



GHOST TAGS

Inside New York City's Black Market for Temporary License Plates

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Illustration by Martin Schapiro

STREETS BLOG

PART 3

The Buyers

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A

drian Mocha's driver's license was suspended, and he didn't have car insurance, but he found a way to get behind the wheel nevertheless. It involved temporary license plates.

Those are the paper tags that car dealerships put on cars they just sold or leased so that customers can drive off before receiving metal license plates. That's virtually the only scenario in which a dealership can legally issue temp tags, as they're known. But Mocha found there are plenty of temp tags for sale online, and the sellers don't seem too concerned whether the buyer is allowed to be on the road.

So Mocha bought a temp tag and kept driving. No one seemed to notice. The tag expired, so he bought another. Then another. Then another.

"I was running with temps almost a whole year and they never stopped me," he said recently in Brooklyn.

You can get temp tags from many states, Mocha said, although those from New Jersey, Georgia and Texas are among the most common in New York City. He received his tags by email and printed them

out. There are counterfeit temps for about \$50, he said, which aren't connected to your name or address, so you won't get bills for running red lights or passing toll cameras. For around \$160, he said, you can also find real temp tags that are less likely to be noticed by the police even though they were acquired illegally.

Eventually a cop spotted a fake tag on Mocha's car and pulled him over. But not before he had gone through eight or nine of them.

"I'm from Bushwick. Everybody there has temps," he said. "Nobody really wants to pay the parking tickets or stuff like that."

Mocha and his neighbors are among many in New York City and across the country who have turned to fraudulent temporary license plates to drive without car insurance or valid licenses, to skirt tolls, taxes and fees, or to commit more serious crimes on the road with their identities concealed. Many drivers find their illegal tags in a thriving black market that operates by word of mouth and in plain sight online—a market supplied not only by counterfeiters, but also by licensed used car [dealers](#) who exploit loose regulations in states like New Jersey and Georgia to issue real temp tags illegally. The consequences of this illicit trade have been dire.

"We've seen ghost cars with fake, obscured license plates speeding through our school zones where our children are playing," Kim Royster, chief of the New York City Police Department Transportation Bureau, [said](#) last year. "We've seen ghost cars driving through red lights and hitting pedestrians and other vehicles, causing serious injuries and then driving away."

Twenty-five people were killed in crashes involving cars with temporary license plates in New York City in 2021 and 2022, according to the NYPD. At least ten of those plates were fraudulent.

The city has sought to combat the problem by going after drivers with bad tags, but there's little that local police can do about licensed dealerships taking advantage of weak regulations to pump out temp tags in other states. Even simply catching drivers with bad tags comes with challenges, former NYPD auto crime detectives told Streetsblog, given the sheer variety of temp tags on city streets, the difficulty in determining a tag is fraudulent and the gap between the effort required and the minor criminal charges against drivers that typically follow.

Sham paper tags are [among many techniques that](#) drivers now

employ to evade accountability on the road amid the rise of so-called automated enforcement—the cameras that generate bills for motorists who pass under toll gantries or run red lights. With cities seeking to deploy many [more](#) such cameras in the years to come, the number of temp tags on city streets may only grow.

“There’s so much of this bad stuff out there,” said Thomas Burke, one of the former NYPD auto crime detectives, who has investigated the misuse of temp tags. “And you’re going to see more and more of it.”

► Advertisements for illegal temporary license plates abound online.
Graphic: Angel Mendoza



A thriving market

Those seeking an illegal temporary license plate don’t have far to look. Facebook, Craigslist and Instagram are teeming with ads for them, and typically list a phone number to call or text.

“Georgia, Florida, Texas & NJ Temporary tags available for your New Car!” read one ad posted in December on Craigslist in New York. “We are a licensed dealer in the state of Georgia, Florida, Texas & NJ.”

The phone number provided in the ad also appears on the website of a Florida paving company that, per Florida business records, has a single officer: Neelam Nayee. Reached by phone, Nayee said she charges \$150 to \$175 for tags, and the business is profitable, although she declined to say to what extent. She said her tags are real and that she has drivers who deliver them.

“I’m doing Georgia, Florida and Texas,” she said. “Still got the dealerships.”

She implied that she previously sold New Jersey temp tags through a dealership there that has been shut down. She declined to identify any of the dealerships.

Although it is illegal to sell temporary license plates, Nayee insisted her business is legal.

“Everything is done properly, legally,” she said. “I have to check the license is good, I have to make sure you have a policy number, the name—all that bullshit that is the right thing to do.”

Some buyers are duped by false assurances of legality. That includes a 42-year-old Ecuadorian immigrant interviewed by Streetsblog outside of Brooklyn criminal court.

The woman, who asked to remain anonymous because she is living in the country illegally, said she purchased a New Jersey temp tag over the phone without realizing it was illegal.

“He told us it was real,” she said. The Brooklyn district attorney charged her with violations including misdemeanor criminal possession of a forged instrument, which carries up to one year in jail. She also was charged for driving without a license or car insurance.

Eburama Sillah also told Streetsblog he didn’t realize his temp tag was illegal. The 26-year-old Bronx resident said he paid \$200 for a 45-day Georgia tag because going to the DMV is “a hassle.” The tag was “legit,” he said—the man who sold it to him in the Bronx has a Georgia used car dealership license.

Dealerships in Georgia and New Jersey are prohibited from issuing temporary license plates without selling or leasing someone a car, but many have done so nonetheless, Streetsblog reported [previously](#). State regulators have caught and punished some of those dealers with fines and license suspensions or revocations. But those fines typically range from \$500 to a few thousand dollars, according to disciplinary records and interviews, while possible profits from selling temp tags can be far greater.

One former seller is Jessenia Baena. The Queens woman said she sold around 3,000 temporary license plates through Corona Auto Sales, her dealership registered to a remote commercial building in Hackettstown, New Jersey, that serves as the business address of dozens of other used car dealers.



▲ This quiet office complex in the hills of western New Jersey is the official address of dozens of used car dealers that printed 13,000 temporary license plates last year.

Photo: Johnny Milano

Baena said she did not have to be in Hackettstown, or even New Jersey, to profit from her dealership license. From her home computer in Queens, she said she was able to log into a web portal created by the New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission—the state’s motor vehicle agency—and print official New Jersey temp tags. She printed about 500 tags, she said, and made around 2,500 photocopies, which she sold for \$100 each, mostly in Queens and on Long Island. At that price, 3,000 tags would yield \$300,000 in revenue.

Baena was eventually caught by the MVC, which sent her a letter informing her that the MVC was suspending her dealer license and fining her. But the fine was just \$500—the maximum allowed under New Jersey law for a first dealership violation.

As for why she opened a dealership in New Jersey instead of New York, where she lives?

“It’s easier,” she said.

Some dealerships have been shut down for temp tag fraud, but others manage to continue their illegal trade unnoticed, said Abdul Cummings, a Jersey City dealer who knows dealers selling tags.

The trick, Cummings said, is to make every temp tag look as if it’s going to an out-of-state customer. In his experience, New Jersey

auditors don't look too closely at those transactions, as New Jersey doesn't receive sales tax on cars sold to residents of other states.

“I know a guy in Jersey City here that has a dealership that—he hasn't personally sold or retailed a car in years. All he does is sell temp tags,” Cummings said. “If it makes an extra seven or eight grand a month, why not?”



Cummings blamed temp tag abuses in New Jersey on weak regulations that make it easy to open a used car dealership and print temps—a situation Streetsblog also found playing out in Georgia, another state whose temp tags commonly appear on cars in New York City. There, too, oversight of temporary license plates for out-of-state buyers is minimal, said Jon Salmon, the finance manager of a used car dealership in Alpharetta, Georgia.

▲ Abdul Cummings, a used car dealer in Jersey City, New Jersey, watched the black market for temporary license plates explode during the pandemic.

Photo: Jesse Coburn

“If you're just doing temp tags for out of state, they're not so concerned for those,” he said.

In a statement, New Jersey MVC spokesman William Connolly said: “To fight and deter fraud, the MVC continues to work closely with law enforcement at the local, state, and federal levels, and enforce all applicable administrative action against dealers that improperly issue temporary tags and violate New Jersey law.”

The Georgia Department of Revenue, which regulates used car dealers in the state, released a statement condemning “bad actors” who “stain the reputation of hardworking Georgians engaged in the business of buying and selling motor vehicles.”

Tolls skipped, lives lost

Last summer, New York City Mayor Eric Adams stood at a lectern in a tow pound in Queens, holding New Jersey and Georgia temporary license plates in his hands.

“Ghost vehicles can't be traced,” he said, waving the tags to assembled

news reporters. “And we know if we don’t get them off the streets, just like ghost guns, they become a weapon of death for our innocent New Yorkers.”

It was the second city press conference on the topic in just over a year—the last one [held](#) the summer prior by Adams’s predecessor, Bill de Blasio. Despite their attention to the problem, neither mayor had much more to announce than crackdowns on drivers using phony plates. Where the tags were coming from—like the licensed used car dealers selling them illegally—received little attention in their remarks.



◀ New York City Mayor Eric Adams decried the proliferation of illegal temporary license plates at a news conference in Queens in July 2022.

Photo: Gersh Kuntzman

De Blasio and Adams had good reasons for focusing on the problem. Sham paper plates had been used in connection with [shootings](#), [robberies](#) and [hit-and-runs](#), city officials said. Of the 3,300 cars with paper plates towed by the NYPD in 2022, 400 were never claimed.

Temp tag fraud costs local agencies millions of dollars each year—likely tens of millions—in unpaid tolls and traffic tickets. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority alone lost \$11.3 million in unpaid tolls at its bridges and tunnels because of drivers with bad temp tags in 2022, an agency spokeswoman said. The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey loses more than \$40 million in unpaid tolls at its bridges and tunnels each year, an agency spokeswoman said, although that figure also includes tolls lost to obscured and missing plates.

And the city Department of Transportation was unable to bill potentially \$61 million in tickets for possible traffic violations caught by its cameras in 2022, although that number also includes tickets lost to drivers without license plates. (DOT cannot even bill drivers with

legitimate temporary tags caught speeding or running red lights by DOT cameras.)

The temp tag trade also robs states of unpaid sales taxes and registration fees on cars. A New York DMV spokesman said the agency has no estimate of the extent of that lost revenue.

Then there is the human toll.

In August 2020, a driver ran a red light in Flatbush, Brooklyn, and [rammed](#) into the side of a Lyft carrying Isaiah Benloss, a recent high school graduate. Benloss suffered a traumatic brain injury and died 15 months later. The car had a New Jersey temp tag on it; its driver fled the scene. The NYPD has not caught the driver.

In February 2022, 10-year-old Davnia Afokoba was walking home from school in Far Rockaway, Queens, when a woman driving an SUV with a learner's permit and a Texas temporary license plate [struck](#) Afokoba on the sidewalk, pinning her under the car. A building facade collapsed on the car and Afokoba, who was killed. The driver received only a summons.

► A woman driving with a learner's permit and a Texas temporary license plate struck and killed Davnia Afokoba as she was walking home from school in Queens last year.

Photo: Jeff Bachner



Seven months later, an unlicensed driver in a Dodge Ram pickup truck ran over and [killed](#) a 5-year-old boy in East Elmhurst, Queens, before speeding off. The truck had a counterfeit New Jersey temp tag. The NYPD ultimately caught the driver, Xavier Carchipull, who pleaded not guilty to criminally negligent homicide and seven other charges. But the Queens district attorney is not charging Carchipull for the bad tag, which the office declined to explain.

Noah McClain, a sociologist at Santa Clara University who researches transportation technology and law enforcement, characterized the misuse of temp tags as a symptom of a broader problem of car dependency in the United States.

“We have created a world in which the inability to drive a car can be a crisis—a crisis for employment, a crisis for handling logistics like childcare or getting to the grocery store,” McClain said. “That adds an underlying desperation on top of an ugly car culture that exists nationally in a way that might inspire people to mask up their cars and be sort of permanent outlaws.”

‘A scathing problem’

New York City has sought to tamp down on temp tag fraud, [leading several well-publicized towing](#) operations of cars with fake plates. But for officers tasked with identifying bad tags, it isn’t as easy as it seems, two former NYPD auto crimes detectives told Streetsblog.

Authentic temp tags look different from one state to the next, meaning officers must be familiar with the various official designs to tell a real one from a fake. Legitimate temps appear in law enforcement databases, but determining whether a real tag was acquired legally can require calls to DMVs, police departments and even car dealerships out of state—an often-fruitless undertaking on nights and weekends, said Burke, the retired NYPD detective, who is also a board member of the New York Anti-Car Theft & Fraud Association.

Even if an officer is able to identify a sham tag, the result is often only a misdemeanor charge, said Vic Ferrari, a former NYPD auto crime detective. And that still might not lead to prosecution, he said.

“You might waste up to six or seven hours to get down to the district attorney’s office only to be told: this isn’t a strong case, we’re going to decline to prosecute,” Ferrari said. “Nobody wants to go through that.”

The NYPD did not respond to a request for comment. Streetsblog also asked the Federal Bureau of Investigation as well as federal, state and local prosecutors in New Jersey, Georgia and New York whether they have investigated or charged anyone for fraudulently issuing temp tags. The offices declined to comment, did not respond or said they had no such cases.

Burke said the NYPD was also involved in efforts to identify illegal temp tag sellers and was well-aware of the [dealer compounds](#) churning out vast numbers of temp tags out of state. But without overhauling the laws and regulations in states like New Jersey and Georgia that enable licensed dealers to profit from selling tags illegally, temp tag fraud is unlikely to go away, Burke and others familiar with the problem said.

“The whole used car dealership scene is in such need of better regulation,” said Thomas Flarity, the former director of security, investigations and internal audit at the New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission. “It’s a scathing problem.”

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