

Identity theft rises as economy tanks

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SAN MATEO – A married couple charged with bilking unsuspecting diners and a man whose counterfeit check led to a violent confrontation with police are the latest in a rising tide of identity theft cases, San Mateo County prosecutors say.

“With the economy moving the way it is, we’re seeing more embezzlement, more identity theft,” said Chief Deputy District Attorney Steve Wagstaffe.

While prosecutors haven’t tallied the rise, “it’s certainly a noticeable increase,” Wagstaffe said.

Identity theft is the fastest growing crime in America, according to a 2008 report by the Federal Trade Commission. Statistics from the FTC reveal that 44,000 Californians were victims of identity theft in 2007. The state had the second-highest number of victims per capita, following only Arizona.

On Monday, a preliminary hearing will be held in San Mateo Superior Court for Harold James Cook, 55, of Hayward. Prosecutors say that when Cook tried to pass a counterfeit traveler’s check at a Redwood City Starbucks on Feb. 18, police arrived and blocked the door. Cook allegedly pushed the officer, who ordered his police dog to intervene as the two struggled. Prosecutors say Cook punched the officer, then punched the dog, named “Bohdan.”

Customers rushed to the officer’s aid and subdued Cook, Wagstaffe said. Investigators later determined the phony check was part of a larger counterfeiting ring that had cost American Express \$1 million in losses, according to prosecutors. Cook, who faces charges of passing a fictitious check, assaulting a police officer, assaulting a police dog, and several counts of forgery, could face 5½ years in prison if convicted. The warehouse worker is being held on \$50,000 bail and has pleaded not guilty. The officer and dog were not seriously injured.

South San Francisco couple Atin and Iris Singh will face a preliminary hearing March 11 that could send them away for a decade. Prosecutors say Atin Singh, 23, who managed a Burlingame restaurant, stole customer credit card numbers using a skimming device. He then took the stolen information to Safeway in South San Francisco, where his 27-year-old wife worked at the deli counter. The couple allegedly purchased more than \$80,000 in gift cards and other items from March 2008 to January. Prosecutors still don’t know the number of possible victims, Wagstaffe said.

Atin Singh was on probation for a 2007 misdemeanor theft conviction at the time of his arrest. His wife did not have a criminal record, Wagstaffe said. The couple denies wrongdoing.

Tips to protect yourself from identity theft

- Order a copy of your credit report each year from one of the national credit bureaus and review it

closely for any questionable entries.

- • Shred or cut up all credit card receipts and old bank statements and bills before throwing them away.
- • Close all unused credit card or bank accounts.
- • Remove your name from mailing lists for pre-approved credit lines and telemarketers.
- • Contact your creditor or service provider if you notice odd charges or if expected bills don't arrive.
- • Update your computer virus software, use a secure browser and install a firewall program.
- • Do not give out personal information via the phone, mail or Internet unless you initiated contact.
- • Do not carry your Social Security number or any PIN numbers or passwords in your purse or wallet.
- • Do not print your Social Security number on your checks or other identifiers.

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation

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