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New key threatens mail safety

Experts fear postal boxes could become an easy target

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May 10, 2006

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With a simple bump of a key, most of the post office boxes rented at the U.S. Postal Service and UPS Stores can be opened in seconds, making consumers and business owners who rely on the boxes vulnerable to theft, a local security expert says.

So-called bump keys have yet to cause widespread problems here, but thieves are increasingly using them in bigger cities, and as South Dakota's largest city grows, its post office boxes could be targeted more often, Marc Tobias of Sioux Falls suggested.

"It allows you to open virtually all standard locks in seconds, and kids can do it," Tobias, author of "Locks, Safes and Security," said of bumping.

Here's how it works: A bump key has all the grooves cut to the maximum depth and a tool to hit the back of the key, Tobias explained. When the key is "bumped" while in the lock, it separates the lock's top and bottom pins so the key can be turned.

Not everyone believes the use of bumping is widespread. But Tobias said the fact that most post office box locks can be opened so easily is a matter of federal security, particularly since many post office stores are open 24 hours.

"The post office's worst nightmare is Ted Kaczynski with a bump key," he said.

An industry official said she is aware of the issue but hasn't had any major complaints.

"This is not a problem that we generally have at our stores," said Becca Andrews, spokeswoman for UPS Stores. "Our store owners and employees know their customers. If they're coming in to get their mail four, five times a week, they get to know them."

Andrews said the stores also have outside door locks that customers must use for 24-hour access.

Another local store, PostNet, uses the same method for 24-hour access. Though owner Janel Cole hadn't heard of bumping, she said she also knows her customers.

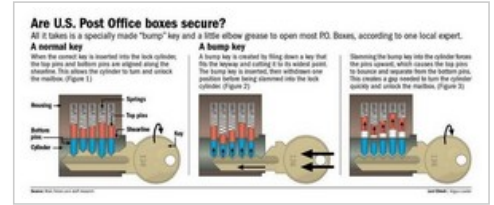
"I'm always here in the store, and I know who has a mailbox with me," Cole said. "I don't think that would be a big security concern."

UPS doesn't have plans to change the locks in its boxes, Andrews said, but she added the company would consider it if people do start calling about problems.

Tobias, meanwhile, wants solutions before the problems strike.

He wants the boxes made more secure by changing the locks. He said he'd also like the laws that govern mail delivery, which he said haven't been updated for about 50 years, to be changed to prevent the sale of bump keys.

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