



Australia Post

'SAFE DROP' PROGRAM: A REVIEW OF THE FIRST YEAR

March 2010

Findings of an investigation by the Commonwealth and Postal Industry Ombudsman,
Prof. John McMillan, under the *Ombudsman Act 1976*

REPORT NO. **03|2010**

Reports by the Ombudsman

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September 2008, Australia Post introduced its 'Safe Drop' program across Australia.

Under the program, non-signature parcels that don't fit into a mail box are no longer always taken back to the post office for collection if the addressee is not home to receive them. Instead, provided certain conditions are met, they can be left in a safe place at the delivery address.

Our view at the time the program commenced was that this was an operational decision that Australia Post was entitled to make. However, we decided to monitor complaints we received in connection with the program in case any issues of concern arose.

By and large, a consideration of complaint data from the first year of the program suggests that there are no significant or systemic problems arising from it. However, we have produced this report to bring to Australia Post's attention observations that we believe warrant further consideration. They relate to:

- additional training and awareness for staff about 'safe places' for delivery
- people who want to 'opt out' of the Safe Drop program
- the requirement to leave a card when an item is 'safe dropped'.

PART 1—THE SAFE DROP PROGRAM

Parcel delivery

1.1 Traditionally, Australia Post would not deliver a parcel that did not fit safely into a customer's mail box unless someone was at home to accept the parcel. If nobody responded to a delivery person's ring or knock on the front door at the addressee residence, the parcel would be returned to an Australia Post facility for collection. A card would be left to notify the addressee that this had happened.

1.2 As related in the Ombudsman's 2008 report *Australia Post—use of notification cards*, the system generated complaints to Australia Post and to the Ombudsman. Typical complaints were that a card had been left but there had been no attempt to knock on the door, or that problems had been encountered when the addressee subsequently tried to collect the parcel (it had been lost or given to the wrong person, or the customer was unable to get to the relevant post office during business hours).

1.3 We also encountered a variety of complaints relating to efforts to deliver parcels to units, high rise blocks, or premises where there was no public access to the front door (for example where a security buzzer needed to be operated to gain access through a gate). Such arrangements would hinder an attempt to deliver a parcel, even when the addressee was at home.

Safe Drop

1.4 As the parcels market expanded with the rise of internet shopping, it was logical for Australia Post to explore the possibility of streamlining its parcels delivery processes. This led to the trialling of the Safe Drop program, and its implementation Australia-wide in September 2008.

1.5 The idea was that parcels not requiring a signature for delivery, and that could be safely left at the destination address, would not be returned to the post office if no-one was at home to receive them. Instead, a card would be left advising the addressee that the item had been delivered. The conditions for leaving an item were that:

- a signature was not required
- the item was undamaged at the time it was left
- it was protected from potentially damaging weather
- it was secure from pets
- it could not be seen by passers-by.

1.6 We took the view at the time that Safe Drop was introduced across Australia that it was not unreasonable for Australia Post to make this change to its processes. While there was an element of risk, this was mitigated to an extent by the Safe Drop conditions.

Our consideration of the issues

1.7 We considered it appropriate to review any complaints about the program one year after its country-wide implementation to see whether any issues were arising from the operation of the program, and assess whether there was any impact on the number of complaints we were receiving about carding.

1.8 We analysed complaints to the Ombudsman for the year 8 September 2008 to 7 September 2009 (the first year of Safe Drop operations across Australia).

Australia Post's response

1.9 We provided a draft of this report to Australia Post for its comment. In response, Australia Post advised that:

- it expects delivery people to keep to the conditions that parcels are only to be left where they are not in view, and are safe from weather and pets. Australia Post management continues to give direction to delivery drivers about locations where items are not to be safe dropped, and remedial action will be taken where the correct procedures are not followed
- development of a process to permit customers to formally ask to be excluded from Safe Drop would add to delivery costs and would affect parcel prices. Australia Post has no plans to introduce such a process
- it is Australia Post policy that a card should be left at all times when a parcel is safe dropped. Remedial action will be taken where it is apparent that correct procedures have not been followed.

1.10 We appreciate that a formal process for addressees to opt out of the Safe Drop program would add complexity to Australia Post operations and would involve a cost. However, a cost is also incurred when parcels are safe dropped inappropriately and lost or damaged. Our suggestion that addressees should have a way of formally notifying Australia Post of issues that might make their property unsuitable for Safe Drop could save both customers and Australia Post money in the long run.

1.11 We will monitor this issue and, if future complaints to the Ombudsman indicate that items are being safe dropped inappropriately in the face of customer requests or warnings not to do so, we may consider reporting further on this matter.

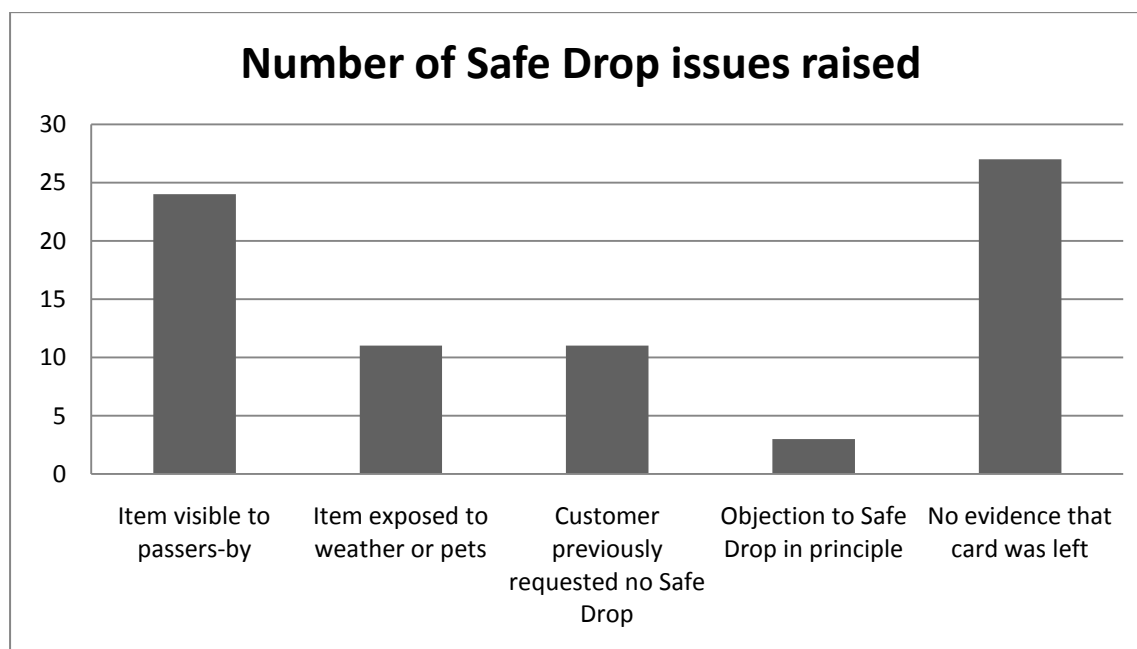
1.12 Overall, we welcome Australia Post's commitment to ensuring that delivery drivers follow the rules when safe dropping parcels, and we hope that as time goes by and familiarity with the program increases, we will see fewer complaints that parcels have been safe dropped in inappropriate locations.

PART 2—COMPLAINT THEMES

2.1 The number of complaints that raised Safe Drop issues during the system's first year was low. We appreciate that not all complainants would have been aware that the problem they encountered was related to Safe Drop—accordingly, we identified Safe Drop complaints as those where the complainant knew that Safe Drop had occurred and those that apparently related to Safe Drop (for example, when a parcel had been left by the delivery person on someone's veranda and it had been stolen).

2.2 For the year in question, we identified 37 complaints about Safe Drop issues. This compared to a total number of approaches about Australia Post of 2,315 during the same period, and constituted 1.6% of the total.

2.3 The following chart shows the number of times different issues were raised by complainants. Some complaints raised two or more issues.

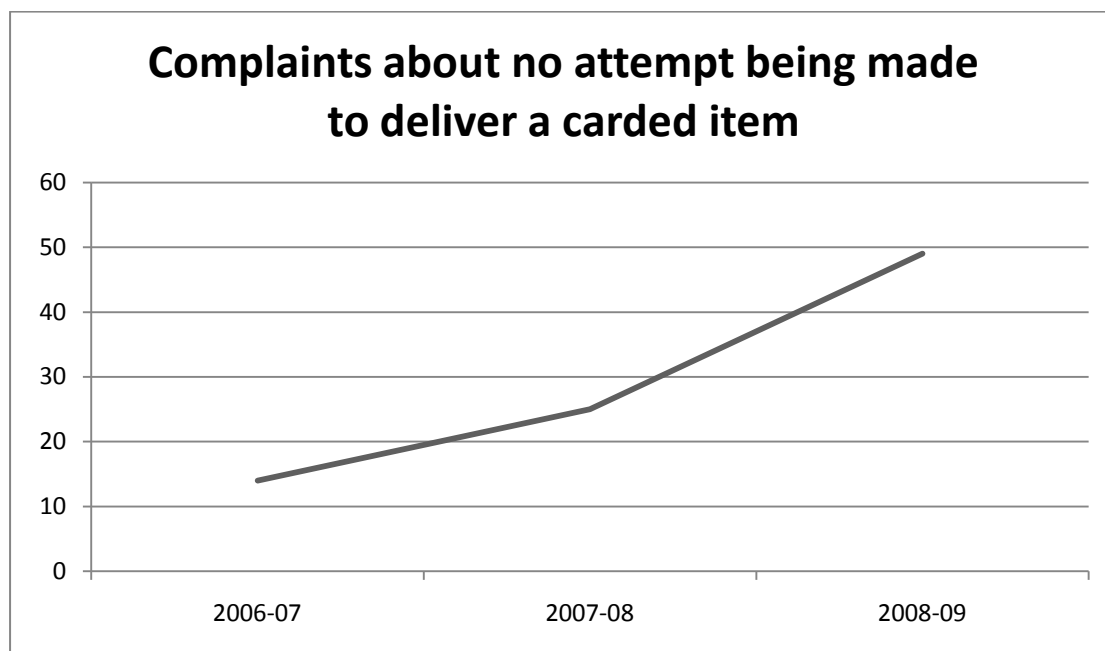


2.4 In more than two-thirds of cases, there was no mention of a card having been left to notify the addressee of the Safe Drop. This was not an issue that complainants tended to raise with us. As discussed later in this report, it may nevertheless have implications for delivery people who Safe Drop items, and we include the data here for comparative purposes.

2.5 In preparing this report, we revisited a separate but related issue discussed in Ombudsman report 14|2008 *Australia Post—use of notification cards*. That report dealt with complaints that Australia Post had made no attempt to deliver an item, and instead left a notification card advising the addressee to collect the item from the post office. The addressee claimed to have been at home at the time of the attempted delivery.

2.6 We revisited the issue to gauge whether or not the introduction of the Safe Drop scheme had reduced such complaints, given that fewer items would have been returned to the post office.

2.7 In fact, the opposite seems to have been the case, as the following graph illustrates.



2.8 In fact, the number of these complaints has risen significantly. We have not investigated the reason for the increase. However, it is possible that there would have been an even greater number of complaints had Safe Drop not been introduced.

PART 3—COMMENTARY

3.1 A few complainants have suggested that Safe Drop is an unacceptable system or that the system is out of step with community expectations, but this view is not supported by the low number of complaints about Safe Drop. As a general observation, we believe the program has been accepted by customers and can be considered a success.

Location chosen for Safe Drop

3.2 It is not surprising that the most common complaint about Safe Drop related to the delivery person's choice of location to leave an item. In some cases, delivery people may have taken too broad a view of what would be considered a 'safe' place to leave an item.

3.3 Australia Post should take this issue seriously and emphasise in its training to delivery people that if a place cannot be found for an item out of view of the street, and safe from weather and pets, it must not be safe dropped.

Requests not to Safe Drop

3.4 Of particular interest were the complaints we received from people who had tried without success to make arrangements with Australia Post not to Safe Drop items at their address.

3.5 In discussions with Australia Post at the start of the program, we were told that customers could choose to 'opt out' of Safe Drop. The procedure for doing this was not clear, but we assumed that a customer could contact Australia Post using its customer contact number, or via their local delivery facility, and have their address identified as unsuitable for Safe Drop.

3.6 We have received complaints from people who tried to do this but were told it was not possible, and from people who were told they could request items not be safe dropped at their property, but subsequently received Safe Drop deliveries.

3.7 Complaint investigations carried out by us since the start of the program have clarified Australia Post's attitude to 'opt-out' requests. We understand that there is no set process for an *addressee* to 'opt out' of Safe Drop, but a sender can mark an item 'do not Safe Drop' (a form label is provided for this purpose). An addressee who does not want parcels safe dropped can try to make arrangements with the sender to that effect and 'opt out' in that way.

3.8 This however leaves an unmet need in relation to people who may have good reasons for not wanting items safe dropped. It will not always be possible to ask a sender to mark an item 'do not Safe Drop' (which assumes, as a starting point, that an item is expected); and the sender may in any event fail to follow such an instruction. For example, it is not clear whether or not large international retailers such as amazon.com will follow this instruction.

Case study: Healthy horses

Ms A ordered a parcel of horse feed supplement, which the delivery person safe dropped. Ms A's horse leaned over her fence, tore the parcel apart and destroyed it.

Ms A complained to Australia Post but was told that there was nothing that could be done, procedures had been followed correctly, and the item should have been insured. Ms A was not only dissatisfied with the damage to her parcel, but was concerned that the same thing would happen in the future.

Case study: Unit issues

Ms B lived in the front unit of a block of 10 units. She received parcel deliveries that were safe dropped on her front door step. While the delivery person might reasonably have thought that deliveries could not be seen from the street, they were on view to occupants and visitors of the other nine units in the complex. Ms B was concerned for her mail security and wanted all delivery items to be carded for collection.

3.9 In the case of Ms A, Australia Post's initial reaction was that there was nothing that could be done. It was only following our investigation that Australia Post agreed to instruct the delivery contractor to not Safe Drop at this address.

3.10 In Ms B's case, Australia Post had already agreed to arrange for all deliveries to be carded for collection because her premises were not suitable for Safe Drop. However, Ms B had cause to complain to us on two occasions when this agreement was not honoured. It was not clear to us how the 'no Safe Drop' agreement was implemented, beyond a verbal instruction to the delivery contractor.

3.11 We consider that there is a need for a procedure by which customers who do not want items safe dropped at their property to lodge a request to that effect with Australia Post. This information should then be made available to delivery people. We reiterate that there may be good reasons, not immediately obvious to a delivery person, which make a property unsuitable for Safe Drop.

3.12 Australia Post should include information in its General Post Guide and Parcel Post Guide about the procedure for requesting that items not be safe dropped at an address.

Leaving Safe Drop cards

3.13 A feature of the Safe Drop system as originally implemented was that delivery people were required to leave a card advising the addressee that an item had been safe dropped. The intention was that the card would advise the customer that an item—which could be concealed from view—had been delivered. It would also provide a measure of proof that an item had been left in accordance with authorised procedures if delivery was later questioned.

3.14 In 10 of the Safe Drop complaints we analysed there was evidence that a Safe Drop card had been left. In 27 cases, there was no such evidence. It is possible that in some of the cases where no card was mentioned by the complainant, a card had been left but overlooked or thought unimportant. However, it would seem that in many cases, perhaps the majority, a card was not left. Anecdotal evidence from Ombudsman staff who have received Safe Drop deliveries also suggests that cards are not always left when a parcel is safe dropped.

3.15 It may be that delivery people are failing to follow this requirement of the Safe Drop program. We appreciate that the lack of complaints to the Ombudsman may indicate that this is not considered a problem. Our view, however, is that if Australia Post does not consider failure to leave a card problematic, it should consider revising the Safe Drop rules to bring policy into line with practice. The risk to delivery people is that if they fail to leave a card when the instruction is to do so, and an item is stolen before the addressee gets to it, the implication may be that the delivery person did not leave the article.

3.16 Australia Post should therefore consider the necessity of leaving a Safe Drop card whenever an item is safe dropped. If it is not necessary in all cases, Australia Post should review its policy on this issue.

PART 4—CONCLUSION

4.1 Our complaint data does not suggest any systemic problems or widespread concerns with the Safe Drop program. However, we make the following observations for Australia Post’s consideration to improve the program:

- Australia Post should emphasise in its training to delivery people that if they cannot find a place to leave an item where it cannot be seen from the road and is safe from weather and pets, it must not be safe dropped but should be carded for collection.
- Australia Post should establish a procedure for customers who do not want items safe dropped at their property to lodge a request to that effect with Australia Post, and for delivery people to access that information. Australia Post should include this information in its General Post Guide and Parcel Post Guide.
- Australia Post should consider the necessity of leaving a Safe Drop card whenever an item is safe dropped. If it is not necessary in all cases, Australia Post should review its policy on this issue.