

POSTAL NEWS

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1. How To Protect Yourself From Mailbox Theft

By Dave Lieber | Last updated Feb 27, 2011, 9:13 am

Those blue postal collection boxes outside of post offices are sitting ducks for identity thieves. Getting mail out of them is as easy as licking an envelope.

Crimes occur but information is scarce

Yet the U.S. Postal Service and the U.S. Postal Inspection service don't easily release the information about mailbox break-ins to the public. Rarely, do you see these break-ins listed in police crime reports. The only way to get the information is through the U.S. Freedom of Information Act.

As readers of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram Dave Lieber Watchdog column first learned, the problem of thefts from blue U.S. Postal Service collection boxes apparently hasn't gotten any better in the past year. Watchdog Nation took a sample of its home Fort Worth postal district.

Mostly unreported crimes

A year ago, the Fort Worth postal district reported 60 mailbox thefts in 13 months. But in the past 11 months, there have been more than 80 incidents in the district, which includes Amarillo, Lubbock, Abilene and Decatur, too.

Most of the thefts are in Fort Worth and Arlington. (See the 3-page government release here.)

Fort Worth boxes were hit almost 40 times, with the crimes scattered throughout the city.

Arlington had 28 reported incidents. One blue collection box at 300 E. South St. was apparently hit eight times.

Watchdog Nation took this photo in late 2009 of a mailbox break-in outside the Haltom City, Texas post office.

Watchdog Nation methodology

I asked for a list of all reported incidents of theft, vandalism and tampering involving the blue collection boxes in the last 11 months of 2010.

The Postal Inspection Service cautioned me about the data it sent me:

“These reports are the raw, unverified data provided by USPS employees. Some of the entries provided contain duplicate reports of possible thefts or vandalism, as well as unverified dates of possible thefts or vandalism.” (I eliminated the obvious duplicates.)

I asked for vandalism and tampering crimes, too, because it’s often hard to prove any mail was stolen, but a good indicator is whether a mailbox was vandalized or tampered with.

How bad is the problem?

John Breyault of the National Consumer League suggests that before you mail anything, you check the condition of a mailbox. “Is it in good repair? Is the lock on it secure? Does it look like it’s been tampered with somehow?”

He also offers an excellent idea: Check periodically with your residential carrier about mailbox thefts in your area.

A mailbox security expert tells me that along with thefts from mailboxes at homes, thefts at collection boxes remain a major problem nationwide.

Background

“It’s basically a crime that’s not being prosecuted because there’s too much of it to deal with,” says Michael Johnston, owner of USMailboxes. “The way I see it and experience it, it has increased tremendously in the last few years. It started out as a way for thieves to get drug money. Now the recession has made it worse.”

Ten years ago, Johnston was hired by the post office to strengthen the blue collection boxes in his home state of Oregon. “We went around and put those security bars on to help make it harder to break into without a key,” he said. “We also put a heavier lock that was harder to pick. And they put special locking nuts on the bolts in the ground so they couldn’t easily be taken off.

“I don’t know how to make them stronger. I don’t think they know either. The biggest problem up here now is they throw a chain around it and yank it out of the ground.”

The blue collection boxes are especially popular, he says, because they contain more mail, especially bill payments containing individual checks. Thieves can use the name, address, account and bank routing numbers on the checks for identity theft.

“The post office would like to remove the blue boxes,” Johnston says. “They would like to take them all off the streets and make people go to the post office or use their own mailbox to send mail out.”

What should you do?

If that’s true, the post office won’t state that publicly. In a statement to The Watchdog this week, Postal Inspection Service spokesman Michael J. Romano writes, “The Postal Service employs crime prevention countermeasures for collection box thefts, but for obvious reasons, this information is law enforcement sensitive and is not released to the public.

“We maintain that the U.S. mail is a very safe and secure way of conducting commerce with close to 600 million pieces of mail and packages successfully delivered daily.”

Still, the post office warns, “When possible, customers should avoid placing mail in a blue collection box after the last posted collection time or on a day mail is not scheduled to be picked up. If they must deposit mail during that time, they should use the lobby drop inside a post office.”

The boxes do not provide this information to consumers. But probably they should with signs. If the boxes are not completely safe, the people using them should know. Mail inside is a sitting target. That’s what the numbers show.

File your own request

If you want to file a freedom of information act request, here’s how you do it:

CHIEF POSTAL INSPECTOR
US POSTAL SERVICE
475 L’ENFANT PLAZA SW RM 3100
WASHINGTON DC 20260-2100

[Date]

FOIA REQUEST

Dear FOIA Officer:

Pursuant to the federal Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. § 552, I request access to and copies of a listing of all reported incidents of:

- theft of mail from...
- vandalism of mailbox...
- tampering with

the blue collection mailboxes located outside all post offices, stations, substations, etc. in the [YOUR DISTRICT] from [GIVE DATES] to the date of this letter, Dec. 31, 2010.

I agree to pay reasonable duplication fees for the processing of this request, but ask that you first alert me to the charges so I may know before any work is done. You may call me about this at xxx-xxx-xxxx or e-mail to xxxxx@xxxxx.xxx.

If my request is denied in whole or part, I ask that you justify all deletions by reference to specific exemptions of the act. I will also expect you to release all segregable portions of otherwise exempt material. I, of course, reserve the right to appeal your decision to withhold any information or to deny a waiver of fees.

I look forward to your reply within 20 business days, as the statute requires. Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

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2. NZ Post slashes payment to govt

Published: 6:43AM Monday February 28, 2011 Source: BusinessDesk

* NZ Post slashes payment to govt (Source: NZPA / David Rowland)
NZ Post street post box - Source: NZPA / David Rowland

New Zealand Post Group, the state-owned postal service, slashed its first-half dividend to the government by two-thirds as its reported profit more than halved.

NZ Post will pay just \$1.8 million to the government for the six months ended December 31, down from \$5.7 million a year earlier, as net profit tumbled 63% to \$15.8 million in the period.

Rising impairment charges for bad debts weighed on the earnings, with subsidiary Kiwibank reporting a 41% fall in profit, while the postal delivery service continues to languish, with earnings sinking 52% to \$9 million.

The group does not expect to meet its full-year target profit of \$60.8 million.

"The framework for the long-term future of the New Zealand Post Group has been put in place, and I expect the benefits of our strategy, which includes our commitment to growing Kiwibank into new levels of banking service, to accrue progressively over time," said chief executive Brian Roche in a statement.

"Our efforts are being directed through a revised structure comprising three new divisions - customer solutions and services, innovation and technology, and

operations - in addition to the existing Kiwibank and joint venture courier businesses," he said.

NZ Post has struggled to compete in an increasingly electronic world, writing down more than \$72 million in the last financial year.

Advertisement

Still, the postal services are the entity's major source of revenue, and contributed more than half of the \$652 million in the period, and beating expectations.

Domestic mail volumes fell 3.6% in the period, though this was offset by an increase in postal charges.

Roche said the group increased spending by \$49.8 million in the period, which mainly came from Kiwibank's bad debt provisioning and a \$13 million writedown in fair value gains at the bank.

NZ Post also took a \$5.7 million loss on the sale of an Air Post aircraft, though that's expected to be recouped over time without the servicing costs.

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3. Business As Usual For UK Postal Regulator Postcomm

27 February 2011 - Steve Lawson

pcomm.jpg

On Friday, UK postal regulator Postcomm published its proposed work plan up to the proposed transfer of its responsibilities to communications regulator Ofcom as outlined in the 2010 Postal Services Bill. The Bill also paves the way for the sale of up to 90% of the Royal Mail. Postcomm has invited interested parties to comment on its plans.

Postcomm said that following the publication of a new regulatory framework document for 2011-12, its plans for a sustainable postal service are nearing completion. An interim price control for 2011 has been agreed by the Commission, and the remaining work needed to modify Royal Mail's licence is underway and expected to be ready for implementation by the end of March.

It said a regulatory framework from 2012 will be dependent on the introduction of the interim price controls, analysis of markets and appropriate monitoring safeguards for the future.

The regulator admitted that whilst a proposed transfer of responsibility had changed the context of its work, it was determined to put in place "a flexible and resilient regulatory framework which safeguards the universal service and provides greater certainty to users of postal services and to the market."

In other words, business as usual.

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4. Egypt - Postal Services Returning To Normal

27 February 2011 - Franz Groter

Several European operators have reported that postal services in and out of Egypt are gradually returning to normal and backlogged mail now starting to clear.

The Chairman of Egyptian Post recently visited Alex to stand alongside employees of key mail centre, Ramsis Traffic Center, remembering those who had died during the Egyptian Revolution

He also took a tour of post offices in the city, to see how services are being reinstated in different sectors as well as listening to employee suggestions to encourage and motivate production as the country attempts to establish a degree of normality.

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* Posted: Mon, Feb 28 2011. 1:00 AM IST

5. Irda's plan to sell insurance products through post offices hits roadblock

Postal life insurance wing raises objections to selling other insurers' policies, says it has its own life cover schemes

Remya Nair & Surabhi Agarwal

The life insurance wing of India's postal service has objected to the insurance regulator's move to allow post offices to sell the policies of other insurers.

India Post's life insurance wing says since the postal department has its own life cover schemes, it should not sell the policies of other insurers.

"We have the largest network on which other insurance companies want to ride," an official of the directorate of the postal life insurance (PLI) said on condition of anonymity. "We have our own insurance scheme. Then why should we sell policies of other insurance companies and lose our advantage?"

The Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority (Irda) in October allowed each postal region of India Post to function as an insurance agent. Each such circle was allowed to sell policies of two general insurance firms, two life insurers, one agricultural insurance company and one stand-alone health insurer.

Some private insurance firms have found it difficult to expand their distribution networks. The regulator's move to have post offices act as agents would have worked in the larger interests of financial inclusion, according to Irda.

To be sure, since selling financial products is a good way to generate revenue, the postal department is reluctant to let go of this income-earning segment despite objections from its insurance wing.

It was India Post that had asked for such an arrangement, said an Irda official. "Earlier, they were allowed to sell policies of only one insurance company," he said, requesting anonymity. "We permitted each circle to sell policies of two life and general insurers and one health insurer."

Postal life insurance, initially meant for postal employees, was later extended to other government employees. In 1995, it was extended to rural areas.

There were more than 4.4 million postal life insurance policies and 9.9 million rural postal life insurance policies as on 31 March 2010, official data show.

Irda gave India Post a special dispensation after an expert committee headed by Ajay Shah suggested effectively utilizing the postal network to further financial inclusion.

The insurance regulator wanted to leverage the reach of India Post to deepen the coverage of insurance services in the country. While the penetration level of general insurers is as low as 0.6% of the gross domestic product, penetration of life insurers is slightly above 4%.

India Post has a network of over 155,000 branches across 22 circles. More than 45% of its revenue comes from various financial services. As of December 2009, India Post's total revenue was Rs.2,273.69 crore.

"Selling insurance policies is a good revenue stream for the postal department. As it is, the PLI scheme does not cover all the requirements of the population," said an insurance company official, who declined to be named.

Private insurers say if the India Post experiment was successful, Irda may also permit banks to sell policies of more than one firm.

"I think Irda has test-piloted by opening it out for India Post," said another insurance company official, requesting anonymity. "The regulator wants to see what the teething problems are and the bottlenecks before permitting an open architecture."

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