Tuesday, Aug. 27, 2024 / Hackers probably stole your Social Security number

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Recently Vox’s senior tech correspondent, Adam Clark Estes, got some bad news from his telephone.

TK SCORING IN — World 6 Ice BMC

IPHONE SFX

ADAM CLARK ESTES (*Vox* reporter): I got a I got an alert from my bank, which is Chase . And, the message said your Social Security number has allegedly been compromised. “Allegedly” was a word that I really like held on to is hope that maybe it wasn't true. But then I found out there was a lawsuit about a huge data breach …

*<CLIP> ABC: It comes from what may be the worst data breach ever, one reportedly that has resulted in the theft of the social security numbers of every American…*

ADAM: Couple weeks ago, it was confirmed: me and a few hundred million other Americans got their Social Security numbers stolen.

SEAN: But Adam didn’t just panic. He took action! He protected his information. And on *Today, Explained* he’s gonna teach you how to do the same. And he’s gonna argue, believe it or not this massive data breach is actually a GOOD thing.

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[THEME]

SEAN: *Today, Explained.* Sean Rameswaram. I’ve gotten spammy messages warning me that my information has been stolen. You’ve gotten them, too. Adam Clark Estes recently got one that was real.

ADAM: It's true. We're always getting notified that our data is out there, that we're using a compromised password, and there are so many of these alerts, we kind of stop paying attention to it. Data breaches happen all the time. I've been covering this space for over a decade, and I write about a big data breach maybe once a year. So my first thought was like, ‘Okay, this is another one of those. Every once in a while, they are a big deal. You might remember Equifax, the major credit bureau, was compromised a few years ago, and that led to everybody's information getting out there.

*<CLIP> NBC NEWS: Financial and cyber experts warn the equifax hack has the potential to haunt americans for decades…*

ADAM: But most of the time, it's kind of small time stuff. Your email might get leaked, some personal information, maybe your address. And that might lead to spammers spamming you more because they have your info. Your passwords might get out, and that might mean that, you know, somebody in the Philippines has your Netflix log in, and is watching movies. That happened to me once.

SEAN: <laughs> Really?!

ADAM: It did, yeah

SEAN: What did they watch?

ADAM: Umm … it was … *House of Cards*.   
  
SEAN: <laughs more>   
  
ADAM: It was. It's a, it's still a popular show.

*RING TAP NETFLIX SOUND*

SEAN: Okay, but this wasn't an email or a notification about your Netflix password. This was about your Social Security number. How did your Social Security number and that of hundreds of millions of other people get compromised?

SCORING IN—THE COMMITTEE

ADAM: The short answer is we don't know and we might never know. But for the long answer, I want to zoom out a second and talk about the data brokerage industry. There's a whole industry that buys and sells your data. Sometimes this is data that you voluntarily given up. Sometimes it's data that's been stolen. You can kind of think of it as like, like a market where instead of produce, they're trading your information and sometimes Social Security number. But any in any case, there's lots of data about us floating around all the time, and pretty much anyone can get that data if they have money. Sometimes it's being sold out in the open in legit spaces. Sometimes it's in the dark web. And sometimes it's for nefarious purposes, like spamming you or scamming you. And sometimes it's legitimate purposes, like, if you have a business and you want to sell people background checks, you would need data for that.

SEAN: So so what happened in this case? Do we know?

ADAM: We don't know Exactly what happened. But I can tell you what we do know. And this is based on, what some security researchers have figured out and some details from that lawsuit. So the breach happened due to a company called National Public Data getting hacked. And what we know about National Public Data, it's a small company that sells background checks, and it's run a former sheriff's deputy, actor, and reality TV star named Salvatore Verini.

SCORING STUTTERS OUT OR SOMETHING

*<CLIP> COUNTRY DAZE, 2019:   
BIG MIKE: Hey, what's up Sal.   
SAL: What’s going on, Big Mike?   
BIG MIKE: Nothing much, man. What are you up to? What are you doing? Hey man, I gotta tell you something. I’ve got a video. I’ve got 100 percent proof the earth is flat. You gotta take a look at this.*

SEAN: Sal!

ADAM: Sal.

*<CLIP> COUNTRY DAZE, 2019: Mike is what they call a flat earther. And well they think the earth is actually flat.*

ADAM: It doesn't seem like it's a very sophisticated operation. They happen to get a lot of data, and they weren't protecting it very well. We know now that the password to break into their database was actually hidden in plain text in another website that was also owned by Sal.

SEAN: Hm.

ADAM: So somebody broke in, stole all the data. We first found out about this hack earlier this year when on hacker forums, known cybercriminal called USDOD started talking about a huge database of Social Security numbers.

SEAN: <chuckles> US DOD is a hilarious name for a hacker. <laughs>

*<CLIP> NBC NEWS: USDOD claimed they stole 2.9 billion records of personal data and were trying to sell them for 3.5 million dollars.*

ADAM: But this hacker, they, they couldn't sell it. And eventually somebody got Ahold of it and just posted it in a forum and it's been floating around. But earlier this month, that lawsuit I mentioned was filed. And then National Public Data, I think it was probably, Sal himself, admitted they'd been hacked.

*<CLIP> NBC NEWS: In a statement on their website NPD acknowledged the breach and says, ‘We cooperated with law enforcement and government investigators, and have implemented additional security measures.’*

SEAN: This just sounds like, I don't know, like a *Sopranos* subplot. Some guy named Sal, I'm assuming he's in New Jersey somewhere, somehow compromises 270 million Americans Social Security numbers.

*<CLIP> SOPRANOS:   
GUY: You’re supposed to push Webestics!   
OTHER GUY: Webistics is our pick of the week.*

ADAM: This is, like, supposed to be your most prized personal information. How is this happening? I know you just told us, but how is it not more secure?!

ADAM: Well, it's housed in Florida. First of all.

SEAN: <laughs>

ADAM: But you're right to be kind of Upset or surprised by this. But first of all, Social Security numbers are not a super secure thing. It's literally nine digits. It's a number that you know and you're not supposed to tell other people about unless the right person asks you. And then you have to trust that they're not going to tell anybody else about it. You know, if you put it in a website, they put the little asterisks over it. When you put in the number, that's how you know it's secure.

SEAN: I got a question for you real quick. Real quick, Adam. Um … what's your Social Security number?

ADAM: Uhhh. I almost did it. I almost told you.

SEAN: <laughs>

ADAM: This is the number that we use to prove our identity. And it's not a great system, but it's the system we've got. And sometimes you type it into, legitimate bank website, and they protect that data, and sometimes you type it into something that looks like your bank's website. But in fact, you clicked on a link in a text message or email and you got phished. And now your Social Security number is in the hands of hackers and probably being bought and sold on the dark web.

SEAN: And how big a deal is it if your Social Security number is being bought and sold by hackers on the dark web, how big a deal is this hack?

ADAM: There are two questions there.

SCORING IN—FIELD OPERATIVE

ADAM: One is, how big of a deal is it if your Social Security number is out there? Two, how big of a deal is this hack? If your Social Security number is in the hands of a hacker, it can be a big deal. They can use that to steal your identity, and that can be a real pain in terms of how big of a deal it is. It's huge. I mean, in terms of scale we're talking about. Not just hundreds of millions of people, but nearly 3 billion records were in this database that was stolen. That doesn't mean 3 billion people were impacted. That would be almost half the world's population. But we do know that 272 million Americans’ Social Security numbers are in there, at least. But I asked this question to a lot of data security experts, and what they told me was really interesting. They said it's bad and it's big, but a lot of this info is already out there.

SEAN: Hm!

ADAM: They said a lot of these Social Security numbers actually belong to people that are deceased.

SEAN: Oh!

ADAM: one security researcher I talked to actually found himself in the breach and basically said that all of the information about him was either incorrect or outdated. Nevertheless, it's a lot of information. It's out there and it's not going anywhere.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: The implication here is that this isn't the first time. It won't be the last time. Why does this keep happening, Adam?

ADAM: Data breaches keep happening for a lot of converging reasons. First of all, hackers are good at hacking. They keep getting better. As, as much as we try to protect our information in different ways, they figure it out, and they hack. It's what they do. There's also a ton of data about us floating around online, and there aren't really there aren't really rules for companies, who are trading this data. There aren't rules for them to protect it. There aren't privacy rules for consumers. And the data industry is, largely unregulated.

SEAN: Why is that? I mean, you know, as recently as a few minutes ago, I asked you for your Social Security number. And, of course, it's a crazy thing to ask about. And yet, online, it's just like there's free for all. Why aren't we doing a better job of protecting this information?

SCORING IN—CYBER DEFENSES

ADAM: The internet has historically been lightly regulated or completely unregulated in some spaces. The thinking here is that we have this powerful new communications technology. So if we regulate it, we might limit its potential, namely its business potential.

*<CLIP> CBS SUNDAY MORNING: Written before Facebook or Google were invented Section 230 says in just 26 words that Facebook or Google is not liable for what their users post.*

ADAM: But in the past couple of decades, there's been, an increasingly loud chorus of people that say we need better data privacy laws. You might remember around 2010, Mark Zuckerberg started talking about how was the the end of privacy online, how was no longer a social norm.

*<CLIP> ZUCKERBERG, People have gotten really comfortable sharing more information, different kinds, but with more people. And that social norm has just evolved over time.*

ADAM: And you got roasted for that at the time. But in some ways, he was right. We've been losing privacy online as we've been using the internet more and more. Because there's been nothing to keep companies from gathering data about us and using that in various ways or selling it. There have been a lot of attempts at a comprehensive consumer privacy legislation.

*<CLIP> OBAMA: We’ve identified some basic principles to both protect consumer privacy and make sure industry can keep innovating.*

ADAM: Some states, like California, have their own laws. Europe has historically, been better at protecting its citizens privacy. But in the US, these these bills come up and they never seem to, to make it, to law. So right now, we don't actually have a, national right to data privacy.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Okay. So in the meantime, your information may be out there and it may stay out there, or it may one day soon get out there. It all sounds kind of rough for our information, but you wrote an article for our homepage, vox.com, called ‘The Massive Social Security number breach is actually a good thing,’ which is a very provocative headline. How is this a good thing and, and for whom?

ADAM: Well, the fact that I got an alert from my bank and ignored it, but then went back and said, ‘Oh no, I've got to do something about this,’ is good if only because I'm not the only person who had that reaction. I've been hearing from my friends, ‘I think that I've been hacked.’ What do I do? And there is something to do. And I think a lot of people are going to do it.

SCORING IN

SEAN: Okay. What, what you have to do with Adam when we're back on *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back with Adam Clark Estes from vox.com. And Adam, you wrote this thing that said that this whole Social Security number breach was actually a good thing. You had friends texting you, calling you, asking what to do, and you actually had an answer for them. What is it?

ADAM: Freeze your credit files.

*<CLIP> BATMAN: What killed the dinosaurs? The ice age!*

ADAM: There are three major credit bureaus Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion. You can go to their websites and you can freeze your credit files and that is going to stop other people from opening accounts in your name.

SEAN: What does that even mean? I mean, I've heard that before. I've certainly never done it, but. But what exactly does that entail? Freezing your credit files. Does that mean if I want to, like, I don't know, apply for a car loan, I can't do it anymore?

ADAM: So basically what those three major credit bureaus do is they track everything about your financial life, who you have accounts with, how much you owe to, to whomever. They, they're the ones that issue credit reports. And if you want to get a car loan. The bank or whoever you're getting that loan from, will want to see your credit report to prove that you are who you are and you're a good person to give a loan to. But when you freeze your credit files with those bureaus, they basically won't let anybody else get access to that report. So that means you can't get a new car loan. It also means a hacker can't come and steal your identity. It does not mean that it will be that way forever. You can unfreeze those files, but if you don't need a car loan, you can go ahead and freeze the file and protect yourself.

SEAN: But what if you do need a car loan?

ADAM: You can unfreeze your credit file. So depending on the credit bureau that you're freezing and unfreezing with and you should do all three. It can take 24 hours or up to 72 hours to unfreeze the file, but it's very easy, like the flip of a switch to unfreeze it once it's frozen.

SEAN: Okay. Fair enough. Is this something that you did when you found out that your Social Security number had been compromised earlier this month?

ADAM: I did. I froze my credit files with all three of the major bureaus, and I was worried that that was going to be hard and time consuming. It really wasn't. It used to be. And you might think that it is hard. I froze my credit files a few years ago and then got really tripped up trying to unfreeze them because they gave me, like, a pin that I had to write down and quickly lost. And I eventually got them unfrozen. But these days, you just basically set up an account with a credit bureau, log in, freeze it, unfreeze it. You're done. It's really easy.

SEAN: How long did it take? How easy was it?

ADAM: It took me less than ten minutes ...

SEAN: Oh!

ADAM: … with all three bureaus and some of them, I had to set up new accounts. So, like, if you already have accounts, it's a couple minutes.

SEAN: Okay. Does it cost money?

ADAM: It is free.

SEAN: It’s free!

ADAM: It's free by law. It's free. They also have to give you a credit report once a week if you ask for it. But after that 2017 Equifax breach, some laws changed, and now it's free and easy.

SEAN: Huh. So there aren’t laws to protect your Social Security numbers, but there are laws that that demand that this process of freezing your credit is free.   
  
ADAM: It's progress!   
  
SEAN: <laughs> Okay. Well, you know, I know this isn't your job to, like, help your colleagues protect their Social Security numbers, but, but can I ask, since we're talking about this, that you just tell me how to do it, and I'll do it right now while we're in this interview, because my Social Security number must just be out there unfrozen, just just baking in the hot sun.

<CLIP> BATMAN: “Hey Freeze, the heat is on.”

ADAM: Yeah, let's do TransUnion.

SCORING STARTS—WIN LOSE OR SCABIES

ADAM: And instead of asking you to Google it, which is like what you tell a friend, let's just go to transunion.com, and then I'll walk through it with you.

SEAN: Oh, I already googled it, but I'm still there. We ended up in the same place. Okay.

<CONVERSATION FAST FORWARDS>

ADAM: Click on member. Log in.

SEAN: Member log and got it very clear.   
  
<CONVERSATION FAST FORWARDS>

SEAN: Okay. Log in. Do I have a log?

ADAM: I would, if you're not sure. Go ahead and click Create Account.

<CONVERSATION FAST FORWARDS>

SEAN: Have you lived here for more than six months? Indeed I have. Email Noel at King dot com mobile number.

<CONVERSATION FAST FORWARDS>

SEANL Create a password. Myles. Bryan. 123. Oh. They do not like the strength of that password. Wow. They really want a serious password. 12 to 64 characters.

<CONVERSATION FAST FORWARDS>

SEAN: Isn't that placing a lot of trust in these services?

ADAM: You got to try somebody.

SEAN: Ugh. I'm not so sure.

<CONVERSATION FAST FORWARDS>

SEAN: Credit freeze. There's a little snowflake. Yes, that's me, a little snowflake. Your report does not have a credit freeze in place. It says it's available. And then there's a huge button that says add freeze.

ADAM: That's the button to click.

SEAN: Doing it!   
  
 <CONVERSATION FAST FORWARDS>

SEAN: ‘A freeze is now in place on your TransUnion credit report. It will stay in place until your request. Until you request its removal.

<CONVERSATION FAST FORWARDS>

SEAN: did we do it?

ADAM: We did. It wasn't that easy.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: You know, it wasn't hard. It wasn't hard. Was it annoying? You know, mildly. But. But what you're saying that, you know. There's a there's a payoff. Yeah, well.

ADAM: Do you know, it's more annoying than doing that?

SEAN: I can guess.

ADAM: It's getting your identity stolen.

SEAN: <laughs> But wait, I have to do this three times now. Like I've done it once. I have to do it two more times. With, with what? Experian and Equifax?

ADAM: Yes.

SEAN: How much do you want to sit here while I do those two?

ADAM: I don't mind.

SEAN: <laughs> That's sweet of you. I bet our producer does. What? He just wrote to me. “I mind.” Okay. <claps once> What if you have kids? Do kids even have credit? Is this just, like, an 18 plus thing?

ADAM: Kids have identities, which is the big thing here. When your child is[[1]](#footnote-0) born in the United States, they're given a Social Security card and number on it, and they have an identity. If you have a young child, they probably don't have a credit file yet, but you can actually contact their credit bureaus, get them to create a file and then freeze it for you to protect their identities. And experts tell me you should do this.

SEAN: So if you've got like four kids, you do have like, an afternoon's worth of work ahead of you here.

ADAM: Maybe not an afternoon. It's a little bit different than freezing your own credit file. There's a form involved that you actually have to mail in, but it's worth doing because actually. Child identity theft is rising more quickly than adult identity theft.  
  
SEAN: Huh!  
  
ADAM: And you might not even you might not even know your child's identity has been stolen until they are 16 or 18 and get their driver's license, or apply for a student loan. And if they find out at that point in time their identity has been stolen. And they have. Multiple credit cards that are maxed out, and a mortgage on four houses in Florida, probably, it's going to be a huge headache, so it's worth taking the small step now to avoid that headache in the future.

SEAN: To get back to the title of your recently published piece at Vox, ‘The massive Social Security number breach is actually a good thing,’ is it a good thing because it will encourage people to do what I just did – to freeze their credit? Is that the argument you're making?

ADAM: The argument I'm making is that it's a good thing because we're talking about this right now. It's a good thing that my friends were asking me about how to freeze their credit files, and it's a good thing that a lot more people are going to do it. It is the first line of defense between you and identity thieves. And like one security expert told me, if you haven't had your identity stolen yet, it's not because you're special. It's just because they haven't gotten to you yet. The information about you is out there and it's only a matter of time. I think that worldview is a little bit paranoid, but I think that he has a point.

SCORING IN — Glockenspiel Childish

ADAM: Think about it this way. In your home, you have things that are valuable to you, and if other people got those things, it would be upsetting. But we have security measures in place. You have a lock in your front door, but if someone breaks that lock and comes into your house, you can call the police and they will come in and help you because those systems are in place. Well, the internet doesn't quite work like that. You have a lot of valuable information that's out there, and people are stealing it and buying and selling it all the time. And there's not really an internet police that's coming after them. Of course, there are like cybercrime divisions of the actual police, but the scale of this problem is so big, it's literally every person in the United States and every person in the world that's online could be a victim of cyber crime. And if there were the right amount of protections and regulations in place, we wouldn't have data breaches where hundreds of millions of Americans Social Security numbers are compromised.

SEAN: Adam Clark Estes. You know where to find him because I said it several times. I also said Miles Bryan produced this show. But I didn’t say that Matthew Collette edited our program today. And that Laura Bullard fact checked it. And that Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kristinsdottir mixed it.  
  
But I did say this is *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)