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Meth and ID theft: The law enforcement side

By Andrew Peterson
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Criminals and law enforcers have always been locked in a struggle of one-upmanship, with criminals usually enjoying the tradition advantage of having the initiative.

Nowhere is this more true than in the methamphetamine-fueled underworld that encompasses the depth and breadth of San Diego. Fortunately for law abiding San Diegans, Damon Mosler, who runs the county district attorney's narcotics unit, is a quick study.

"I've been doing drug cases for quite a few years," Mosler said. "We're always looking at trying to keep people aware of what's going on in our county ... and we all intuitively felt that there was a link between fraudulent [ID] crime and meth. But it wasn't until we decided that we would look into it more seriously, which was in June of last year, and I started talking to law enforcement and did a lot of peer work surveys, and I was amazed at the response I got ... almost all the narcotics officers said yes, in every narcotics case they had they saw some form of identity or fraudulent paper crimes."

Private financial data is currency for meth users. Cops on a narcotics raid are as likely to find document caches today as they are drug caches.

"The amount of fraudulent documents is so voluminous that [police] have no choice but to follow through and do the investigation on that," Mosler said. "If you walk into a room with 50 pieces of mail, that's 50 people you have to contact."

The criminal profile for meth-driven ID theft varies widely. At one end of the continuum are addicts living hand-to-mouth.

"A lot of times they're staying at cheap motels or staying at apartments where there's multiple people," Mosler said. "And they're

stealing just to exist."

More successful practitioners live, according to Mosler, "in nice houses, drive nice cars ... if you have some brains and you haven't fried 'em on drugs you can do pretty well with this business."

Would-be victims, rich or poor, must guard against both types of criminal. If you live in a house, get a lockable mailbox.

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"If you live in a big [apartment] complex, get a PO box if you can," Mosler urged. "Because that's much safer than those big banks of mailboxes."

As for the more affluent, Mosler can see their condos from his downtown office: "I'm sure they have mailboxes that can be rifled through, and they have a drop area where people leave their mail to be picked up ... Anybody can walk in and grab that."

The amounts of money that can be made are an irresistible lure, he said.

"I have one case where this guy's been living this way for several years, and managed to live a \$50,000-a-year lifestyle for several years off his identify theft activity," Mosler said. "He kept stealing and he kept moving on. You get one ID,

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you use it for a couple weeks, you go to the next one, go to the next one, you open accounts, you steal checks, you dummy them up and pass them."

Businesses working with law enforcement play a crucial role. Mosler defended the practice of moving drugs like Sudafed behind pharmacy counters.

"It slows people down," he emphasized. "It makes it more expensive to actually do it ... somebody can be tracked down a little easier, if they start to be investigated."

He praised retailers like Target for their surveillance programs.

"You see three people come in from

the same car, walk in and buy pills and leave, what do you think they're doing? There's a nickname for it called SMRFing - they're gathering up all these pills to make methamphetamine."

Perhaps the most intriguing meth-ID theft development Mosler has seen is one in which thieves use meth sales as something akin to a booster rocket, which is ultimately jettisoned once the more profitable realms of pure ID fraud are reached.

"Some of the higher-level dealers have gotten out of dealing, and gotten into just taking paper," he said. "And buying paper from people ... buying identify information. And then generating computer fraud and identify fraud on computers."

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