

# Altering checks stolen in mail rises in areas of Treasure Coast

Martin deputy: About two cases a month seen

Will Greenlee 6/16/22

Treasure Coast Newspapers USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

Some local law enforcement agencies are investigating what they said is an uptick in mail theft and related “check washing,” with others reporting various levels of the crime.

St. Lucie County Sheriff’s Chief Deputy Brian Hester said his agency experienced five cases in May and two in April.

“We had zero up until April this year,” Hester said.

The seven incidents, he said, involved someone removing mailed checks from mailboxes and altering the check by “check washing,” or creating a fraudulent account. Check washing involves using chemicals to erase the name on a check and writing a new name on the check.

Hester said the incidents seem isolated in the northern part of the county. He suspects they are connected.

“This is not new to our area,” Hester said. “I was actually a victim of the

same type of crime about a year ago.”

Police in Port St. Lucie investigated five cases in May and two in March, Assistant Chief Richard Del Toro said.

“All of these were stolen from either a personal or business-type of mailbox,” Del Toro said. “We really could put an end to check washing, if people would not put their checks out in their personal mailboxes.”

In Martin County, sheriff’s Chief Deputy John Budensiek said his agency averages about two “check washing” cases a month. Those responsible, he said, tend to prefer business checks.

In addition to erasing or removing ink from checks, check washing also can refer to using the routing and account numbers and other information from a stolen check to order or print another check, he said.

## **Traveling criminals and professional fraudsters**

“They use the same account number, the same sequence number, because that business has accounted for that check going out,” Budensiek said. “What’s different on that check is obviously the name and then the dollar amount, and they don’t get caught right away.” Martin County sheriff’s officials arrested a New Jersey man and a Pennsylvania man after investigators reported stopping their vehicle in Palm City June 3 and finding items including five bank cards with different names, a folder with “27 pages of blank drafts and completed checks,” a fraudulent Illinois driver’s license, printer and a notebook with names, dates of birth, phone numbers and Social Security Numbers, records show.

Budensiek described the men as “traveling criminals” and “professional fraudsters.”

“If you look at their fake IDs that they had, they had them from several different states,” he said. “They were into anything that involved fraud, stolen credit cards, stolen checks, washing checks, printing their own checks, which is part of washing checks.” Del Toro said banks tend to be the ultimate victim, because banks reimburse the check owner.

“The original victim is not out any money,” he said. He said without issuing subpoenas to a bank, police won’t necessarily know where the checks are deposited and whether it’s in their jurisdiction.

“We haven’t really made arrests like this in the past that I know of, so it’s kind of hard to say what their (motive) is,” Del Toro said. “We just know that they are using chemicals to wash the checks. We’ve seen that happen before.”

## **Avoid being victimized by check washing**

Budensiek suggested using online banking to minimize chances of being victimized by check washing. He also said if you get a bill with a return envelope, put your check in a more discrete envelope.

Hester said locked mail boxes can be purchased from home improvement stores, allowing letter carriers to slip mail in, but they must be unlocked to remove mail.

“I always tell people, don’t put checks in your outgoing mail in your mailbox, anything you raise your red flag for is a red flag for criminals,” Hester said. “If you put something in your mailbox going out and you’re not home, and

you're not sitting there watching it, you're vulnerable."

In Indian River County, sheriff's spokesperson Debbie Carson, said via email that a detective who looks into the cases there has noticed nothing out of the ordinary.

"We're not seeing an increase in reported incidents," she stated.

Budensiek said it's difficult to solve the cases, noting often those who steal the mail aren't the ones cashing the checks.

Still, he said a man was arrested in early June in Palm Beach County in connection with thefts of mail and other items in March in Martin County.

"We can't always connect the dots. A lot of times the guys that are stealing the mail, and recreating these checks, they will pay someone to use their own ID," Budensiek said. "They'll walk in the bank and they'll take the risk of their ID being flagged or the check not being cashed."

### **Mail theft is a felony and could result in federal charges**

Mail theft is a felony. Being charged with stealing mail could land a person in federal prison for up to five years and have to pay a fine up to

\$250,000, according to federal law. Check fraud, such as check washing, is commonly prosecuted by the federal government and may be punishable by prison sentences up to 30 years as well as extremely steep fines. The level of the charge will depend on the value of the check or checks.