A Data Breach to Rival that of Target Stores'

April 24, 2014 - A quick quiz for you. If you were an identity thief from overseas, how difficult do you think it would be to gain access to a database with the names and Social Security numbers of 200 million Americans? If you answered, "Very difficult," you just failed the quiz. This is precisely what appears to have happened in a case involving a man named Hieu Ngo; a Vietnamese national who has been arrested by the FBI.

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Ngo managed to convince a company by the name of Court Ventures that he was private investigator from Singapore. With that ruse, he was able to get an account with Court Ventures. And since Court Ventures had a data sharing agreement with US Info Search, a company in Columbus, OH, he was able to gain access to their database. That database contains the personally identifiable information - including SSN's - on 200 million American citizens.

Unfortunately, Ngo wasn't a private investigator. Federal prosecutors are accusing him of reselling his account information to 1,300 people over an 18 month period of time. During that time, more than 3 million searches were conducted using Ngo's account. At present, it is not known exactly how extensive the breach was but it is likely that the number of records included in search return results was significantly higher than the actual number of searches that were conducted.

A multistate investigation has begun which includes Illinois, Connecticut, Massachusetts and New York. The investigation is targeting US Info Search and Experian; the owner of Court Ventures since early 2012. Ngo has already confessed to causing the breach. The state investigations are likely to look closely at the conduct of the companies involved and whether or not they followed state and federal laws regarding data breach notification and data security.

byJim Malmberg

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