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Identity theft skyrockets by 400% in South Africa

South Africa sees a 400% surge in identity theft cases, leaving victims struggling to reclaim their lives.



Picture: iStock

Identity theft cases are on the rise in the country, leaving victims in limbo with no paperwork to identify themselves.

One of the victims is Zabe Shingange from Nkowankowa in Tzaneen, Limpopo, who said her life was put on hold for five years after her identity document (ID) was stolen.

Shingange said her ID went missing after she booked into a hotel in Boksburg north, Gauteng in 2007.

Identity theft victim

“I lost my ID when I was in Gauteng for an interview with one of the biggest pharmaceutical companies. I couldn’t find it after I left the hotel for a walk and then I reported it stolen. My interview was successful and I began working,” Shingange said.

Her ID was blocked due to the ongoing investigation by police and the department of home affairs.

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Shingange was fired six months later after she could not provide a valid ID to her employers.

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“During that long investigation, I was like a dead person because I could not do anything without documentation. I was blacklisted because the person who stole my identity bought things and failed to pay,” she said.

“The theft of my identity will continue to affect me as long as I am alive. I think the police and the department of home affairs are not doing enough to fight this kind of crime.”

Shingange said the problem was finally resolved in 2011, when she was issued with a new ID.

ID issued in 2011

The latest figures from the Southern African Fraud Prevention Service (SAFPS) showed a 400% surge in identity theft fraud from April 2023 to April 2024, while from April 2022 to April 2023, it increased by 356%.

SAFPS head of product development Nazia Karrim said the police did not treat identity theft cases as a priority crime because they focussed on more serious cases instead of investigating single incidents of identity theft.

“If they can group the cases and investigate them at the same time that will assist. I believe that our police have the necessary skills,” Karrim said.

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“My advice is that people should report these cases as soon as they happen, to be on the safe side. Technology is contributing to the growth of this kind of crime, so we must lock our devices such as phones and laptops so that our information will be protected.

“We also need to create awareness of identity theft preventative measures.”

Another victim is Elsie Mgwenya, from Bushbuckridge in Mpumalanga, who said her life became difficult eight years ago when her ID book was used in a fraudulent marriage to a Pakistani national.

ID used in fraudulent marriage

“I found out about this marriage at the department of home affairs offices when I was applying for my baby’s birth certificate. They told me that I was married to a man called Muhammad in 2004,” Mgwenya said.

“I tried to convince them that I didn’t know how that happened but they did not listen. They promised to investigate the matter but nothing happened.”

“I kept on going to the home affairs offices in Hazyview but they did not assist me. Last year, I phoned the home affairs head office in Pretoria and requested copies of my ID and the supporting documents but they also failed to help.

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“I am worried that my child does not have a birth certificate as I refused to register him with the Muhammad surname. I can’t even get married to the man that I love because of this fake marriage,” she said.

The Public Servants Association of South Africa (PSA) called on authorities to prioritise identity theft cases as many of their members were victims of the crime.

“The PSA member who was a victim of this scam was fraudulently declared deceased on 10 September 2023, by the department of home affairs, with a falsified death certificate citing an unnatural cause of death,” the PSA said.

Prioritise identity theft cases – PSA

“It has been uncovered that a sophisticated criminal syndicate orchestrated this fraud, likely intending to claim life insurance policies taken out in the victim’s name.”

Criminologist Willem Els said it was hard to prevent this type of crime. “We need a huge investment to improve the expertise in the police that will focus on dealing with this crime and the other related fraud cases,” Els said.

Prof Witness Maluleke from the department of criminology and criminal justice at the University of Limpopo said: “The police receive less training to investigate ID theft adequately, leaving them to be reactive, rather than proactive. They have limited capacity and systems to effectively respond.”

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