

# Identity fraud in Gauteng is increasing

Identity theft and business fraud in Gauteng have increased dramatically with the number of cases under investigation more than doubling between 2012 and 2013, according to private investigations company, Justicia Investigations.



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Conrad van der Merwe, director at Justica, said they had investigated no cases of identity theft during 2012. This year, Justica was taking on between two and three new cases every month - a figure that they expect to continue to grow. One of these investigations led to the arrest of a key member of a syndicate in October.

The syndicate used a 'disabled' woman in a wheelchair as bait. She asked passers-by to help out by pushing her a few blocks in the Johannesburg CBD to the flat where she allegedly lived. "When the female victim pushed the 'disabled' lady to the identified block of flats, this good samaritan was violently assaulted by the same 'disabled' lady and two male accomplices and robbed of her handbag, wallet, cell phone and whatever shopping she had done before the incident," he explained.

## ID blacklisted

"To add insult to injury, the syndicate then took over her identity and whole life. They used the victim's ID to open fraudulent bank accounts, rent a flat and open clothing accounts at retailers. As a result, the victim had to try to explain to SAPS investigators that she was not the fraudster they were looking for in connection with several cases. She also had to explain to all the stores where accounts were opened that she was not responsible for opening them," he said.

The end result was that her ID number was blacklisted as fraudulent, making it impossible for her to open an account, get credit or sign a lease. "They effectively destroyed her identity and her life - all because she was kind enough to help a seemingly disabled woman," he said.

It did not stop there. According to Van der Merwe, members of the syndicate informed a large marketing company of a change in the banking details of one of their business partners. The new account was the fraudulent account that they had

opened using the victim's ID number. As the fake bank letters looked genuine to the accountant, she changed the banking details on the payment system. At month end, an electronic payment of more than R600,000 was made into the fraudulent account.

## **No payment received**

"A few weeks later, the accountant received a statement indicating that no payment had been received. When she sent through proof of payment, she was horrified to discover that she had paid R600,000 into the wrong account. The bank confirmed that the entire R600,000 had been withdrawn at their Musina branch. This was a crippling blow to the company as they now had to repay the bill and write off R600,000," he explained.

Van der Merwe said the arrested syndicate member was found in possession of another six stolen RSA identity documents, four of them with her picture already installed professionally. Further investigation by Justicia revealed that the suspect was a female Zimbabwean national with no passport, no work permit and no legitimate identity document, making a living out of impersonating her victims and abusing their identities.

## **Guard documents**

The suspect had been charged and had appeared in court during October. She was deemed a flight risk and denied bail. The case will return to court in November. Although a proportion of the criminals that are stealing ID documents and using these to commit fraud are South African, the bulk of the 'specialists' are mainly Nigerians and Zimbabweans.

In light of this, he appealed to South Africans to guard their ID documents and not to give out their ID numbers without checking that those requesting it were trustworthy. He also encouraged people not to carry ID books in purses or handbags and never to leave important documents in their cars. "Justicia also wants to appeal to all accounting staff of firms not to just accept notice of a change in the banking details of clients without contacting the company in question on a landline (not cell phone) to verify that this is actually happening," Van der Merwe warned.

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