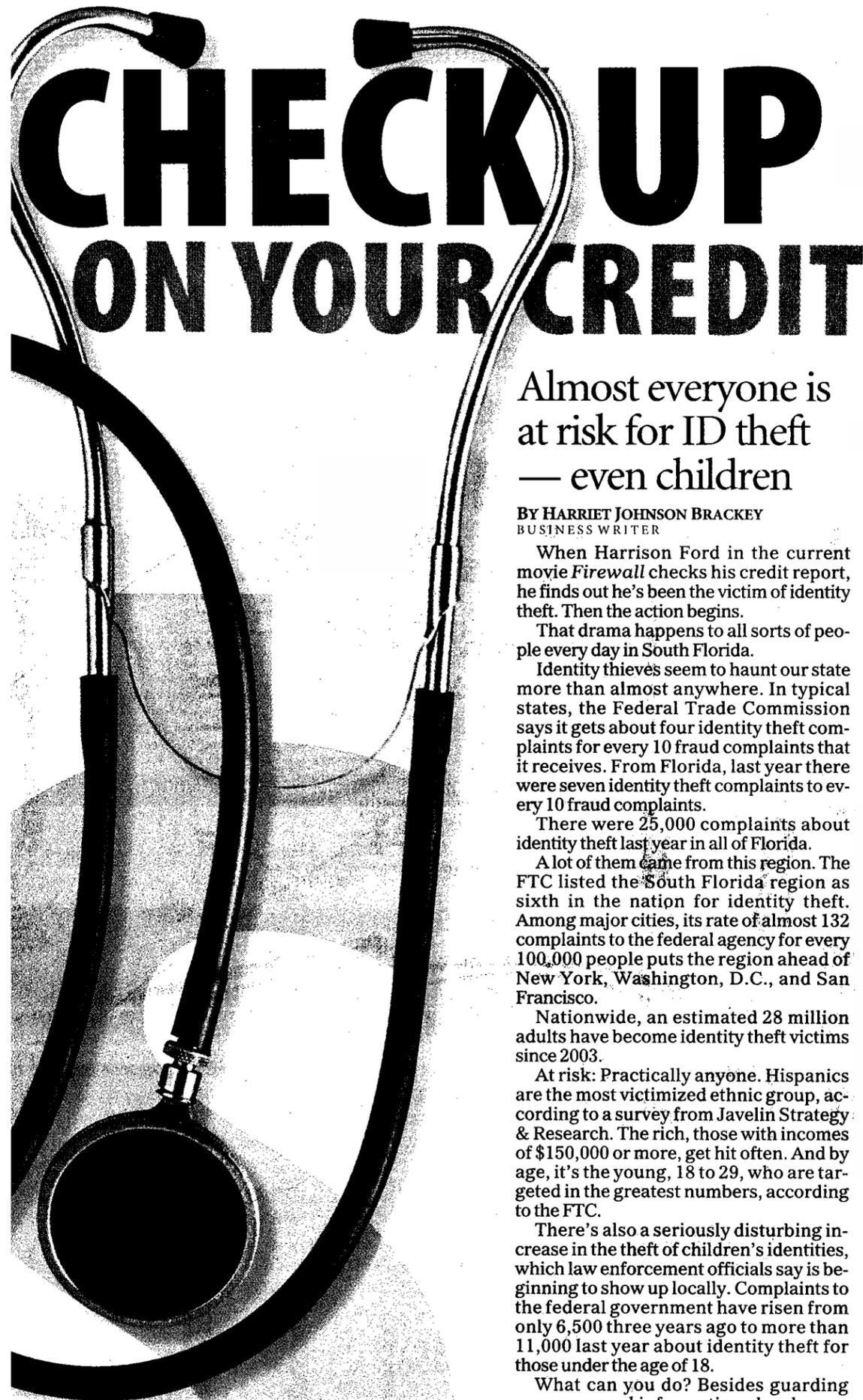


# Business & Technology

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# CHECK UP ON YOUR CREDIT

## Almost everyone is at risk for ID theft — even children

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When Harrison Ford in the current movie *Firewall* checks his credit report, he finds out he's been the victim of identity theft. Then the action begins.

That drama happens to all sorts of people every day in South Florida.

Identity thieves seem to haunt our state more than almost anywhere. In typical states, the Federal Trade Commission says it gets about four identity theft complaints for every 10 fraud complaints that it receives. From Florida, last year there were seven identity theft complaints to every 10 fraud complaints.

There were 25,000 complaints about identity theft last year in all of Florida.

A lot of them came from this region. The FTC listed the South Florida region as sixth in the nation for identity theft. Among major cities, its rate of almost 132 complaints to the federal agency for every 100,000 people puts the region ahead of New York, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco.

Nationwide, an estimated 28 million adults have become identity theft victims since 2003.

At risk: Practically anyone. Hispanics are the most victimized ethnic group, according to a survey from Javelin Strategy & Research. The rich, those with incomes of \$150,000 or more, get hit often. And by age, it's the young, 18 to 29, who are targeted in the greatest numbers, according to the FTC.

There's also a seriously disturbing increase in the theft of children's identities, which law enforcement officials say is beginning to show up locally. Complaints to the federal government have risen from only 6,500 three years ago to more than 11,000 last year about identity theft for those under the age of 18.

What can you do? Besides guarding your personal information closely, you should regularly check your financial records to see what's on them.

"I think personally one of the most important things a consumer can do to minimize the risk of identity theft is to look at your credit report. You can see clearly whether there are accounts on there that may not be yours," said Cindy Liebes, assistant regional director in the FTC's Southeast Region office in Atlanta.

It's not difficult to follow her advice. You can check your report once a year for free or pay a small sum to see it more often. Here's a guide to finding and reading credit reports.

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## UNDERSTANDING YOUR CREDIT REPORT

### Personal Information

The following information is reported to us by you, your lender, or other sources. It may vary from your credit file, which may result in variations of your name with additional information may appear. As a security precaution, we have masked your Social Security Number. The Geographical Code shown with each address identifies the area associated with each address.

Names:  
JOHN Q CONSUMER  
JONATHAN Q CONSUMER  
J Q CONSUMER

Social Security number variations:  
999999999

Year of birth:  
1954

Employers:  
ABCDE ENGINEERING CORP

Telephone numbers:  
(555) 555 5555 Residence

①

### Accounts in Good Standing

**AUTOMOBILE AUTO FINANCE**

Address: 100 MAIN ST E  
SMALLTOWN, MD 90001  
(555) 555-5555

Status: Open/Never late.

Date Opened: 01/2000  
Reported Since: 01/2000  
Date of Status: 08/2001

Type: Installment  
Terms: 65 Months  
Monthly Payment: \$210  
Responsibility: Individual

②

### Requests Viewed By Others

We make your credit history available to other creditors. Some of these requests may be made available to companies who have requested your credit information.

The section below lists all who have requested your credit information for the purpose of completing a credit application or the purpose of evaluating your creditworthiness.

**HOMESALE REALTY CO**

Address: 2000 S MAINROAD BLVD STE  
ANYTOWN CA 11111  
(555) 555-5555

Comments:  
Real-estate loan on behalf of 1000 COPELAND

**ABC BANK**

Address:

③

### Public Records

Credit grantors may carefully review the information connected with some public records, such as bankruptcies, judgments, and liens.

**MAIN COUNTY CLERK**

Address: 123 MAINTOWN S  
BUFFALO, NY 10000

Status: Civil claim paid.

Date Filed: 10/15/2000  
Date Resolved: 01/04/2001

Claim Amount: \$200  
Liability Amount: NA

Responsibility: INDIVIDUAL

④

A credit report, such as this example from Experian, is divided into four parts: personal information, credit history, inquiries and public records.

① **Personal information** will include your name, address, date of birth, recent addresses, current and previous employers.

② **A credit history** displays the accounts you have either in your name or on which you are an authorized user. For each account, there will be a date when it was opened, the credit limit, your balance and your payment history. That shows whether you sent the payment in on time or late, as well as whether the account is delinquent or has been dispatched to a debt collector. If you close an account, the closing date will appear. Account details are reported by your creditors.

③ **Inquiries** are noted when a lender, service provider, employer, landlord or insurer checks your credit. Inquiries also can include credit grantors who have the right under federal law to inquire about your credit information without your consent. Government agencies, too, can look at parts of your report.

④ **Public records** could be bankruptcies, judgments against you or liens on your property. In some states, they also include overdue child support.

With hundreds of millions of credit histories on file, the credit bureaus do make errors. If you find one on your report, check the procedure the credit bureau uses to handle disputes. Often, these issues can be resolved quickly by using the bureau's Web site to report the error.

If you can't resolve an issue, you can add a statement to your report explaining your position. This statement will remain on your record for seven years.

What's not on a credit report: your credit score, information about your checking and savings accounts, medical records or arrest records.

Negative items eventually must disappear from your report. By federal law, bankruptcies appear for only 10 years, unpaid tax liens for up to 15 years and bad debts for seven. Public records, too, appear for seven years while inquiries remain on reports for two years.

## HOW TO GET YOUR REPORT

Once a year, you have the right to a free copy of your credit report. You also can get a free copy if you are unemployed or have been denied credit. In those circumstances, contact your credit bureau.

If you need a report more often than once a year, expect to pay a modest fee for it. Usually, they run from about \$6 to \$10.

Credit bureaus will often try to sell you more than a simple report. They offer credit monitoring, they sell credit scores and they have services designed to protect you against identity theft, for a wide range of prices.

**Equifax**  
800-685-1111  
[equifax.com](http://equifax.com)

**Experian**  
888-397-3742  
[experian.com](http://experian.com)

**TransUnion**  
800-888-4213  
[transunion.com](http://transunion.com)

For free yearly credit reports, go to: [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com) or call 877-322-8228