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# U.S. Mail Security Threatened By

**Editor's Note:** Billions of dollars in cash and other valuables flow through the U.S. postal system each day. Some of it never reaches its destination because it is stolen by postal employees. This report from the AP Special Assignment Team examines the worsening postal theft problem that can affect everyone who uses the mails.

By JAMES R. POLK  
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Millions of dollars in merchan-

dise and money are being stolen from the U.S. mails by a faceless new criminal: the pilfering postman.

Credit cards, cash, Christmas gifts, guns, rich stocks, checks for charity, and even Treasury's h i p m e n t s have been vanishing from the mails in growing numbers.

Officials can't put a precise dollar figure on the theft losses, but the nation's top postal cop, Chief Inspector William J. Cotter, said:

"We handle billions of dollars a day in the mail, and

when I say it (the losses) would go into the millions, that might be low."

Arrests of postal workers for theft and rifling mail have jumped by one-half in less than two years, now running well beyond 1,100 a year.

The percentage of postmen dipping into the mail—usually a sorting clerk rather than the friendly neighborhood mailman—is very low. But losses still run high.

An Associated Press study across the country shows anything that moves may be prey

for some postmen:

1. It took more than two months before the Post Office even found out that a registered envelope sent by air mail from New York City to Boston was missing. The contents: \$15 million in stocks and bonds.

The Wall Street firm that suffered the loss isn't alone. A top inspector in New York City said, "There are several firms down there that have lost millions of dollars in securities in the mails over a period of time."

2. Some mailmen have proved all too willing to take credit cards instead of cash. The unsuspecting victim never knows a new card coming in the mail was stolen until he gets a huge bill from the credit firm a month or more later.

In Brooklyn, postal workers pocketing credit cards have been linked with organized crime. A stolen card can bring \$200 on the black market there. In Washington, D. C., losses have climbed so high that two major firms now refuse to send their cards

# Pilfering Postmen

through the mail in the nation's capital.

3. Charity can be sweet for the postal thief. One well known charity, CARE, lost more than \$71,000 in contributions sent to it in the mail last year. Contributions are a major target for mail thieves because most of the charities, when they don't get the checks, have no way of knowing what they're missing.

4. Merchandise and parcels are the bulk of the stolen mail problem, according to postal authorities. In a New

Jersey case, postal workers were accused of simply slapping new labels on packages to send them to their own address. Recently the government erased a rule requiring all gun parcels sent by mail be labeled "firearms" because so many were being stolen.

5. Despite warnings against sending money through the mail, many people still do—including the government. Two mail bags with nearly \$110,000 in old, used money being sent back to the Treasury for burning disappeared from the Washington post office last year. Officials spent two days looking for any misplaced

plain brown wrapper approach" to try to hide their plastic money in innocent looking envelopes. Some firms seal mail sacks and ship them directly to neighborhood post offices, bypassing the big city centers, but losses still persist for the industry.

Cotter said the biggest mail theft problem involves parcels and packages, which, because of their shape and size, obviously contain something of value. Thefts range from TV sets to Christmas cookies. ("If it's marked 'perishable,' they know it's good to eat," an inspector said.)

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An unending river of riches moves through the U.S. mails every day. Most of it gets to its destination. The very vastness of the mails keeps many items of value hidden from sight and assured of safety.

Diamond merchants often use the mails rather than messengers. Stocks go by mail. So do mink coats, money, candy, taxes, toys, bill payments, millions of social security checks a month, and sometimes even the kitchen sink.

The Post Office moves \$2 billion pieces of mail a year. Its complaints about mail apparently lost or stolen last year ran to about 1 million—a tiny percentage, but people don't complain about missing letters that weren't of any value.

Postal files show arrests of mailmen are on the rise. The count for the past ten months has hit 1,139, already surpassing the record total for the previous fiscal year.

The figures mean that roughly 1 out of every 500 postal employees is arrested for theft each year.

In big cities, the percentage is probably worse. One-third of the arrests so far this year have been in the New York area.

Cotter, the former CIA agent who now runs the postal police force, is adding 200 new inspectors and giving them detective duties in the big city post offices.

But many of Cotter's present inspectors are tied to other jobs, such as auditing the books, investigating all accidents, keeping an eye on pornography, and giving each post office an annual checkup.

On top of that, the archaic nature of the American mail system leaves Cotter's force even more outmanned.

For instance, each piece of registered mail is stamped with a number, supposedly to keep track of its movement. But then the Post Office fails to make a serialized list of

which pieces are in a particular office. Registered mail because of its value, has become an acute problem area for postal officials. There's

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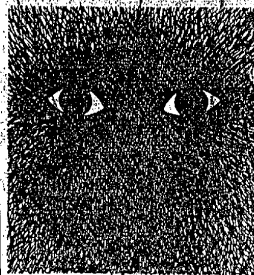
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There are strong indications that mail order houses may be suffering sizable losses of their packages, but Cotter's top assistant for criminal investigations, C. A. Miller, won't give any details.

"You're not gonna get Charley Miller here to identify firms that have had mail losses. We don't want to alarm the public," he said.

Other known thefts have involved everything from churches to Easter Seals. But most charities don't want to talk about it any more than the Post Office does.

*John W. Hamaker*  
WESTCHESTER  
CROSS COUNTRY CENTER, YORK PA.



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Credit card companies, hit with heavy losses, are trying a different method, using the

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