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Target confirms massive credit, debit card data breach December 19, 2013 / 6:56 AM

/ CBS/Reuters

Target confirms 40 million credit cards at risk from theft 02:27

Target shoppers have been victims of a stunning theft of information on their credit and debit card accounts in recent days.

The giant retailer said Thursday about 40 million credit and debit card accounts may have been impacted in U.S. stores between Nov. 27 and Dec. 15, 2013.

“Target alerted authorities and financial institutions immediately after it was made aware of the unauthorized access, and is putting all appropriate resources behind these efforts,” the chain said in a statement. “Among other actions, Target is partnering with a leading third-party forensics firm to conduct a thorough investigation of the incident [Rebuild].”

The Secret Service is

investigating, according to a spokesman for the agency, which safeguards the nation’s payment systems.

Investigators believe the data was

obtained via software installed on machines that customers use to swipe magnetic strips on their cards when paying for merchandise at Target stores, according to a person familiar with the matter who was not authorized to discuss it and declined to provide further details.

Krebs on Security, a closely watched

security industry blog that initially broke the news, said the breach involved nearly all of Target's 1,797 stores in the United States, citing sources at two credit card issuers.

“When all is said and done,

this one will put its mark up there with some of the largest retail breaches to date [Disappointment],” the report cited an unnamed source as saying.

The biggest credit card breach at a

U.S. retailer reported to date was an attack against TJX Cos, the parent of TJ

Maxx and Marshalls. The company disclosed in March 2007 that data from 45.7

million payment cards had been stolen by hackers over 18 months. Banks later asserted in court documents the hackers could have obtained more than 94

million account numbers.

It is not yet clear how the

attackers were able to compromise point-of-sales terminals at so many Target stores across the country. Doing so would have required careful planning by sophisticated cyber criminals.

An American Express spokeswoman said

the company is aware of the incident and is putting fraud controls in place.

Representatives for Visa and

MasterCard declined to comment.

There are no indications that the

theft affected shoppers on Target's website, Krebs reported.

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