Singular noun with a plural possessive

To avoid ambiguity, use a singular noun with a plural possessive when only one of the things possessed could belong to each individual.

- Forbes knew most of them by their first name.
- Four pilots crashed to their death.
- Think of the last name of five pupils in the room.
- The steam line ruptured, causing the death of seven longshoremen.

However, take care not to apply the rule to the wrong noun.

Wrong: It is pretty clear that the smile on the face of the delegates, whenever they look at each other, is not a sincere one.

Right: It is pretty clear that the smile on the faces of the delegates, whenever they look at each other, is not a sincere one.

(Smile is the noun the rule applies to.)

Taken from Words into Type. Englewood Cliffs, NJ. Prentice-Hall. 1974