

Hurricane Katrina Has Greatly Elevated the Risk of Identity Theft

(BOSTON, Mass. -- Sept. 14, 2005 -- IDTheftSecurity.com) Phishers are already preying on its victims. Courthouses and other buildings housing individuals' public documents no longer stand, and paper is everywhere. Social Security cards, birth certificates, and other identifying documents are floating in the floodwaters. The circumstances, warns an expert on the issue, are ripe for identity theft and call for a renewed wake-up call on fraud.

"Identity thieves couldn't ask for a better opportunity," said Robert Siciliano, a nationally televised identity theft and personal security expert. "Many victims lack identification, yet it goes without saying we must help them. Thieves know this and will exploit the situation."

Siciliano is author of "The Safety Minute: 01" and an upcoming book, "Identity Theft Pandemic: Curing the Identity Theft Virus." He appeared on CNBC's "The Closing Bell" shortly after high-profile data breaches highlighted the problem of identity theft earlier this year.

MyPublicInfo, an identity management company, provides the Public Information Profile (PIP), a tool that can be very useful in tracing the public "threads" that run through our lives. Citizens can use their PIP to see their public records and make sure their identities are in order. Anyone can obtain a PIP by visiting Siciliano's Web site, <http://www.idtheftsecurity.com>, and clicking on the "MyPublicInfo" logo.

On Sept. 6, an *Associated Press* report by Jennifer Kerr focused on the pervasiveness of floating debris that litters the Hurricane-afflicted region. Much of this debris displays personal, financial, and other identifying information. A Sept. 9 story that ran in *All Headline News* reinforced the reality that victims of this hurricane are now highly susceptible to identity theft and fraud.

"We've heard on the news that the Gulf Coast has been through two disasters in just two weeks," said Siciliano. "First, the storm hit. Then, we all witnessed a painfully slow response to the unfolding danger in New Orleans. Let's make sure we stop a third disaster, the possible flood of identity theft in Hurricane Katrina's wake, before it strikes us out."

A PIP helps in two ways. Anyone who obtains one can view public records connected to his or her name and also see information accessible to other people performing background checks.

"An event like Hurricane Katrina brings with it numerous challenges, as we have all seen," said Dr. Harold Kraft, CEO of MyPublicInfo. "One of these, daunting as it is, will be the retrieval of public records. Anyone hit by this disaster needs to consider jumpstarting the process of verifying his or her identity."

“It’s just as important as finding shelter,” said Siciliano. “Public records, personal financial information, and other important documents are strewn, for everyone to see, across an area the size of Great Britain. There’s no telling how many of Katrina evacuees will find that their identities have been compromised by thieves.”

Those who have tried to help with their money are also encountering scams. A Sept. 8 *New York Times* article by Tom Zeller Jr. explored the wide variety of online con jobs masquerading as legitimate hurricane relief sites. Many sprouted almost immediately following the disaster.

“The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina is starting to look a lot like what happened after the Tsunami earlier this year,” Siciliano concluded. “It’s a shame that we have to think about thieves at times like these. It’s also the reality.”

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Siciliano provides consumer education solutions to Fortune 500 companies and their clients. He has been featured on CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, "ABC News with Sam Donaldson," "The Montel Williams Show," "Maury Povich," "Sally Jesse Raphael" and "The Howard Stern Show." Siciliano also leads personal safety and security seminars nationwide.

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