Opinion

Did the U.S. Postal Service pave the way for surge in thefts by muzzling its own police?

As of late June, there are no more postal police working the day shift in Philadelphia, marking an end to “50 years of having postal police operations 24 hours a day,” union chief says.

Outside the post office at South 25th Street and West Snyder Avenue in South Philadelphia in 2020.
ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ / Staff Photographer

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by Joseph N. DiStefano | Columnist
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This Independence Day is a time to consider the oldest U.S. government service — mail delivery — and its recent deterioration in this period of distracted

Revolution. Long reliable, it is fast becoming a place we can't trust to carry our checks anymore, without risking theft, fraud, and loss.

Readers have been sending me awful stories about getting ripped off by old-fashioned check thieves and forgers, since my June 18 column about the suspected postal fraudsters who convinced my bank to give them $5,620 of my money. (I got it back).

The most surprising report, to those of us who hadn't been paying attention until our bank accounts got picked, came from a police labor leader, Frank Albergo, national president of the Postal Police Officers Association. Its members make up what the Postal Service calls its "elite police force," trained in mail theft prevention and the protection of postal boxes, offices, and mail processing centers — and the 600,000 workers who connect us with more than 10 Billion pieces of mail every month.

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left in the U.S. That's down 130 in the past three years, just half as many as in 2008, and one-sixth the number who patrolled the mail system in the 1970s. (There were around 2,100 postal inspectors in the late 1990s; there are now around 1,300.)

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As of late June there are no postal police working the day shift in Philadelphia, due to "lack of manpower," Albergo says. That marks an end to "50 years of having postal police operations 24 hours a day."

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its inability to train new officers during the pandemic for the drop in police staffing but promised to resume training new ones in August.

U. S. Postal Service carrier Henrietta Dixon delivering mail to Alvin Fields in Philadelphia in 2020.
Matt Rourke / AP

Stolen checks in Pennsylvania

It's not new that union leaders advocate for more members and more money. But the reported crime numbers strengthen Albergo's case: Pennsylvania is a hot spot for check theft, with 871 checks stolen from Pennsylvanians turning up on the Internet's thieves' corner, the "dark web," just in May, according to data collected by the Evidence-Based Cybersecurity Research Group at Georgia State University.

There were more Pennsylvania checks for sale to fraudsters than from California, Florida or New York, which are more populous states. Indeed,

With postal cops ordered to stand down, Albergo says it's no surprise that gunpoint robberies of letter carriers are a serious problem. He sent me a list of 11 carriers "that we know of" robbed in different states from June 9 to 21.

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Looking back further, the Georgia State group found at least 165 letter-carrier robberies that took place last fall and winter. That's five times the annualized rate from 2019, according to a Bloomberg report.

A report by the Postal Service inspector general found during one year from when the pandemic started, March 2020 to February 2021, mail theft complaints more than doubled, to 300,000, compared to the same period in 2019-2020. But only around 1,000 mail-theft cases were prosecuted, fewer than in the previous year.

Every armed robbery of a letter carrier can leave hundreds of "mail theft, check fraud, and identity theft victims," Albergo says.

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And that's not counting thefts from P.O. boxes, like the one suspected in my case: Thieves apparently stole my Delmarva Power payment from a post office box in May, copied the account number and other printed check details, and used this to convince my bank to honor half a dozen checks to people I never heard of. (The bank reimbursed me.)

The post office at N. 63rd Street and Media in Philadelphia on July 30, 2020.
ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ / Staff Photographer

If it's like other postal thefts, it's unlikely thieves snuck up to our one-story postal outpost and forced open a box, Albergo said.

"I can almost guarantee that some thief had the Postal Service 'arrow key' to your ZIP code, and

The arrow key is a master key that opens many postal mailboxes. In a 2020 report, the postal inspector general called the service's key management "ineffective."

Albergo says that if the Postal Service can't secure its own mailboxes, management should take them out of service, or at least warn the public more effectively.

"In short, the Postal Inspection Service has abandoned its mission," Albergo contended. Inspectors are still working with other agencies on "high-profile" national cases, but they are no longer around much to "protect the U.S. mail and postal workers" or "prevent postal-related crime from happening."

Mail carriers on their own

Staff cuts have been going on for years, but Albergo says the pivotal change dates to Aug. 25, 2020.

That's the day — in the run-up to the Trump vs. Biden presidential election, just as Americans were

In its reply to my questions, the Postal Service acknowledged that “like the rest of the nation, crimes have increased, and the Postal Service has not been immune.” It pledged to “aggressively pursue perpetrators.” But it also confirmed the recent focus on defending Postal Service property, along with employees, customers and mail while they are on it, rather than mail or mail carriers on the road.

A mail carrier makes a delivery in Philadelphia on April 2, 2020.
Matt Rourke / AP

Albergo’s union sued, but the court found no law that blocked the Postal Service from ending patrols and leaving carriers to robbers, thieves, and the hope local police might somehow intervene.

To be sure, the carriers’ bosses, through their National Association of Postal Supervisors, wrote to Postmaster Louis DeJoy, begging to restore postal police patrols and “field operations,” arguing that “we cannot allow these kinds of assaults upon carriers

at least do something “when felonies against postal employees occur in their own presence,” hasn’t been made law.

“The Postal Service is an American institution,” Albergo told me in conclusion. “It is the ‘crown jewel’ of our federal government. It serves every household and business.” But “it is in peril. Postal workers are being attacked and mail is being stolen at unprecedented levels.”

Was the nation really more competent in the 1970s, or even the 1770s? Why can’t our government restore trust that the mail will get through?

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I write about people and money in our community and beyond.

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