

What is Ghosting?



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By Betsy L. Ehrenberg

It may not be what you envisioned, but apparently there can be life after death. It's called "ghosting," and it's both scary and surprising.

Ghosting is a form of identity theft. It occurs when someone uses the personal information of a dead person, often for monetary gain. A savvy criminal can take over bank accounts, apply for new credit cards, and even file for fraudulent tax refunds. Ghosting often happens shortly after someone dies, before the death is widely known. That's because it can be months after a person dies before entities like credit reporting agencies, the Social Security Administration, and the IRS receive, share or register death records.

Some 2.5 million identities are stolen each year; over 320,000 thefts or about 13% are from deceased individuals. And you need only look in the obituary section of your local newspaper to see where identity thieves find the information they need. There, they can obtain a potential victim's full name, maiden name, date of birth, place of birth, place of residence at death, mother's maiden name, and even where the victim went to school and was employed.

With that information, it's often not difficult to track down additional information online, such as the deceased's home address. And given the number of data breaches involving Social Security numbers, it's possible an identity thief could track that number down, as well, perhaps purchasing it from another criminal.

Criminals can often get away with ghosting because no one may be aware anything fraudulent is going on. The deceased can't check their credit reports for unfamiliar activity and credit protection services are discontinued as of date of death.

How can you help protect your family from ghosting? These tips may help:

- Limit the amount of personal information you share about the deceased in newspaper and online obituaries.
- Notify the Social Security Administration of the death. In most cases, this is handled by the funeral home handling the arrangements.
- Send the IRS a copy of the death certificate so that the agency can note that the person is deceased. The death certificate may be sent to the IRS office where the deceased would normally file a tax return; however, there are two IRS office locations for every state depending on whether the person owed money or not.
- Send copies of the death certificate to each credit reporting agency asking them to put a "deceased alert" on the deceased's credit report.
- Review the deceased's credit report for questionable credit card activity.

Losing a loved one is difficult enough. By taking a few simple steps after a family member's death, you can help by locking their accounts and removing their name from a number of sites. You will protect their identity and, in doing so, help protect the family from further emotional suffering.

For a complete package of estate protection services, please contact Legacy Concierge at sales@legacy-concierge.com today.



About the Author

Betsy Ehrenberg is a business leader and innovator in the tech industry. She has successfully started, built and sold two software companies. Her first Silicon Valley venture was Operations Control Systems, a software company providing performance and security services to Fortune 50 companies, later sold to Cisco Systems, Inc. In 2003, she founded Veriden, providing biometric identification to secure financial transactions in the payment processing space. In addition to her business acumen for software companies, she has also and founded two non-profits providing art business education.