

Do You Know the Identity Theft Risks on Social Networking Sites?

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Social networking has become a mainstay in the everyday lives of many consumers, with over 800 million people reportedly using Facebook on a monthly basis. The risks of privacy intrusions and identity theft, however, may not always be apparent to social networkers. At the Identity Theft Resource Center, we have become concerned about a correlation between identity theft and Facebook use. Recently the ITRC conducted a [survey](#) to measure Facebook users' understanding of the possible risks and threats.

The survey was conducted over 45 days and had nearly 450 participants. The findings confirmed the results of other studies measuring similar issues. They indicate a significant lack of understanding about Facebook privacy settings on the part of users. For example, 14 percent of respondents did not know what their privacy settings were on Facebook, and 16 percent did not have their profiles set to "private." This is not surprising considering the frequent changes that Facebook has made to the privacy settings it offers. The ITRC was pleased that more than two-thirds of respondents were concerned about their Facebook accounts being taken over by imposters, which indicates that many users are at least aware of this risk. This awareness was driven largely by news coverage of the issue, which leads us to believe that the news media may be a most efficient way to educate the public about social networking and other internet safety issues.

While few survey respondents said that their full addresses were in their Facebook profiles (only four percent), most had their full names in their profiles, 60 percent had family members' names, and 33 percent identified their employers in their profiles – all information that can give identity thieves a good start in impersonating people. We also wanted to know how often consumers had been a target of what we call "identity threats" such as someone on Facebook asking them to visit a scam website, having spam posted on their profile page, and similar events. A large number of respondents said they had been targets, indicating that these threats may be widespread. One of the main goals of the survey was to measure the correlation between identity theft and Facebook use. Though very few of those surveyed said that they had actually suffered harm as a result of an identity threat on Facebook, the fact that previous studies have shown that most identity theft victims are unable to determine where their information was compromised leads us to be skeptical of these results.

The ITRC survey provided insight into something that many security experts just assume; that Facebook can be a risk to user's privacy and a great trolling ground of identity thieves. With millions of regular Facebook users, even 5% of that population presents a large, attractive target for those looking to victimize consumers. The survey findings reinforce the ITRC's resolve to educate social networkers about the risks and how to protect themselves when using these platforms.

About the ITRC

The Identity Theft Resource Center® (ITRC) is a non-profit organization established to support victims of identity theft in resolving their cases, and to broaden public education and awareness in the understanding of identity theft. Visit www.idtheftcenter.org. Victims may contact the ITRC at 888-400-5530.