

Mail theft on rise in Coos County; drugs blamed

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It started with an overdue notice from a bank, then similar letters swarmed into James and Alice Harris' Crab Flats home.

The bank confirmed their checks were cashed, but by the wrong people. A check to pay their credit card bill was spent in a local restaurant. Another was used to buy gas. The Harrises were victims of mail identity theft and they have company.

Across America police agencies and U.S. Postal Service officials report increases in such crimes, and link much of it to methamphetamines.

The Harrises discussed the impact the thefts have made on their lives.

A frustrated, angry James, 84, sat in a recliner looking through stacks of bills, bank statements and canceled checks. The crooks wiped out their bank account and creditors are still calling.

"It's been awful," he said. "They take the money right out of your bank and you can't do anything about it."

Alice said James has been in and out of the hospital in recent months, his nerves about shot.

"I try to keep him laughing, but it's hard," she said.

According to the Federal Trade Commission, about 10 million Americans have reported identity theft costing victims about \$5 billion a year.

The problem has grown steadily over 10 years but December 2007 was especially hard for Coos County, said Coos Bay Crime Prevention Officer Randy Sparks.

"The reports of mail theft and identity theft are darn near a daily occurrence," Sparks said, adding Coos Bay has had more than 100 reports of identity theft and about 52 of stolen mail in 2007.

He said meth users have found an easy way to support their habits.

"These are the same folks that would break into your home or steal items from your car or steal from the businesses. But, through identity theft and mail theft, they have a greater return and a lower risk," Sparks said.

"If you cash one check for \$1,000 that's all profit. If you steal a \$1,000 item and fence it, you might get \$100, \$200 or \$300 for it."

He said he learned of the drug link from recent arrestees.

U.S. Postal Inspector Scott Helton, who covers Oregon's south coast, agreed. "I have not worked a case in Coos County that didn't involve methamphetamine as a motive," Helton said.

It got worse in December when state "kicker" checks and Christmas cards with money or checks began arriving.

Thieves strike repeatedly until they get caught, Helton said.

Stealing mail is a federal crime that can result in at least a two-year sentence, Helton said. But he said less than one percent of U.S. mail is stolen.

Sparks said thieves often look for outgoing mail signaled by the red flags on mailboxes, often at night and in rural areas.

If the thief finds a check, signatures, the amount and the payee will be chemically washed away, a procedure he said is simple.

"Then the ID thief will simply write in what amount they want the check to be, forge the name and cash it," he said.

Sgt. Pat Downing of the Coos County Sheriff's Office said mail thieves used to look for cash in birthday or Christmas cards but that the stakes have risen.

Downing said letters from the Oregon Department of Motor Vehicles, credit card applications and other mail that includes private information can be used to steal identity.

In October, Coos Bay resident Tom McElmurry noticed pieces of paper scattered around his trash can and found mail from more than a dozen local residents.

One piece belonged to Roger Dixon, a dentist.

Dixon, a lifelong Coos Bay resident, said police told him they found one of his credit card statements.

In July 2006 a crook racked up about \$1,000 in fraudulent charges on his credit card.

He said he remembers when people would leave car doors unlocked. Things have changed. He now has his home mail delivered and collected at his office.

"It's a hassle and it's kind of sad," he said.

Information from: The World, <http://www.theworldlink.com>