

Fake IDs Openly Made and Sold in New York City

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It is easy for an illegal immigrant - or a terrorist - to get false documents in New York. The New York Sun did it in about an hour this week, just three days after President Bush promised to tackle document fraud.

Our fake green card cost \$100. Roosevelt Avenue in Queens is an open market for the manufacture of Social Security papers and driver's licenses, as well as the valuable green cards that certify permanent resident status.

Despite federal and local law enforcement pledges of investigations, including a sweep earlier this week of the operation where the reporter purchased the card, business is booming.

"Roosevelt Avenue is like the mecca for fake documents," a state Assemblyman who represents the district, Jose Peralta, said. "If anybody comes through New York City and they ask, 'Where can I get a false document?' the no. 1 answer is going to be Roosevelt Avenue. It's the place, it's the spot."

Indeed, it's an international market: Local dealers said most of their clients are immigrants from Latin America, but also include Africans, Haitians and Europeans, and even Americans. Customers are not only immigrants to New York, but travel to Roosevelt Avenue from far beyond the five boroughs: "I have clients from Boston, North Carolina, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Virginia," a young Mexican seller said last week. "Kids of 16 even come to buy IDs to enter the discotheques."

Mr. Peralta attributes the vitality of the strip to a lack of federal, state, and city enforcement. In the 1980s and 1990s, he said, more attention was given by the Queens district attorney's office and federal authorities. When it waned, Mr. Peralta said, "It took on a life on its own. Once those entities stopped investigating, it developed into the lifeline of fraudulent documents."

The Department of Homeland Security said it is aware of the problem and is working with local enforcement agencies to prevent it. "Roosevelt Avenue is one of the primary areas in New York City to buy false documents, but it is not limited to any borough, or any immigrant community, and it is not new," a spokesman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Mark Thorn, said. Earlier this week the Queens district attorney's office, working with the New York Police Department's Special Fraud Unit, took a swipe at the market. In one of the largest investigations in recent years, authorities arrested more than a dozen alleged dealers in false documents, including the location where this reporter bought a fake green card last Thursday for \$100. It will take more than one sweep, however, to put the brakes on this market.

"You can put some out of business, but others will just spring up," the president of the National Border Patrol Council, representing more than 10,000 border patrol agents, T.J. Bonner, said. "As

long as there's a demand for these documents and the documents continue to be accepted, people will be out there supplying."

Employers are not required to verify the validity of immigration documents presented by a prospective employee. Even if an employer chooses to try, Mr. Bonner said, "It's often impossible to differentiate between the good documents and the bad documents."

One young Mexican dealer on Roosevelt Avenue who saw the police close off the street, arresting a dozen of his colleagues on Sunday, said the owner of the business already fled south of the border. The dealer, however, said he is staying local. Yesterday afternoon he said he was back selling cards on the sidewalk, working for another "company" 40 blocks down Roosevelt from his old location.

The young man, who prior to hawking documents had worked low-wage labor from washing dishes to construction until he was lured by the easy money, said arrests were part of the illicit trade. "It's something normal already," he said in Spanish.

In interviews last week before the sweep, other dealers - the lower rungs of the smuggling operation - said they see their job as responding to supply and demand. Illegal immigrants like them need to work. Fraudulent Social Security card or greens cards are the means to do so.

Despite increasing immigration enforcement on the border, the inflows of illegal immigrants last year for the first time outnumbered legal immigrants to America, according to research by the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington. The organization estimates the total of illegal immigrants at 11 million nationwide and 525,000 in New York City.

A young Mexican document dealer at one of the busiest spots likened himself last week to a modern-day Robin Hood. "We know it's something bad because it's against the law, but we are doing something that serves the people," the clean-cut illegal immigrant, who identified himself only as "Raul," said in Spanish. "That's not a justification, but it's the reality."

He said he earned \$200 on the average day, much more than he made prepping salads and deserts at a Manhattan restaurant, and enough for him to have already bought a home in his native Acapulco.

Raul said he still worked in the restaurant three afternoons a week as a cover. If the cops busted him, as they'd done once before, he said, the restaurant would cover him when he claimed he was buying documents, not selling them.

Before the sweep, between juggling cell phone conversations and handing over papers, Raul on Thursday afternoon pointed out fake document pushers like himself. The young Mexican men blended in on the immigrant thoroughfare, but they were hard at work, whispering "Social," "Social" as potential customers passed by.

When someone approached wanting documents, Raul, who studied psychology for six months in Mexico, said, "I see it in their eyes, I see they're looking for something." Documents are offered, \$50 for a Social Security card, \$100 for a new green card. In a nearby office, three more worked a computer and typewriter to manufacture the documents. The boss, he and other dealers said, was another Mexican, a 35-year-old former gang member. "Because of that everyone respects him on the

block," Raul said. "They don't mess with him."

The founder of the Guardian Angels, Curtis Sliwa, who set up a chapter in Corona a couple years ago because of a reported rise in Latino gangs there, maintains gangs are increasingly behind the fake identification trade. Raul and two of his co-workers denied the charge. Rather, they said, they try and keep gangs away because they bring the attention of the police.

The police were constantly circling trying to catch them in action, the men said. "It's a risk you take when you do this work," Raul said. Those caught may face deportation - which Raul laughed off as "a free trip home" - or felony charges, which carry a penalty of up to seven years in prison.

In Arizona last week, the president acknowledged the prevalence of document fraud and proposed two solutions: a program where employers could rapidly determine the validity of a Social Security number and a legal temporary worker program that would eliminate some of the demand for black market labor. Mr. Bonner of the border patrol group said he was "not very impressed." "They have had such a pathetic showing in interior enforcement that it's been a joke for several years," he said. "Politicians like to pretend we can have open borders for laborers but somehow seal the borders off against criminals and terrorists. It's a laughable notion, but they actually try and sell that notion."

On a local level, Mr. Peralta said he had been surprised last week when after he brought up the Roosevelt Avenue market, many of his colleagues at the Assembly told him they had no idea about it. "We're sitting here talking about security, about anti-terrorism money, yet this is happening at the grassroots level," he said. "You don't know who they're selling false documents to."

Mr. Peralta said the Department of Homeland Security had approached him in the past with a plan to do a sweep of the area. That's the wrong approach, he said, because it would only get rid of those who are easily replicable, and the lowest in the operation.

"You've got to eliminate the brains of the operation," Mr. Peralta said. "The guppies are a dime a dozen - anyone can stand on the street saying, 'Social, Social.'"

How To Buy a Fake ID on Roosevelt Avenue

The dealer, Juan, lingering next to the taco stand on Roosevelt Avenue, had an approachable air despite a tear-shaped tattoo under his eye and multiple tongue piercings. When a reporter from The New York Sun crossed his path he sprang into action, asking in a whisper, "documentos?"

A new permanent residency card with a special hologram, Juan said, would cost \$100 and would be ready within an hour. An older version that would expire within the year would run \$80. Other documents were also available: passports, licenses, etc.

Juan sized up the reporter, who was speaking in a Portuguese-accented Spanish, as a Brazilian immigrant. When she told him she was frightened of the police, he reassured her by saying that many other Brazilians purchase and renew fake green cards from him at the spot he regularly occupies on Roosevelt Avenue. The police, he added, were nothing to worry about. The document was a flawless replica of the real thing, he said.

The reporter agreed to purchase the new green card and was whisked away to an instant photo shop a block away. The Asian storeowners gave Juan a familiar nod as he explained what was needed. They spoke to the reporter in basic Spanish and said she would have to pay \$5 for the photos. Juan then demanded a \$20 deposit from her and handed her a card with his cell phone number. Then he disappeared down the street.

An hour and 20 minutes later, the card was still not ready. Another pair of dealers offering false documents arrived next to the taco stand at Juan's designated meeting spot. Juan walked over with two cell phones in hand and told the reporter her document would be ready in a couple of minutes. Two tall Latino men approached him, asking for cards, and Juan walked off with them to repeat the cycle.

When he returned a few minutes later, he had the false green card wrapped in a piece of paper from the instant photo shop. He began to hand it to the reporter when a colleague stopped him. "The feds are there," the colleague warned in Spanish. "You've got to be more careful," the colleague told him.

In a plain car across the street in front of the bank was a tall officer in a dark uniform. Juan disappeared inside a Mexican restaurant, and the reporter followed. The two sat down, and Juan slid the card across the table in exchange for an additional \$80.