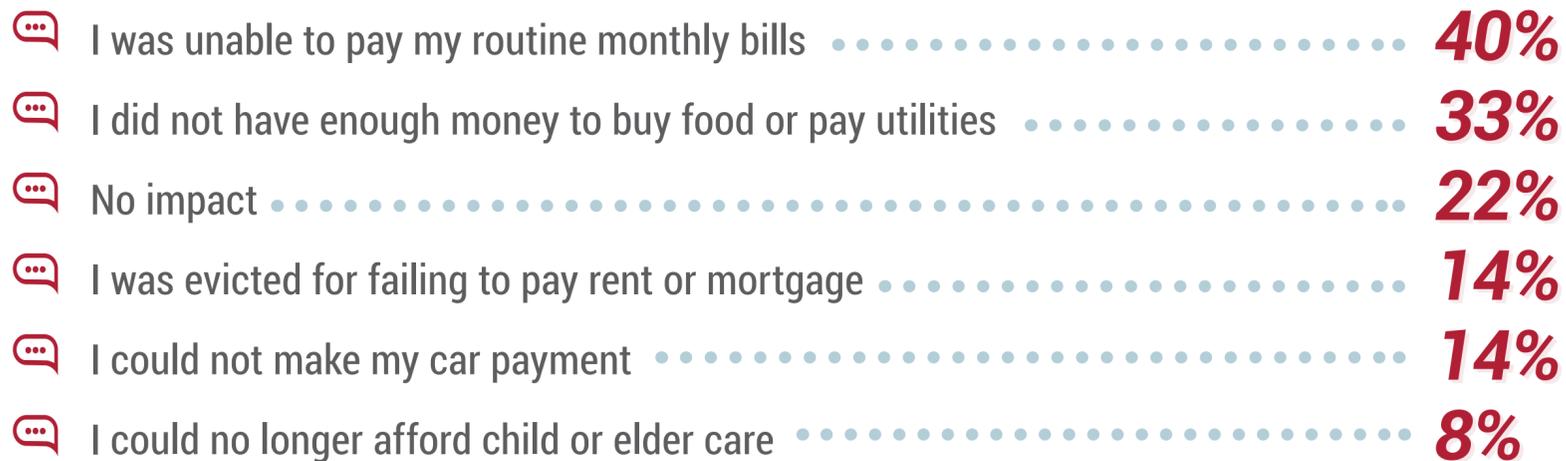


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Question #5

What financial impact did these COVID-19 related identity issues have on you?



Victim Comments:

I was unable to sign up for an unemployment account.

I couldn't pay bills, created significant debt, didn't have enough money to meet our needs and STILL am struggling since I got in debt so badly and can't get any of the stimulus payments to help!

My credit is screwed up and it was very stressful.

I am homeless and it devastated my life.

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Victims Speakout!
COVID-19 related identity issues

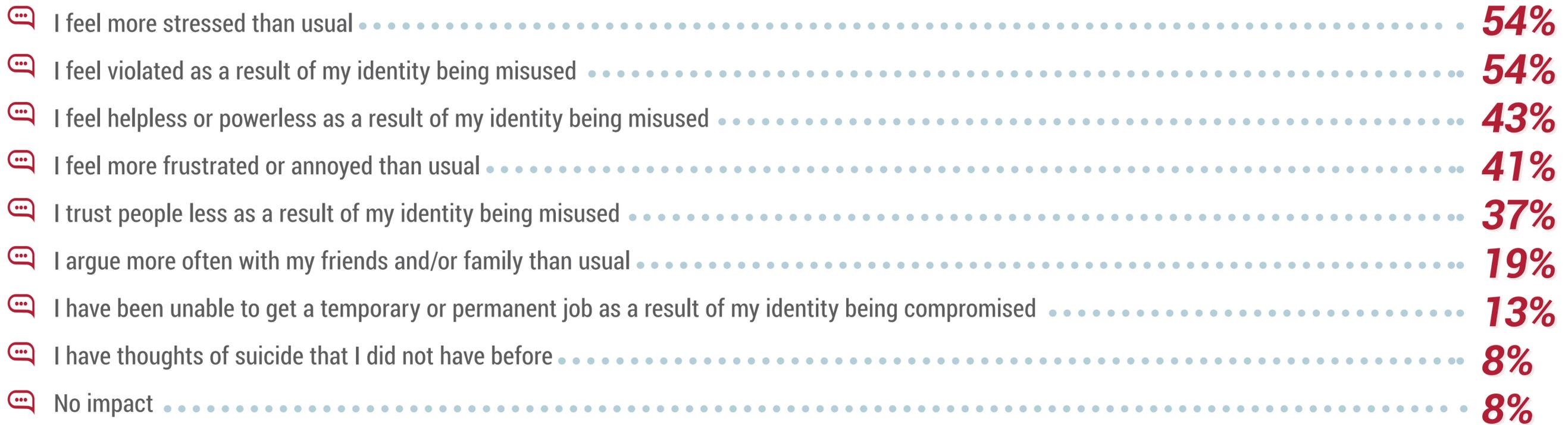
I owe the IRS money now.

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Question #6

What non-financial impacts did these COVID-19 related identity issues have on you?



Victim Comments:



I've always been poor, but this entire year long problem has made my life a living nightmare!

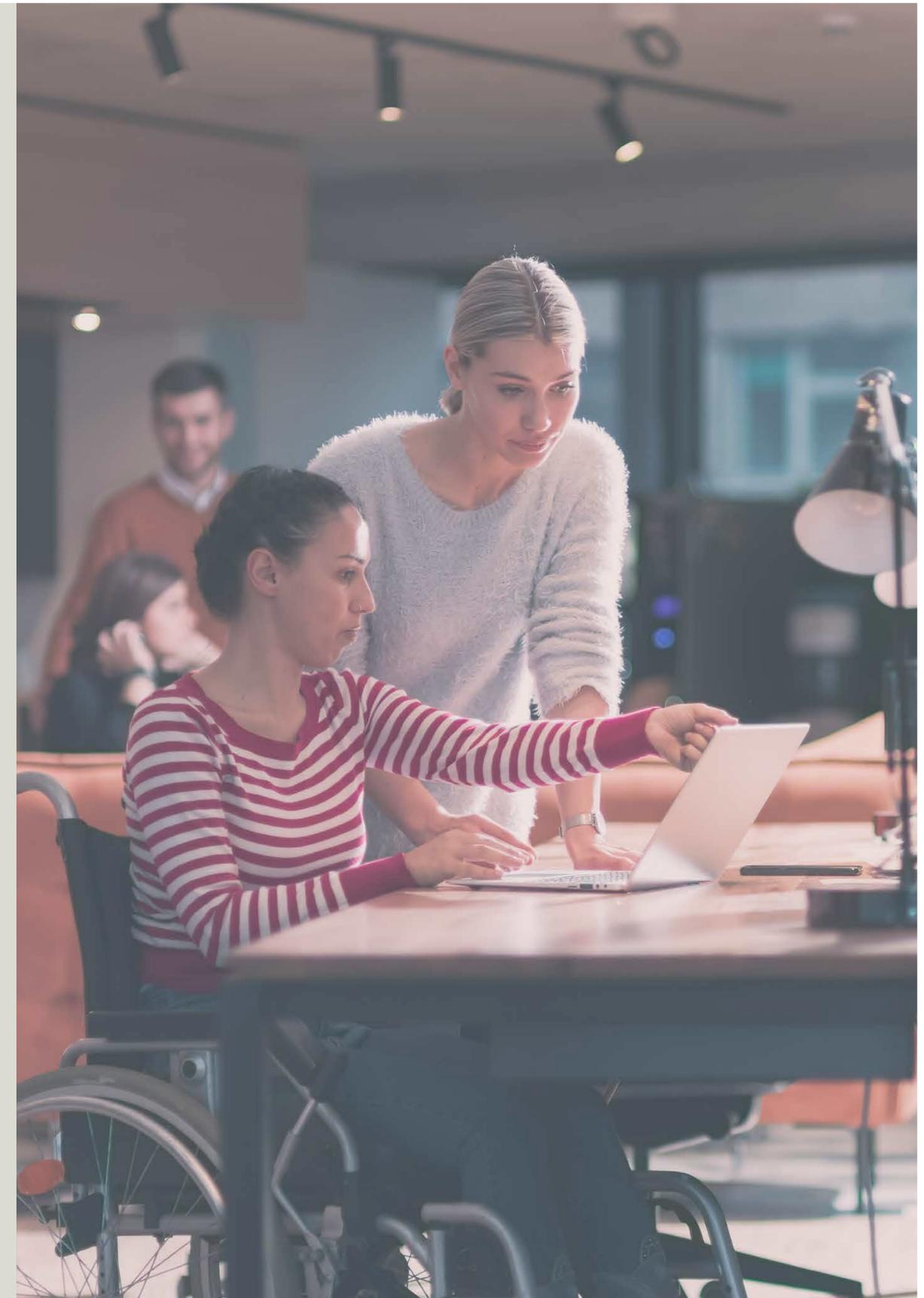


I am ready to give up all together



Impacts of Pre-Pandemic Identity Crimes

The following pages are the **TOP RESPONSES** to select questions from 362 identity crime victims. For complete responses, please visit idtheftcenter.org.



Victims of identity crimes were asked...



How did you discover you were a victim of an identity crime?

- 41% I noticed fraudulent charges on my account
- 42% I checked my credit report
- 36% I received a bill that I did not owe



Victims of identity crimes were asked...

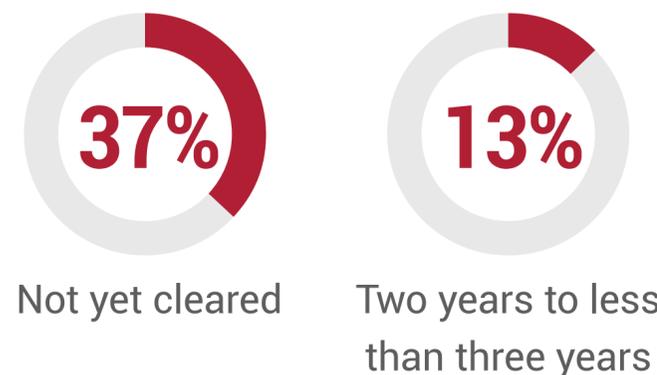


What was the amount of time between the incident and when you found out about it?

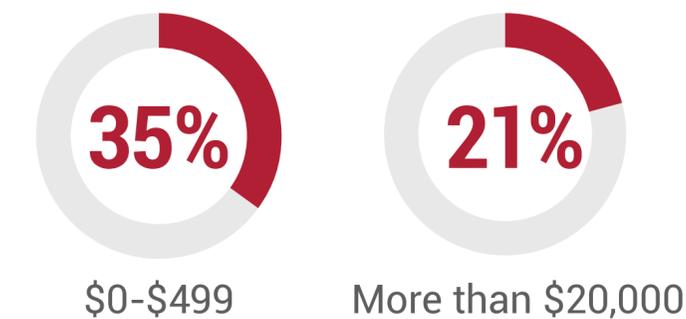
- 21% One day or less (1-24 hours)
- 16% More than a day, but less than a week (25 hours-6 days)
- 16% One year to less than two years



How long have you spent dealing with this incident?



What is the approximate total dollar value stolen from you by the identity criminal?





YES

Have you had any other more recent instances of identity theft, separate from this case?

27%

YES

Have you ever been a victim of identity theft prior to this incident?

29%

YES

Did you report this separate incident to the ITRC?

50%

Victims reported experiencing the following:



Financial-related identity problems **32%**



Government credential-related identity problems **29%**



Crime-related identity problems **10%**



Medical-related identity problems **8%**

Victims reported the impact as:

Debt collectors or collections departments contacted me (or continue to contact me) **100%**

I was turned down for credit or loans **83%**

I was unable to rent an apartment or find housing **83%**

A state-issued driver's license was obtained in my name **57%**

The thief committed a crime and gave my information to law enforcement **57%**

A warrant was issued for my arrest for a crime the thief committed **57%**

A medical provider, billing department, or collection agency contacted or billed me for medical services I never received **43%**

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40%

victims said that NEW ACCOUNTS were opened in their name. Of those,

63%

said the accounts opened were credit cards.

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Percent of victims claiming unauthorized charges or transactions made on any existing accounts:

0% 43% 100%

Of those:

29%

were credit card charges

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35%

Victims stated unauthorized activity on existing accounts caused them to switch to a different bank or credit union

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Victims of identity crimes were asked...



Did your identity theft incident lead you to have any adverse feelings or emotions?

79%
Said YES!

- 84%** Worried or anxious
- 76%** Angry
- 76%** Violated
- 10%** Feeling suicidal¹

¹ This represents the highest level of responses indicating suicidal feelings recorded by the ITRC since 2003.



Victims of identity crimes were asked...



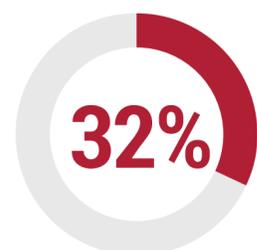
What actions do you CURRENTLY take to minimize your risk of another incident of identity theft?

- 84%** I check my credit reports regularly
- 77%** I delete scam emails and text messages without answering them
- 71%** I use numbers and letters in my online passwords and make them at least eight characters long²
- 71%** I am careful not to put personal information on my social networking profiles
- 68%** I have a security or credit freeze on my credit reports

² The latest recommendation for passwords is 12+ characters



If identity theft made it difficult for you to cover the cost of a need, how did you meet the need?



I went without



I borrowed money from family or friends

Did this incident lead to any employment problems?



I had problems with my boss



I had problems with my coworkers





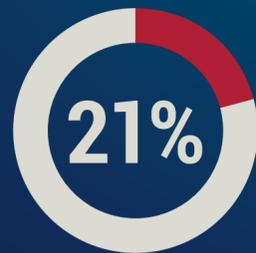
Victims reported that their identity crime incident lead to problems with family members.



Claimed they got into more arguments



Victims reported that their identity crime incident lead to problems with friends.



Claimed they didn't receive support from them



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Acknowledgements

This report was created based on responses from identity theft victims obtained using tools from Development Services Group, Qualtrics, and MailChimp.

Consumer & Business Resources

For more information about the free services and education opportunities for consumers as well as fee-based services for businesses, visit idtheftcenter.org or by email.

✉ communications@idtheftcenter.org



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