

What's in a Few Pennies?

Sterlin Reaves

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. What numbers do you cross-check? (See definition below.) For example, do you cross-check your paycheck with your own record of the number of hours you worked? Do you cross-check your credit card statement with your receipts?
2. Have you ever discovered an error in a transaction? What did you do about it? What happened?

Little Oversights Add Up

I've always considered myself good at math. In school I did well, and on my GED I ranked in the 76th percentile for the entire United States. So when I came to prison back in 1999, I would never have thought that my little oversights while purchasing commissary would cost me hundreds of dollars, and more importantly that this was happening to many prisoners across the country.

I first figured it out one day when I was bored and decided to add up all of my recent commissary purchases and cross-check them against my receipts. What I noticed was that I'd been charged 87 cents more than I should have. I then went back to older receipts and checked them. I discovered that for 20 orders I'd been overcharged nearly \$10. I was curious if this was happening to other prisoners, so I told my friends to cross-check their orders and receipts, and many of them discovered that the same thing had happened to them.

Filing a Grievance

I filed a grievance and got the 87 cents back. Unfortunately, the statute of limitations meant that I couldn't file a grievance on the older purchases. I've been buying commissary for 20 years, so I'm sure I've been overcharged hundreds of dollars.

This experience motivated me to be more aware of my math, and recently I discovered that a similar thing was happening with my wages. I

sometimes got shorted payment for a day or two that I worked. As you can imagine many others experienced the same thing.

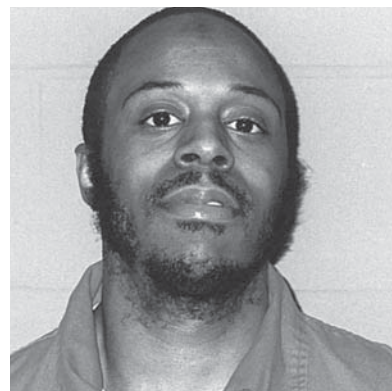
Every Penny Counts!

What I learned through the experience is that we often overlook mathematical errors especially when we think the stakes aren't that high. But for those of us who are incarcerated (and even those everyday citizens who struggle to make ends meet), every dollar counts. And in my case, every penny!

AFTER YOU READ:

1. The author refers to the "statute of limitations." What does that mean? If you're not sure, can you figure it out from the context?
2. The author says we might overlook math errors if "the stakes aren't that high." What does he mean by that? Use clues from the context to figure it out.

Sterlin Reaves is from Philadelphia. He takes correspondence courses in prison. He can be reached at DX-5999, 1189 Fryock Rd., Indiana, PA 15701



Cross-check (v):



**to verify your numbers
by checking them
against another source
of information**