

Woman pleads guilty in Texas 'total identity theft' case

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An undocumented immigrant accused of assuming the persona of a Texas teacher pleaded guilty Monday in a case that put a face on the growing crime of "total identity theft" in the United States.

Benita Cardona-Gonzalez, a Mexican national living in Topeka, Kan., pleaded guilty to a reduced charge of possessing fraudulent identification documents in a deal with prosecutors that calls for an 18-month prison term.

The 32-year-old was accused of completely assuming the persona of Houston elementary school teacher Candida Gutierrez.



Pat Sullivan / AP file The victim: Houston schoolteacher Candida Gutierrez discusses the frustration of having her identity stolen. She got some satisfaction from Monday's guilty plea.

Gutierrez recounted how the thief not only opened bank and credit accounts, but assumed her entire persona — using it to get a job, a driver's license, a mortgage, food stamps and even medical care for the birth of two children. All the while, the crook claimed the real Gutierrez was the one who had stolen her identity.

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As part of the plea deal, Cardona-Gonzalez agreed not to contest deportation after serving her sentence.

Defense lawyer Matthew Works said after Monday's hearing in Wichita that his client was sorry and didn't intend to harm Gutierrez.

"She wanted to give her children a better life. That is what this is all about," Works said.

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Gutierrez said in a phone interview Monday that she plans to attend the sentencing, which is scheduled for March 25.

"I want to see her face to face. I want to see it actually happening," Gutierrez said. "After all this time, I am still haunted. I want to be sure she is put away."

Gutierrez said she would have liked to see Cardona-Gonzalez spend a more than 18 months in prison after everything she put her through. Still, she said she was satisfied with the plea deal because she and her husband want to get the case over with and move on with their lives.

10,000 ID fraud gangs active in US

She praised the U.S. attorney's office in Kansas and said Assistant U.S. Attorney Brent Anderson even came to Houston to talk to her about the deal. He returned her original Social Security card and birth certificate, she said.

"They were pretty amazing getting on it once we contacted them," Gutierrez said. "Brent was informative and helpful. He was very efficient."

Gutierrez first learned her identity had been hijacked when she was turned down for a mortgage nearly 12 years ago. Both women claimed they were identity theft victims and sought new Social Security numbers. The Social Security Administration turned down the request from Gutierrez, instead issuing a new number to the woman impersonating her. In another twist, Gutierrez was forced to file her federal income tax forms using a special identification number usually reserved for illegal immigrants.

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