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MONEY > PERSONAL FINANCE

# From Mailbox To Bank Fraud: Check Theft Is Surging And How To Stop It

By [Steve Weisman](#), Contributor. ⓘ Steve Weisman writes about white-collar...

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FILE - In this Aug. 18, 2020, photo, mail delivery vehicles are parked outside a post office in Boys Town, Neb. The U.S. Postal Service is replacing tens of thousands of antiquated keys used by postal carriers and installing thousands of high-security collection boxes to ... [More](#)  
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While the crime may seem like something from another era, mail theft is big business. Financial-crime analysts at the Treasury Department's FINCEN [estimate](#) check fraud accounted for about \$21 billion dollars in losses during 2023 with a substantial portion of that amount originating with stolen mail. Making matters worse, these figures are undoubtedly low because 90% of mail theft goes [unreported](#).

Starting in the early 2020s, mail theft from mail receptacles began increasing dramatically. [According](#) to Postal Inspection Service investigations and Department of Treasury data between Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 and FY 2023 there was a 139% increase in reports of mail theft from mail receptacles. Mail is stolen from residential mailboxes, USPS collection boxes, burglary of USPS facilities, robbery of USPS employees and through bribery and collusion with USPS employees. The significant rise in mail theft and associated financial crimes has often been attributed to organized criminal groups who consider mail theft and check fraud low-risk, high-reward financial crimes.

Often we are our own worst enemies when it comes to mail theft as people leave outgoing mail containing checks in their personal mailboxes outside their homes with the flag raised to alert the

postal carrier that there is mail in the box to be retrieved, however this also alerts identity thieves who can easily steal the mail.

Recently Jeffrey Bennet, Awquil Hubbard and Tashon Ragan were charged in New Jersey with conspiracy to commit bank fraud. According to court documents From December of 2024 to December of 2025, they stole checks from the mail, altered the checks and then deposited them into accounts at various banks in New Jersey. According to police, they smashed windows of postal vehicles or opened unlocked vehicle doors and stole trays of mail.

#### HOW CHECK FRAUD IS ACCOMPLISHED

Typically, check fraud begins when someone mails an envelope with a check and then somewhere in transit the check is stolen and washed. Check washing is a process by which someone steals a check you have already written and "washes" or removes the name of the payee, often using simple bleach. Often they change the amount of the check as well. The criminal then cashes the altered check and steals the money.

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While businesses can protect themselves from check washing quite readily by using high technology checks such as those containing three-dimensional reflective metallic holograms or

checks treated with chemicals that will make the world "void" appear if the check is attempted to be altered, these are costly alternatives for individuals.

Fortunately, this is an easy crime to avoid. The best course of action is to pay your bills electronically and avoid the problem altogether. However, if you cannot do so or prefer to send a paper check by mail, you should use a gel pen that is not easily "washed" to write your checks. Unfortunately, more sophisticated criminals will scan your check into their computers and use readily available software to keep the signature from the original check, but delete the amount and the name of the payee on the check thereby allowing them to make perfect counterfeit checks which they can make payable to themselves for any amount they choose thereby defeating the gel pen as a defense so electronic banking is still your best bet.

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[According](#) to the FBI, Suspicious Activity Reports related to check fraud nearly doubled between 2021 and 2023. Scammers take advantage of regulations requiring banks to make check funds available within specified time frames which are often too short for banks to identify and stop payments of fraudulent checks to criminals. By the time the fraud is detected, the fraudulent checks have already been cashed.

[According](#) to Nasdaq Verafin, a financial crime management software company, check fraud losses in the United States exceeded \$20 billion in 2023. Many of these losses can be attributed to banks using fragmented and outdated detection methods. Fortunately, companies such as Nasdaq Verafin provide sophisticated services to detect and defend against check fraud. Colin Parsons, Head of Fraud Product Strategy at Nasdaq Verafin [describes](#) their innovative approach as machine learning models trained on billions of data points which “allows us to detect suspicious activity with precision and accuracy – right at the point of deposit, and during the in-clearing phase. These models adapt as fraud evolves, which is critical, and scrutinize checks at a level far beyond human capabilities For in-clearing checks this means considering counterparty insights and behavioral and image analysis for superior detection and prevention.”

So while check fraud continues to be a problem, you can avoid the problem with some simple steps and banks can implement modern technology to make check fraud higher risk and lower reward for criminals.

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