

# GHOST TAGS

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

By Jesse Coburn

Illustration by Martin Schapiro

STREETSBLOG

PART 1

## The Dealers

[April 3, 2023](#)

**I**n some respects, there was nothing unusual about the killing of Walter Gonzalez.

Eighty-six pedestrians had already died in car crashes in New York City last year by October 23, when a driver slammed a pick-up truck into Gonzalez in Brooklyn. It was not out of the ordinary that the driver was speeding, nor that his license had been revoked months prior.

But there was one thing that stood out about the crash: the paper license plate hanging from the back of the truck.

It was a New Jersey temporary tag, the kind that dealerships affix to newly sold cars so that customers can drive off before receiving permanent metal plates. During the pandemic, cars with paper tags [suddenly seemed to be everywhere](#), not least in New York City. Drivers were using them to mask their identities while evading tolls and traffic cameras, or while committing more serious crimes, authorities said. Many were counterfeits.

But the temporary tag on the truck that killed Walter Gonzalez wasn't

fake. It was issued by a licensed New Jersey car dealership. It was registered to the truck. From the perspective of law enforcement, it appeared to be legal.

Vehicle history records obtained by Streetsblog suggest otherwise.

► Investigators approaching the truck that struck and killed Walter Gonzalez in Brooklyn in October 2022. A New Jersey temporary license plate is screwed to the back.

Photo: freedomnews.tv



New Jersey dealerships can only legally put temp tags, as they're known, on cars they've just sold or leased. But the records indicate the truck was last sold in 2017—years before the temporary license plate was issued. And the dealership that issued it might as well not exist.

ECL Auto Empire, as the business is called, has no lot full of cars for sale at its dealership address. You cannot read reviews of the company or look at its inventory online. The phone number listed on its website is disconnected. And yet, ECL Auto Empire printed more than 600 New Jersey temporary license plates last year, according to data obtained by Streetsblog through public records requests. That's far more than the number of cars sold by the average New Jersey dealer. But Thomas Burke, a recently retired NYPD auto crime detective who has investigated temp tag fraud, doubts ECL owner Christopher Lizardo is actually selling that many cars.

“He may be a licensed dealer in New Jersey, but he's definitely doing something fugazi,” Burke said when informed of Streetsblog's findings. “Like selling temps.”

Lizardo did not respond to requests for comment.

Such stories are not uncommon. A Streetsblog investigation uncovered

scores of used car dealerships that have fraudulently issued temporary license plates, which flow through a thriving black market to drivers who use them to skirt accountability on the road. Streetsblog found still more dealerships that, like ECL, issue large numbers of tags with little or no other discernible business activity. Some of these companies are run by New Yorkers but registered elsewhere, in states where loose regulations make it easier to obtain dealership licenses and print tags.

Officials in New York and across the country have sounded the alarm about fraudulent and fake paper tags, which have been used in hit-and-runs, robberies and shootings. One hit-and-run in Queens last year claimed the life of a five-year-old boy, who was struck by a driver with a suspended license and a counterfeit New Jersey temp tag. Temps from New Jersey are among the most common on the streets of New York City, as are tags from Georgia and Texas.

Reviewing state data and documents obtained through records requests, Streetsblog found that at least 109 dealers in Georgia and New Jersey have been caught violating temp tag regulations in recent years. Those dealers have printed more than 275,000 temp tags since 2019, the data show.

They include Jose Cordero, who estimates he made \$18,200 by selling just 200 temp tags through his New Jersey dealership before the state caught on. His dealership license was suspended, he said, and he was fined around \$1,000.

Other dealers told Streetsblog they sold thousands of tags.

“This is a big business,” Cordero said in an interview.

Streetsblog identified another 25 dealers in Georgia and New Jersey that collectively issued 67,000 temp tags last year alone while displaying few features of a normal retail car business. They have no company websites featuring cars for sale, no online customer reviews and no listings on Google Maps. But, on average, each purportedly sold or leased more than seven cars per day last year—a rate of commerce that industry veterans said was improbable without an online presence.

More than one third of those 25 dealers appears to live in New York City, in Westchester or on Long Island. Some of them print tags mainly for New Yorkers. Streetsblog even found one man who was caught illegally issuing temp tags from a New Jersey dealership, only to open

another dealership in Georgia that has generated hundreds of temp tags for out-of-state customers. He lives in Brooklyn.

Texas' problem with sham temp tags [came](#) to [light](#) two years ago, prompting legislative changes and resignations at the state Department of Motor Vehicles. In New Jersey and Georgia, no major reforms have come.

Fraudulent temp tags can make cars virtually untraceable. Some tags are registered to a false name and address, enabling motorists to pass toll, red light and speed cameras without getting billed. Other drivers use sham tags because they lack car insurance or want to avoid sales taxes and registration fees. Both real and fake temp tags are available on the black market, but real tags command higher prices, as they are less likely to stand out to the police.

Many of New Jersey's and Georgia's real temp tags trace back to a network of unassuming warehouses and office buildings, each of which serves as the business address of dozens or even hundreds of licensed used car dealers. The buildings appear designed to minimally comply with the states' modest requirements for used car dealerships.

▼ Used car dealers at this Bridgeton, New Jersey, compound issued 137,000 temporary license plates in 2021.

Photo: Johnny Milano

That's true of the compound in Bridgeton, New Jersey, where ECL Auto Empire and hundreds of other used car dealers are registered.



On paper, the facility in Bridgeton—a small post-industrial city in southern New Jersey—is the most bustling site of used car sales in the state. At least, that is the case when counting by the number of temporary license plates that dealers there are churning out: 137,000 in 2021, a 500-percent increase over 2019, data show. But a gate blocks the entrance, few people ever appear to be coming or going, and the vast parking lot to display cars always seems to be empty.

The New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission—the equivalent of other states’ department of motor vehicles—has suspended or revoked the licenses of dozens of Bridgeton dealers for violating temp tag rules in recent years, records show, and the number of temps printed by New Jersey and Georgia dealers has fallen since the height of the pandemic.

But when New Jersey’s MVC or Georgia’s Department of Revenue, which oversees used car dealers in that state, do punish dealers for temp tag abuses, the fines they impose are typically small compared to the large sums that dealers may be making from illegally selling temps.

One example is F&J Auto Mall, a dealer that was officially based in Bridgeton, although the primary owner listed an apartment in upper Manhattan as his address when forming the company, business records show. F&J issued 36,000 temporary license plates in 2021—more than any other dealership in the state, including the used-car juggernauts Carvana and CarMax combined. Authentic temp tags typically sell for \$100 to \$200 on the black market, sellers and buyers told Streetsblog, meaning if F&J sold all 36,000 tags, it could have made millions of dollars. But when the MVC shut down F&J for fraudulently issuing temps, the agency sent the dealership a letter saying its fine would be only \$500.

“It’s not a deterrent. It’s merely the cost of doing business,” said Kathy Riley, a spokeswoman for the New Jersey State Commission of Investigation, when informed of Streetsblog’s findings. The commission has investigated abuses in the state’s used car industry.

Felix De Jesus Jimenez, who is listed in business records as one of F&J’s principals, denied that the business was shut down for selling temps but declined to discuss it.

Streetsblog’s findings are based on thousands of pages of state documents and four years of temp tag data obtained through public records requests, and on interviews with dozens of temp tag sellers and buyers, legitimate car dealers, industry representatives and officials

from motor vehicle and law enforcement agencies.

The cost of temp tag fraud to New York taxpayers is difficult to calculate, but it's significant. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority alone loses around \$11 million annually in unbillable tolls at its bridges and tunnels due to bad paper tags. Traffic tickets, sales taxes, registration fees and other tolls that go unpaid because of sham paper tags likely bring the total cost in New York into the tens of millions, if not higher. And with toll cameras set to encircle lower Manhattan when New York introduces congestion pricing next year, demand for fake temps may only grow, a market that unscrupulous car dealers would be eager to serve so long as weak regulations enable them to.

“The system has so many loopholes that you can't really stop it,” said Abdul Cummings, a used car dealer in Jersey City who watched demand for temp tags explode during the pandemic. “The system allows it.”



◀ Temporary license plates seen on the streets of New York City.  
Graphic: Angel Mendoza

## Georgia in the Bronx

**O**n a Wednesday afternoon in January, one block of Sheridan Boulevard in the Bronx hosted a curious gathering: more than a dozen parked cars bearing Georgia temporary license plates.

There was little to explain the sight. It was as if more than a dozen people had just purchased cars in Georgia and all happened to drive to the same street in New York City, some 700 miles to the northeast.

Coincidentally, that same stretch of Sheridan Boulevard appears in the background of Instagram photographs posted by Herrera Auto Group, a used car dealership registered to a remote office building in LaGrange, Georgia, a small city near the Alabama border.

The dealership opened only last year, but it's been remarkably busy since then. Data obtained by Streetsblog show that Herrera issued more than 20,000 Georgia temporary license plates from June through December—the most of any dealership in the state in that period. Yet Herrera has few other features of a successful retail car business, like an online inventory, online reviews or a listing on Google Maps. The dealership office in LaGrange was locked on a recent afternoon during business hours, and the parking lot had only one car in it.

Also curious: nearly all the temp tags generated by the dealership went to out-of-state buyers—transactions that car dealers told Streetsblog typically receive less scrutiny from state auditors than those involving in-state customers. And dealership CEO Jeffrey Herrera told Streetsblog he lives in Yonkers.

Herrera denied he was selling temp tags but declined to discuss his business.

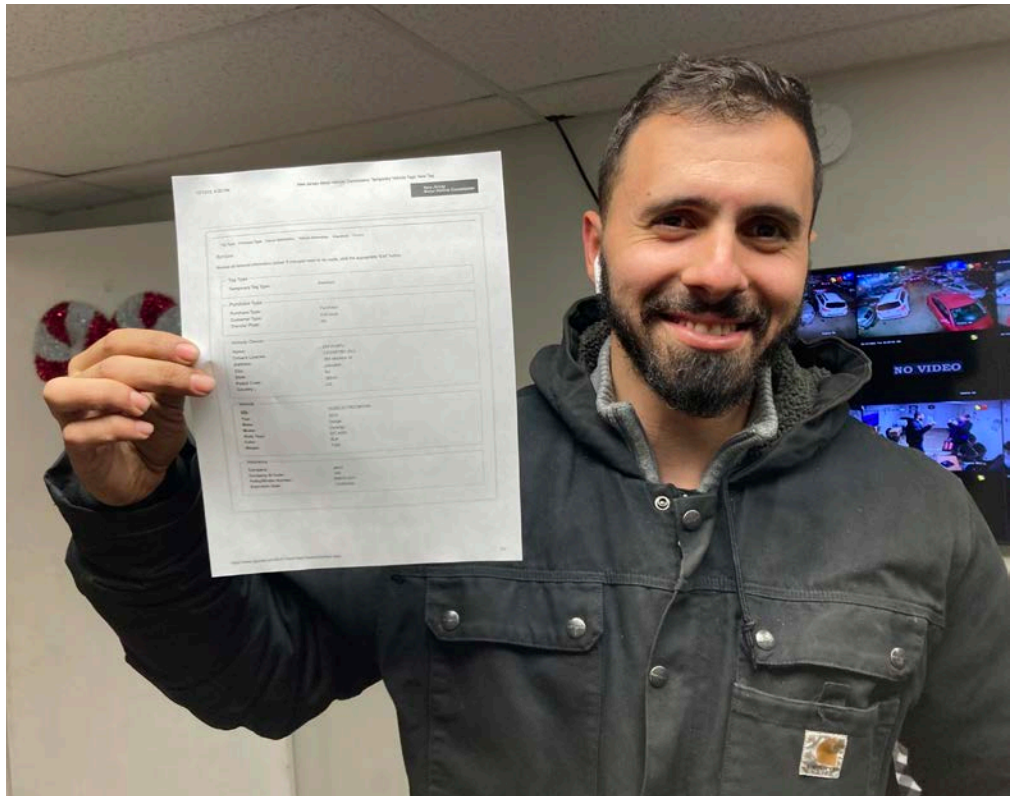
“I don't have to give you my fucking information,” he said in a brief phone interview.

It takes some effort to become a used car dealer. In Georgia, as in New Jersey and other states, applicants for dealership licenses must undergo background checks, fingerprinting and site inspections. Still, some states make it easier than others.

Pennsylvania requires used car dealerships to have display space for at least five vehicles. New Jersey requires space for just two vehicles. In Georgia, there's no statewide minimum display space.

New York requires dealers to have surety bonds of up to \$100,000—in Georgia it's \$35,000, in New Jersey \$10,000. Connecticut requires an applicant to submit letters of reference from prior employers or calls them directly. Neither New Jersey nor Georgia do that. Georgia does not require dealers to keep a minimum number of business hours per week.

The regulatory differences are greater when it comes to temp tags. In Connecticut, Pennsylvania and New York, licensed dealers must



► New Jersey used car dealer Abdul Cummings holding up the confirmation for a temporary license plate he prepared for New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy.  
Photo: Jesse Coburn

go through an additional application process before they can give customers temporary plates. That process includes a mandatory training course in Connecticut and Pennsylvania. If granted permission, dealers in all three states can only issue temp tags to out-of-state customers.

By contrast, dealers in New Jersey and Georgia can begin printing tags soon after receiving their dealership licenses, and they can issue them to state residents and non-residents alike. There's no limit to the number of tags that dealers in Georgia can print, and they can print them from any computer. (The same might be true in New Jersey, although the MVC did not answer Streetsblog's question on the topic.) The states' online temp tag systems do not require dealers to upload documentation verifying key details of supposed sales, such as copies of buyers' driver's licenses, before printing tags.

"You can put a John Doe at 123 Main Street," said Jon Salmon, the finance manager of a used car dealership in Alpharetta, Georgia, of the state's online temp tag printing system. "It's not going to verify it or anything like that."

It's rare to see temp tags from Connecticut, Pennsylvania or even New York in the five boroughs. Meanwhile, tags from Georgia and New Jersey—like the one on the truck that killed Walter Gonzalez—are ubiquitous in the city. And they have been since the pandemic began.



## ‘Phil Murphy just bought a Durango’

**T**he pandemic threw DMVs into disarray. Offices closed to the public. People buying cars from private sellers couldn’t register them. Unable to get license plates, some started approaching dealers asking for temps. Struggling with sudden inventory shortages, used car dealers obliged. (New car dealers abstained, as they face oversight from vehicle manufacturers.)

The market attracted less scrupulous actors, like buyers who wanted temps because they couldn’t legally get plates, and upstart dealers who began printing remarkable numbers of tags. New Jersey used car dealers went from issuing 324,000 temp tags in 2019 to 510,000 in 2021, a 57-percent increase, data show. Georgia also saw a brief increase during the pandemic: from 362,000 tags in the first half of 2020 to 409,000 tags in the first half of 2021.

And it wasn’t just those states. Suddenly, suspicious paper plates were everywhere: in [Louisiana](#), [Maryland](#), [Arizona](#), [Wisconsin](#) and beyond. For a while, Texas was the epicenter of temp tag fraud, which grew into a scandal there that [brought down top](#) DMV officials and led to new state [legislation](#) enabling the DMV to limit the number of tags that dealers can produce and to quickly cut off dealer access to the tag printing system. Members of one criminal ring were [indicted](#) by the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Texas after issuing more than 700,000 Texas temp tags through sham dealerships. One of the defendants was from New York, as were many of the buyers. He pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit wire fraud.

Some New York City blocks suddenly seemed to be full of cars with out-of-state temps. They started popping up in crimes across the city, like a [shooting](#) in Brooklyn, a [robbery](#) in Manhattan and a [hit-and-run](#) in the Bronx in which a driver plowed into a family of six on the sidewalk.

It got bad enough that then-Mayor Bill de Blasio held a press conference in the summer of 2021 to [announce](#) a crackdown—and his successor Eric Adams did the [same](#) one year later. But their focus was drivers sporting paper tags, not the dealers across state lines pumping them out under the noses of industry regulators.

Authorities in Georgia and New Jersey have taken action on the problem, fining dealers caught violating temp tag rules and putting them on probation or suspending or revoking their licenses. The

number of temps issued in those states has fallen from high points during the pandemic; used car dealers in New Jersey printed 343,000 tags last year.

The Georgia Department of Revenue declined a request to interview Commissioner Frank O’Connell. In a statement, department spokesman Austin Gibbons said:

“The Department of Revenue is aware of and condemns the actions of bad actors who abuse the state’s system to avoid title ad valorem taxes, use dealer plates to advance their criminal enterprise, and stain the reputation of hardworking Georgians engaged in the business of buying and selling motor vehicles. The Department will continue to work alongside the Governor’s Office, the General Assembly, other law enforcement agencies, and the industry to address these concerns.”

Four days after Streetsblog shared its findings with the agency, a Georgia state legislator introduced a bill that would create a committee to study temp tag fraud.

Lewis Page, a member of Georgia’s used car dealers licensing board, said the board is “well aware” of the state’s temp tag problems and that “it’s something that we’re investigating and working on.” He said the board disciplines dealers for misusing temp tags and is seeking to stiffen penalties, although he could not say which dealers the board has punished for the violation.

The New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission declined a request to interview MVC Chief Administrator Latrecia Littles-Floyd. In a statement, MVC spokesman William Connolly said:

“The MVC maximizes its regulatory authority under New Jersey law to combat all forms of fraud related to temporary tag use and dealer activity. In recent years, we have promulgated regulations to close loopholes and curb abuses, hired more investigators, launched more audits to detect improper activity, added several anti-fraud measures to our e-temp tag system, and more.”

Connolly did not respond to questions from Streetsblog, including which loopholes have been closed and which abuses have been curbed.

But problems with the temp tag system were common in New Jersey even before the pandemic, with the MVC as early as 2010 finding evidence of suspicious temp tag activity at the Bridgeton compound,

according to one state [report](#).

And the permissive rules that enabled temp tag abuses to flourish in Georgia and New Jersey during the pandemic have not been significantly tightened.

The agency “has never been able to stop this, and they can never stop this the way the system is,” Cummings, the Jersey City dealer, said in an interview at his office.

To prove his point, Cummings swiveled around to his computer and navigated to the New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission website from which dealers print temp tags. Once logged in, Cummings prepared a paper plate for a special new customer. Buyer: Phil Murphy (the governor of New Jersey). Address: 354 Stockton Street in Princeton (the address of Drumthwacket, the governor’s mansion). For the vehicle information, Cummings plugged in a Dodge Durango he had sold previously.

All the information was fake. The MVC portal raised no objections.

“Boom, I’m done,” Cummings said, laughing. The temp tag was ready to print. “Phil Murphy just bought a Durango.”

► Ana Mercado holding up a photo of her longtime partner, Walter Gonzalez, who was killed by a driver with a New Jersey temporary license plate in Brooklyn in October 2022.

Photo: Jesse Coburn



## 'My life is upside down'

**M**any questions haunt Ana Mercado about the death of Walter Gonzalez, the man who was run over in Brooklyn last October. Somewhere on the list: how did a New Jersey temp tag end up on the truck that killed him?

Mercado was there that night. She was the one who sent Gonzalez out of their small Crown Heights apartment to pick up cream at the corner store. She was the one who sat in her wheelchair on Eastern Parkway for nearly three hours after the crash, in disbelief that the human form lying under a blood-stained blanket in front of her was her romantic partner of nearly 30 years. She wailed for Gonzalez, urging him to get up. Nearby, the hazard lights of a blue truck blinked. Its hood was rumpled like an accordion and one headlight was blown out of its socket. A New Jersey temp tag hung from the back.

▼ Left: the truck that killed Walter Gonzalez had a temporary New Jersey license plate. Right: the aftermath of the crash.

Photos: freedomnews.tv



How did that sheet of paper make its way from an enigmatic used car dealership in New Jersey to a fatal car crash in Brooklyn? Few seem to know, and those that do won't say. But Roody Louinis has a story to tell about it.

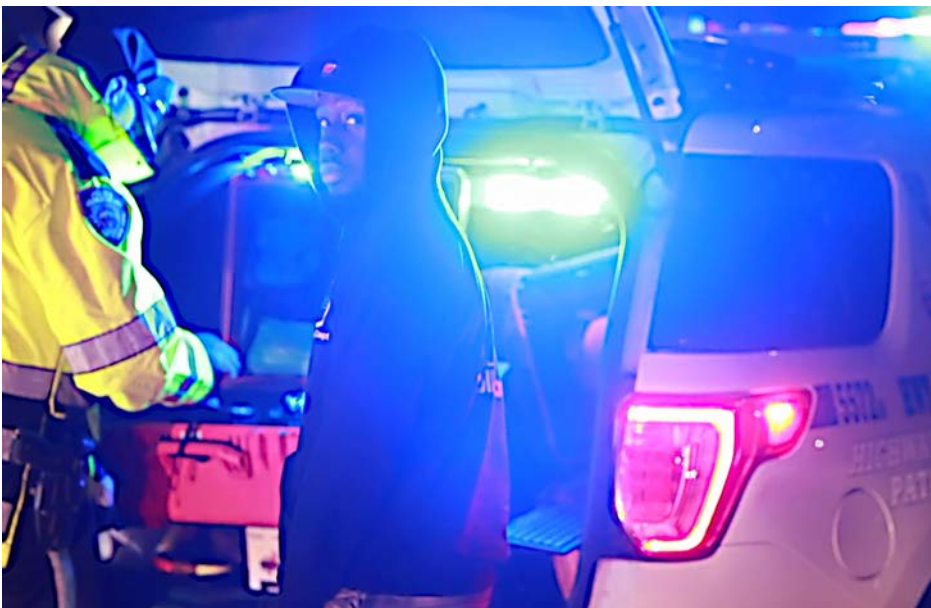
The New York City Police Department's crash report says the truck was registered to Louinis and listed an address for him in upstate Schenectady. But Louinis, in an interview with Streetsblog, said he didn't register the car, let alone buy a temp tag for it on the black market.

Instead, Louinis said he purchased the truck a couple weeks before the crash from a mechanic in the East New York neighborhood of

Brooklyn, where Louinis said he originally is from. The truck needed repairs, which the mechanic offered to complete before handing over the keys. Louinis said he next heard about the truck when his insurance company called him about the crash.

“I didn’t give nobody that truck to drive around, especially—you know what I’m saying?—a maniac who’s killing somebody,” Louinis told Streetsblog.

Vehicle history records that Ana Mercado shared with Streetsblog show the truck was owned by Safeway Motors, a seemingly defunct repair shop in East New York. The truck previously had a New York license plate on it that racked up \$8,000 in tickets in 2020 and 2021, all unpaid.



▲ Jefferson Springer, the driver accused of striking and killing Walter Gonzalez in Brooklyn last October.

Photo: freedomnews.tv

Robert Zelazny, the owner of Safeway Motors, did not respond to multiple requests for comment. New York business records say the company has dissolved. From Safeway’s garage in East New York, a sign was hanging in January advertising a new business: “RJ’s Collision Concepts.”

The garage was closed on weekdays in January, RJ’s did not respond to requests

for comment and the New York Department of Motor Vehicles has no record of the business. But the business name, or something close to it, did pop up in one notable place. “RJ’s Collision Concept” was printed on the sweatshirt worn the night of the crash by the driver who allegedly killed Gonzalez.

That driver was Jefferson Springer. The 26-year-old lived in Brooklyn, not far from the Safeway Motors shop. Two months before the crash, the DMV revoked his license after cops caught him speeding for the third time in 18 months. The police report on the crash says Springer was driving “at an apparent high rate of speed down the center median” before hitting Gonzalez.

Springer declined to tell Streetsblog where the temp tag came from or answer other questions. He has pleaded not guilty to three felony

charges, including manslaughter. The Brooklyn district attorney did not bring any charges related to the tag, and the office declined to explain why to Streetsblog.

The unanswered questions have deepened Mercado's grief. Now she lives alone in the apartment she used to share with Gonzalez. Her windows look out onto Eastern Parkway, not far from where she saw his body lying in the street. The sound of traffic fills her apartment.

"I'm just brokenhearted," she said recently. "My life is upside down."

As Mercado sees it, the dubious temp tag shows it's not just Jefferson Springer who is allegedly to blame for Gonzalez's death.

"The dealership is responsible," she said. So are the agencies tasked with regulating it, she said.

"They gotta do something and check these businesses," Mercado said. "It bothers me that you can just go and get a tag for a car, hit somebody and kill them."

Reporting contributed by Blake Aued in LaGrange, Georgia.

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# GHOST TAGS

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STREETSBLOG

PART 2

## The Dealers

[April 4, 2023](#)

**T**risha Newsome has lived in Bridgeton all her life, and she's worked across the street from 330 East Commerce Street, but she's never known what goes on behind its barbed wire fence.

Not much seems to happen there, she said. She rarely sees anyone driving through the gate. There are large signs out front, but there's nothing on them except hundreds of business names printed in small font. The warehouses on the property are quiet, and the giant parking lots surrounding them always seem to be empty.

And yet, 330 East Commerce Street is the most active site of used car sales in the entire state of New Jersey. At least that's true by one measure: the number of temporary license plates churned out by dealerships registered to the address.

Those dealers numbered at least 300 last year, when together they issued more than 45,000 temporary license plates, data obtained by Streetsblog show. That should mean the dealers sold or leased 45,000 cars, as that's virtually the only scenario in which dealers can legally print temp tags, as they're known. That would be five cars sold every

hour, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. But Newsome has never even seen a car displayed for sale at the compound, let alone sold.

“There’s no cars on that lot,” she said one morning in December as she stood behind the cash register at the Dollar Tree across the street. “I don’t know what kind of place it is. It’s weird.”

It’s not the kind of place where dealers need much space to display cars, industry insiders and retired law enforcement officials told Streetsblog. Some Bridgeton dealers allegedly sell cars elsewhere. Others have been engaged in a different business: fraudulently issuing temporary license plates, which go for upwards of \$100 on the black market and are coveted by drivers seeking to conceal their identities on the road.

Through interviews and public records, Streetsblog identified 53 dealers at the Bridgeton compound and other so-called “multi-dealer locations” across New Jersey that state auditors have caught violating temp tag regulations in recent years. At least three of those dealers told the state that they sold temp tags illegally, records show. Another four admitted it to Streetsblog in interviews.

Those 53 dealerships have issued more than 178,000 temp tags, according to data obtained by Streetsblog through records requests.

▼ Used car dealers at this Bridgeton, New Jersey, compound issued 45,000 temporary license plates in 2022.

Photo: Johnny Milano





Multi-dealer locations are not unique to New Jersey. Georgia—another major source of temp tags in New York City—is also filled with office buildings that hardly resemble typical retail car businesses yet that each serve as the business address of dozens or even hundreds of licensed dealers. Some of them issue vast numbers of temp tags despite having no online inventories, online reviews or listings on Google Maps.

► Signs outside the Bridgeton used car dealer compound list the 300 used car dealers registered to the address.

Photo: Johnny Milano



Some of these dealerships in Georgia and New Jersey are operated by people who live in New York City or its suburbs, Streetsblog found through public records and interviews. Such dealers include Donnon Nixon, who opened DDA Autos in a multi-dealer location in LaGrange, Georgia, in late 2021 or early 2022—around the time his dealership at a multi-dealer location in New Jersey was getting shut down for fraudulently issuing temp tags.

That did not stop Nixon from printing nearly 900 temp tags from his Georgia dealership in the last nine months of 2022, 98 percent of them to out-of-state buyers, data show. Dealers told Streetsblog that regulators typically do not scrutinize transactions involving out-of-state buyers, as the sales tax goes to the buyers' home state.

In a brief phone interview, Nixon denied selling temp tags but declined to answer questions. He said he lives in Brooklyn.

Officials in Georgia caught at least 34 dealers violating temp tag regulations in 2022, records show.

The illicit temp tag trade has spawned a cohort of motorists in the

five boroughs who have relied on paper tags for anonymity while driving without car insurance, skipping out on tolls or sales tax, or breaking the law in more consequential ways. The New York City Police Department has described fraudulent license plates as a “nexus of criminality,” and paper tags have cropped up in robberies, shootings and hit-and-runs.

The locus of unusual temp tag activity is multi-dealer locations like those in Bridgeton and LaGrange, which exploit weak state regulations to serve licensed used car dealers, dozens of whom have gone on to fraudulently issue temps. In New Jersey, at least, industry watchdogs and state lawmakers have known about problems at multi-dealer locations, or MDLs, [for years](#).

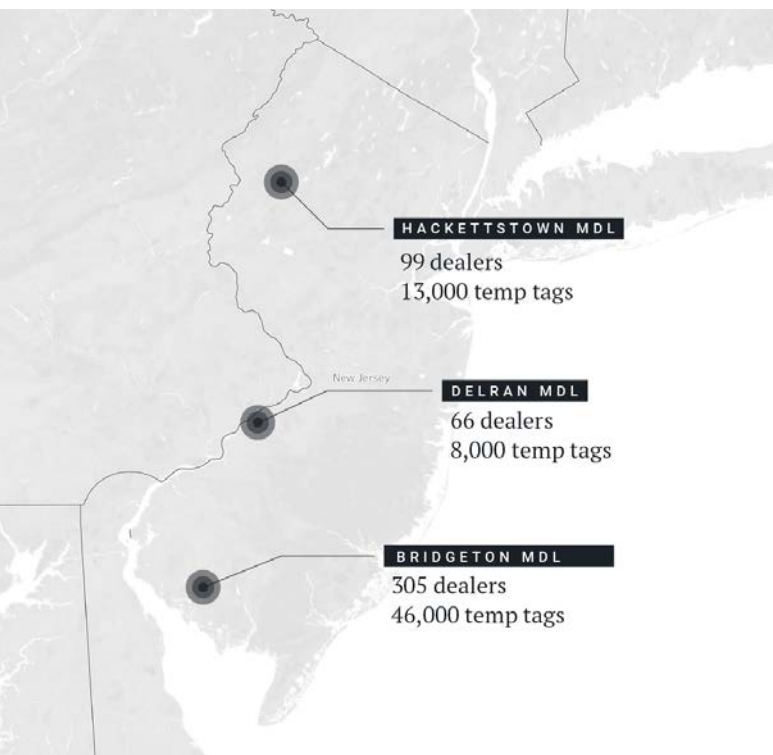
“The MDL, it’s a sham, and it’s a facilitator of all kinds of illicit and potentially illegal activity,” said Kathy Riley, a spokeswoman for the New Jersey State Commission of Investigation, which has investigated MDLs. “New Jersey has turned a blind eye to the abuses.”

## Temp tag mills

▼ These three New Jersey facilities issue a prodigious number of temporary license plates. Data from 2022. Source: New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission.

Map: Angel Mendoza

**F** or those looking to get into the temp tag business, there are few shorter routes than opening a used car dealership at the Bridgeton compound, which is called the New Jersey Dealer’s Auto Mall.



Authentic New Jersey temp tags are printed through a web portal created by the state’s Motor Vehicle Commission, but only licensed car dealers have access to that portal. That’s where NJDAM, the company that runs the compound, comes in.

For what Bridgeton dealers told Streetsblog is typically a four-figure fee, the company helps aspiring dealers get state licenses, then charges them to rent office space in the facility.

Like many things about the Auto Mall, those office spaces appear designed to minimally comply with New Jersey’s modest physical requirements for used car dealerships. The offices are small—the state requires they



▲ 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

measure only 72 square feet—and their walls do not extend to the ceiling. Some that are visible through a street window appeared to contain little more than a desk, chair, lamp, phone, and safe—all explicitly required under state law.

Outside, the compound’s expansive parking lots contain space for each dealer-tenant to display at least two cars—also the state minimum. And the small-print signs by the compound entrance are also a nod to a state requirement that every dealership have an exterior sign.

For the Motor Vehicle Commission, these token gestures appear to be sufficient. MVC site inspection reports obtained by Streetsblog show that officials raised no concerns about the Auto Mall when evaluating the license applications of two dealers who went on to print 73,000 temp tags before getting caught fraudulently issuing them.

Yet would-be car buyers would be hard pressed to take even a test drive at the Auto Mall. On a rainy morning in December, the front gate was closed, and a woman who answered the intercom told a Streetsblog reporter he could not speak to any of the hundreds of dealers registered to the address, even though the MVC requires used car dealerships to be open at least 20 hours per week.

“I’m sorry, we don’t have anybody here,” said the woman, who did not identify herself.

The Auto Mall did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Some 100 miles north, tucked incongruously into the idyllic hills above Hackettstown, New Jersey, an office building flanked by empty parking lots is the official address of dozens more licensed dealers, many of whom either have been caught fraudulently issuing temp tags or have generated large numbers of temp tags without any other discernible business activity. That includes Paa Kwesi Amissah, whose dealership, Peekay Auto Sales, printed 4,600 temp tags from 2020 to 2022, data show.

In an interview, Amissah admitted he sold about half of those temps illegally to other car dealers, including dealers in New York City, who then sold them to their customers. Amissah said he sold them for about \$70 apiece (a below-average price, according to buyers and other sellers). At that price, Amissah could have made more than \$150,000 in revenue from selling tags illegally.



Amissah was eventually caught by the MVC, which sent him a letter informing him that his dealer license was suspended and that he would be fined \$500. That's the maximum allowed for a first dealer violation under New Jersey law.

“I know I wasn't supposed to sell temp tags,” said Amissah, who lives in New Jersey. “I have learned a whole lot of lessons.”

▲ Zack & Auto Sales, a used car dealership on Staten Island, has common ownership with a used car dealer in New Jersey that issues large numbers of temporary license plates with little other discernable business activity.

Photo: Jesse Coburn

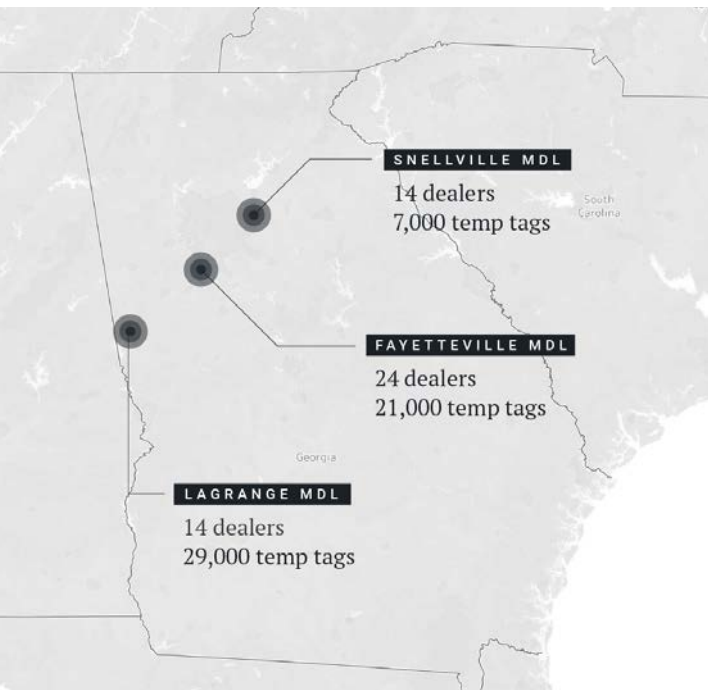
Streetsblog identified other dealers that issue large numbers of temp tags without many of the trappings of a normal retail car business. Among them is Zack Auto Sales, a dealership registered to an MDL in Delran, New Jersey.

The dealership has no website, no online inventory, no online reviews and no listing on Google Maps. Yet Streetsblog found it issued 999 temp tags last year, 71 percent of them to New Yorkers. The average New Jersey used car dealer gave out 165 tags last year, only around 20 percent to New Yorkers.

Zack Auto Sales has common ownership with a dealership on Staten Island, which occupies a fenced-in wedge of land under the Bayonne

▼ These three Georgia facilities issue a prodigious number of temporary license plates. Data from mid-2019 to 2022. Source: Georgia Department of Revenue.

Map: Angel Mendoza



Bridge that contains about 20 cars, a German Shepherd and a trailer. In December, a Streetsblog reporter visited the Staten Island dealership, identified himself as a journalist and asked whether the businesses sold New Jersey temp tags. In response, Manager Ali Ahmed asked the reporter whether he worked with the government and threatened to sue Streetsblog.

“If you’re going to go deep, and I find it, and you go to ask about my company in Trenton and New Jersey, you’re going to get trouble with it, believe me,” Ahmed said.

He said the dealership in New Jersey generates large numbers of temp tags because it sells many cars. As for how dealership employees do so without a website or online inventory, Ahmed said they “retail and wholesale [cars] online, like a broker.”

Streetsblog did not find evidence that Zack Auto Sales illegally sells temporary license plates. But one car wholesaler and one car broker based in New Jersey told Streetsblog that wholesalers and brokers have no reason to issue large numbers of temp tags.

## The Georgia connection

**N**ew Jersey is not the only state with office buildings full of enigmatic dealerships producing large numbers of temporary license plates with little other discernible business activity. Analyzing Georgia Department of Revenue data obtained through records requests, Streetsblog identified 48 street addresses that each serves as the business address of ten or more used car dealers. Those dealers issued more than 84,000 temp tags last year.

Among these properties are a motel-like building in Fayetteville, a small city 20 miles south of Atlanta. The building is the business address of at least 16 used car dealers that printed 17,000 temp tags last year, 93 percent of them to out-of-state buyers.

One of those dealers is MSA Auto Sales, which issued 8,800 Georgia temps last year, 89 percent to out-of-state buyers, while having no website, no online inventory, no online reviews and no listing on Google Maps. The average Georgia used car dealership printed 117

► This office building in Snellville, Georgia, is the registered address of car dealerships including D Lin Autos, which issued large numbers of temporary license plates last year, nearly all of them to out-of-state buyers, and which is operated by a woman who lives in the Bronx.

Photo: Blake Aued



temps last year, 22 percent of them to out-of-state buyers.

In a phone interview, MSA owner Mohamed Sefou denied he sold tags. He said his home address is in New York and that he also owns a dealership in New Jersey, which he declined to identify.

Thirty miles northeast of Atlanta, a red brick building at the end of a cul-de-sac in suburban Snellville houses eight dealers, including D Lin Autos, which issued 3,000 temp tags last year, 99 percent of them out of state. The owner, Lin Pena, told Streetsblog that she lives in the Bronx. She denied selling tags but declined to answer questions.

Streetsblog visited the Fayetteville, Snellville and LaGrange dealers on a recent Saturday, typically a busy day for car dealerships. None was open.

## Red flags ignored

**I**n New Jersey, it's a poorly kept secret that multi-dealer locations are breeding grounds for dubious temp tag activity.

In 2010, an internal Motor Vehicle Commission report noted that many dealers generate “temp tags far in excess of the number of vehicles they sell” and that “misuse of these materials can prove to be serious since they can be used to put unlicensed and/or unregistered and uninsured vehicles on the road.” The report found that nine of the top 10 temp tag issuers in the state were linked to the Bridgeton MDL. Four years later, records from a lawsuit show, the commission fined and suspended the licenses of two Bridgeton dealers for violating

temp tag rules. And around 2016, the commission fined and suspended the licenses of dealers at the Bridgeton and Hackettstown MDLs for producing fake sales receipts to cover up illegal temps.

Misuse of temp tags was one of many unscrupulous activities at multi-dealer locations identified in sweeping [2015](#) and [2018](#) reports by the New Jersey State Commission of Investigation, which found MDL dealers defrauding banks, accumulating millions of dollars in unpaid taxes and hiding mechanical defects in cars they sold. The then-owner of the Bridgeton MDL, Louis Civello Jr., had ties to the Bonanno organized crime family, the SCI wrote. Investigators even found one Hackettstown dealership that received suspicious payments from Lebanese financial institutions accused of laundering money for the militant group Hezbollah. (Business records show that the dealership closed in 2015.)

The SCI also found that abuses at the Bridgeton compound were overlooked by some at the MVC, with agency officials waiving penalties and site inspections for Auto Mall dealers and otherwise impeding efforts to regulate the facility. The Auto Mall even hired C. Richard Kamin, the former commissioner of the MVC under its previous name, the Division of Motor Vehicles, to lobby his old agency on behalf of the compound and its dealers.

Kamin, in an interview, dismissed the SCI investigation as politically motivated.

New Jersey took some steps to rein in the MDLs after SCI's report, but abuses have continued.

“We tried to raise the alarm twice,” said Riley, the agency spokeswoman. “Nothing much has changed.”

New Jersey and Georgia have penalized or shut down dealerships for violating temp tag regulations, and the number of temp tags printed by New Jersey MDL dealers fell last year from 2021. But the number rose in Georgia, as have the number of dealers registered to MDLs in both states.

In a statement, MVC spokesman William Connolly said: “When MVC investigators uncover infractions, we take appropriate action. If there is inappropriate use of New Jersey's e-temp tag system, dealer access is immediately cut off and, upon further investigation, the dealer's license may be suspended or revoked. Penalties and fines as allowed

▼ The 66 used car dealerships at this facility in Delran, New Jersey, issued 8,000 temporary license plates last year.

Photos: Johnny Milano

by statute are imposed. We refer any suspected fraudulent or illegal activity to law enforcement.”

Connolly did not respond to a question about what steps the MVC has taken to combat wrongdoing at MDLs.



Georgia Department of Revenue Spokesman Austin Gibbons said: “The Department has worked with law enforcement agencies and industry stakeholders to develop legislative approaches to address abuse in this area.”

Only one current MDL operator contacted by Streetsblog responded to requests for comment: Jacqueline Norris, president of George Yelland Inc., which owns the MDL in Delran, New Jersey. The facility consists of two single-story buildings parceled into small dealership offices. One property was busy on an afternoon in December, with dealers washing cars and customers wandering among sedans and SUVs in the display lot. The other property was lifeless—no one around, dealership offices locked. The two properties had at least 66 dealer-tenants last year that issued more than 7,900 temp tags.

Norris characterized her MDL as a good place for wholesalers who are frequently out of

the office and for up-and-comers looking to get their footing before opening traditional dealership locations. She said dealers were not present at the second property on the day of Streetsblog’s visit because none keep business hours on that day. She said she hasn’t heard of any temp tag abuses at her facility. Regardless, she said, it’s the state’s job to crack down on dealer misconduct, not hers.

“If these dealers are not doing the right thing, then Motor Vehicle needs to be addressing it,” she said, referring to the MVC. “Even if I was aware that they were doing something, unfortunately, I’m just the landlord.”

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# GHOST TAGS

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

By Jesse Coburn

Illustration by Martin Schapiro

STREETSBLOG

PART 3

## The Buyers

[April 5, 2023](#)

**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

**T**hose 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

**L**ast 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’

**N**ew 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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## ‘Duped’: A Harlem 20-Something Blows the Whistle on an Illegal Temporary License Plate Business

By Jesse Coburn

May 24, 2022

Read this story on [Streetsblog](#)

Co-published with [Motherboard](#)

**I**n retrospect, there were a lot of red flags. But they appeared later—not in the Craigslist ad.

“Hello everyone ! Car dealership hiring drivers,” the ad began. “We pay \$50 per delivery ! You can start immediately .”

Why a car dealership would need drivers, or what it would have to deliver, wasn’t clear to Kareem Ulloa-Alvarado when he saw the ad in December. But \$50 per delivery didn’t sound bad, and Kareem needed the money. So he called the number.

Within a week, Kareem was out on his electric scooter in the city, working on commission for the dealership, his backpack carrying the deliverables: thick sheets of paper with numbers printed across one side, under the words, “New Jersey 30 Day Non-Resident Temporary plate.”

Temporary license plates exist so that people who buy cars can drive them before receiving metal plates. But drivers found another use for them during the pandemic: buy a temp tag on the [black market](#) and you can keep your car anonymous and off the books. No more tickets in the mail for running red lights. No CCTV footage enabling police to

identify you from your license plate after you, say, [shoot](#) people in Brooklyn or [run over](#) a family in the Bronx. In recent years, [New York](#) and [other parts of the country](#) suddenly seemed to be awash in paper tags. But Kareem didn't know any of that. Not yet at least.

Kareem was 20 when he took the job. He was living with his parents in Harlem, making art and working odd jobs. Outgoing, with an easy smile, Kareem liked work that involved talking to people. In a way, this would prove to be a job like that.

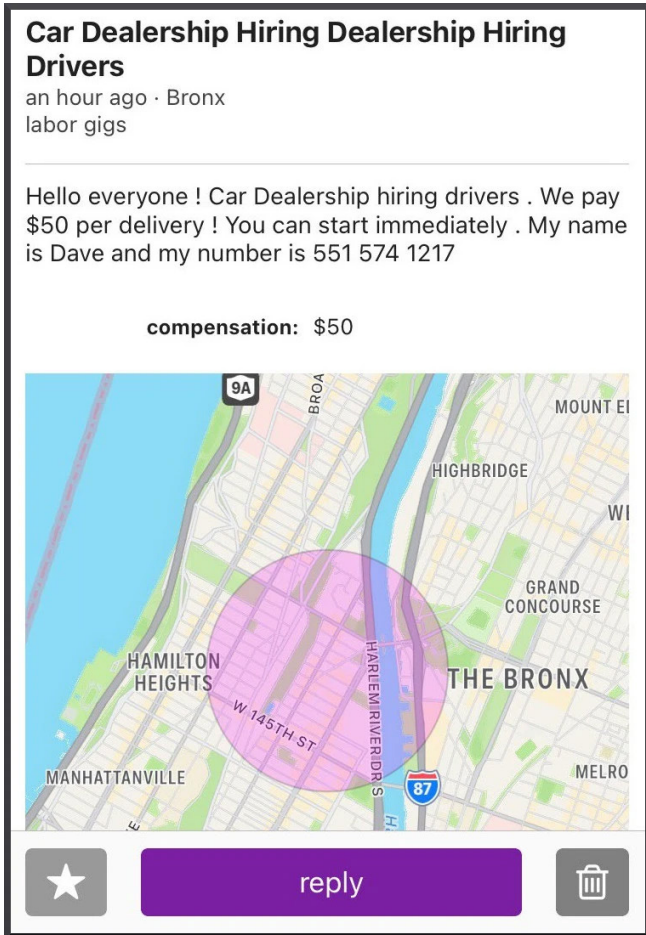
First Kareem spoke to David, or *King David*, as he called himself—the guy who answered when Kareem called the number in the Craigslist ad. King David was affable. He sounded young. He didn't provide his last name or the name of the dealership.

Kareem's onboarding process would involve two steps, David said: buy a laser printer and meet some guy at a strip mall in Fort Lee, New Jersey. The man would give Kareem paper, David

explained. New Jersey temp tags are printed on [special](#) paper that's perforated and weatherized. If you're printing real tags—or fake tags you want to *look* real—you have to use the right paper.

So, on a gloomy afternoon in December, Kareem rode his scooter over the George Washington Bridge from Harlem. Shortly after he arrived at the strip mall, a sedan rolled up, and an older, mostly bald man got out. They exchanged a few words, and the man handed Kareem the paper. He didn't introduce himself.

The job was straightforward. Kareem received emails with temporary license plates attached as PDFs, then he printed and delivered them to customers throughout the city. Kareem's employers instructed him to collect \$150 per tag from buyers, transfer \$100 to a Zelle account,



▲ Kareem's foray into temporary license plate sales began when he responded to this Craigslist ad. Screenshot: Kareem Ulloa-Alvarado

and keep the balance for himself. Kareem has never owned a car, so the idea that a dealership would deliver license plates seemed reasonable enough. The customers were grateful.

“These were like normal people that owned houses and owned apartments,” Kareem said later. “I would give temporary plates to construction guys and mothers. It just seemed so legit.”



▲ Temporary license plates that Kareem Ulloa-Alvarado was sent and instructed to deliver.

Source: Kareem Ulloa-Alvarado

Deliveries were assigned in a Telegram group chat by dispatchers: Abo, sens3iii, TEAM KRAB, MK\_Flash1. They never shared their real names. There were other couriers in the chat, too—a list shared in the chat suggests they numbered in the dozens. A dispatcher would message out an address, and the first courier to respond got the assignment.

(Streetsblog reviewed the chat logs as well as screenshots of the Zelle payments, emails Kareem received from dispatchers, and the temp tag PDFs. Streetsblog also spoke to a friend of Kareem’s whom Kareem told about the delivery job at the time.)

Kareem was upbeat and polite in the chat, coming across like any young, new employee eager to make a good impression.

“Good Morning Team! Looking forward to a positive, safe, and productive day,” he wrote in December, adding heart and thumbs-up emojis.

The discussion was even cheerier in Kareem’s sidebar chat with the dispatcher TEAM KRAB, who told him their name was Sophia. Sophia and Kareem’s conversation often strayed from delivery logistics, with Sophia discussing the “purification” power of snowflakes and praising Kareem’s “beautiful spirit.”

Everything was great. Kareem would put this job on his resume, he thought. It didn't occur to him that there was anything strange about the business, like that he was paid in cash and didn't know the names of his employers. He'd worked plenty of short-term gigs under similar circumstances in the past—putting up posters, handing out fliers, working security at events. As far as jobs like that went, this was a pretty good one: flexible, reliable, easy. Until January 7.

Kareem set out that day to make a delivery in the Bronx. While he was talking to the would-be customer on the street, he said, two men approached from behind, and one punched Kareem in the head, knocking him to the ground. Suddenly, a knife was at his throat. The men took his phone, wallet, and binder full of art, then dashed off. The customer rolled away on Kareem's scooter.

Kareem was terrified, and his lip was bleeding. He ran to a nearby business and asked someone there to call the cops, who arrived and took Kareem to a precinct house. Kareem wanted to file a report. But after he told the detective interviewing him what he'd been doing when robbed—selling a temporary license plate—the detective smirked.

*You know that's illegal, right?* Kareem remembers the detective saying. *If you file a report, I can have you arrested.*

Kareem was shocked. He left the station house without filing a report, his lip swelling up. Fear, shame, and indignation tumbled inside of him. From that tumult, a question emerged: Who had he been working for?

\* \* \*

Not long before Kareem saw the ad on Craigslist, Nazareth Shahinian was attempting to sell a cookie jar on Facebook.

“1977 Queen Elizabeth Cookie jar Stamped great condition,” he posted on his page.

It was just the latest business venture for Shahinian, a prolific entrepreneur of sorts who lives in Fort Lee, New Jersey.

Shahinian's resume is long and varied, according to his social media accounts and classified ads. It includes renting and selling property in New Jersey, installing gazebos in Canada, notarizing documents, assisting senior citizens, and, as he once wrote on Facebook:

“importexport medical equipments, medicine, pills, Doctors surgical necessary procedures, patients transportation, Doctors travel.”

Shahinian and his sons—David and Abraham—are listed in New Jersey business records as the officers or agents of numerous companies, some whose purpose is unclear. One, called Armeniking Corporation, has little online footprint beyond a YouTube account with one [video](#), in which Nazareth offers tips on grilling meat.

“Hi guys, how are you doing, welcome to shish kabob party,” Nazareth says, standing before a row of steaming skewers, a Panama hat covering his bald head.

Not all of the Shahinians’ business ventures have panned out. Legal records show creditors have won around a dozen judgments totaling more than \$100,000 against Nazareth, his sons, and their businesses. In 2004, Nazareth was barred from taking the New Jersey real estate license exam for two years after he was [caught](#) breaking test rules by copying questions and taking notes during an exam. (Nazareth lacked “the requisite good character, honesty, integrity and trustworthiness all candidates for licensure must possess,” the state’s Real Estate Commission found.) Five years later, he pleaded guilty to unauthorized practice of law. Two years after that, he received a Masters of Law from Thomas Jefferson School of Law (which then [lost](#) its national accreditation in 2019).

▼ The Shahinians rent an office in this building in Hasbrouck Heights, New Jersey, for their dealership, Gift Cars.

Photo: Johnny Milano



The Shahinians are also in the used car industry. Business and legal records show David Shahinian and Jessie Granito, who previously listed David as her husband on Facebook, own a dealership called Gift Cars in Hasbrouck Heights. Nazareth and Abraham were previously listed as managers on Gift Cars' Better Business Bureau webpage.

Gift Cars is located in an odd place for a car dealership, on a dead-end industrial street wedged between New Jersey Transit tracks and Teterboro Airport. The building is strange, too: a two-story brick structure surrounded by cracked, weedy pavement that has signs outside listing dozens of other tenants, all apparently used car dealers. On a recent morning during business hours, the building seemed to be empty, and Gift Cars' office was locked.

Gift Cars does not appear to be a high-volume dealership. The company does not have a website. Its Facebook page has listed just 16 cars for sale in the past seven years and includes unrelated content, like a post from 2017 that reads: "Yoga Aerobics Music Dancing burning fat." But, in 2020, something miraculous happened: the number of temp tags issued by Gift Cars increased tenfold, from under 200 in 2019 to more than 2,000 the next year, according to New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission data obtained through records requests.

▼ A letter that the New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission sent to Gift Cars after catching the dealership fraudulently issuing temp tags.

Source: New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission

**NJMVC**  
New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

Business Licensing Services Bureau  
P.O. Box 170  
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Philip D. Murphy  
Governor

Sheila Y. Oliver  
Lt. Governor

B. Sue Fulton  
Chair and Chief Administrator

October 19, 2020

David N. Shahinian  
[REDACTED]

Re: Gift Cars, LLC; #05330U

**ORDER OF SUSPENSION  
NOTICE OF PRELIMINARY HEARING  
and  
NOTICE OF PROPOSED REVOCATION**

Pursuant to N.J.S.A. 39:10-20, N.J.A.C. 13:21-15.5 and N.J.A.C. 13:21-15.15, it is hereby **ORDERED** that your New Jersey Motor Vehicle dealer license, dealer plates and registrations certificates are hereby **SUSPENDED** with an assessed civil penalty of **\$500.00** for the following reason(s):

- **Contrary to N.J.A.C. 13:21-15.15 - Emergency Disciplinary Action**

(a) In the event of an emergent situation, in which ongoing fraud, lack of insurance, destruction or vacation of premises, or other circumstances would jeopardize the integrity of the Commission's title records and the ability to prevent traffic in stolen or fraudulently titled motor vehicles, the Commission may immediately issue a preliminary suspension of the dealer's license.

**Specifically, your business is issuing temporary registrations for vehicles that are then titled as casual sales. In addition, your business is issuing temporary registrations to vehicles that are never titled.**

**This suspension is effective as of October 19, 2020.** You are required to immediately refrain from all dealer transactions pending the preliminary hearing which has been scheduled.

That leap in car sales was not what it seemed. The commission caught the Shahinians fraudulently issuing temps, according to an October 2020 letter from the commission obtained through a records request. And Nazareth, in an interview with Streetsblog in December, admitted Gift Cars had been selling tags illegally. (It's illegal for a dealership to issue a temp tag to someone without selling or leasing them a car.)

Nazareth told Streetsblog that "we didn't know" it was illegal to sell temp tags. He characterized selling temps during the pandemic as a public service of sorts: DMVs were frequently closed at that time, making it **hard** to register new cars. But people still needed to get around. They needed license plates.



“Instead of thank you, the government punish us,” Nazareth said.

Gift Cars wasn't the only dealership dabbling in illegal temp tag sales at the time. Across New Jersey and other states, obscure dealerships started printing massive numbers of temp tags while displaying little other business activity, a Streetsblog [investigation](#) found. It was around then that dubious-looking paper tags became commonplace on cars in New York City and elsewhere.

Some drivers had legitimate reasons for using those tags—the Motor Vehicle Commission [extended](#) expired New Jersey temps by a few months in 2020, for example. Others had less defensible reasons, like [people](#) using fake or fraudulent temp tags for cover while driving without licenses or car insurance. Such motorists had no trouble finding tags for sale online. Lawmakers in [New York](#), [New Jersey](#), and [Texas](#) are now trying to clean up the problem.

There are both real and fake temp tags on the black market—both being sold illegally. The fake ones are made by scammers with graphics software. The real ones are sold by licensed dealers and generally fetch higher prices, since they look legal to police.

Real ones typically sell for at least \$100, meaning Gift Cars' 2,000 tags were worth at least \$200,000 on the black market. Nazareth told Streetsblog in December that Gift Cars sold tags for \$20 or \$25, which, if true, would be wildly under market value but would still make those 2,000 tags worth at least \$40,000. But the commission's punishment of Gift Cars amounted to a two-month license suspension and a \$500 fine. That's the [most](#) that the commission appears to be allowed to fine dealers for a first violation under state law. (A new [bill](#) in the New Jersey legislature would change that.)

Nazareth told Streetsblog in December that Gift Cars was no longer selling tags. And yet, a web of connections appears to tie Nazareth to the operation that employed Kareem.

For one, it appears to have been Nazareth who met Kareem in the parking lot in Fort Lee and gave him the temp tag paper. Kareem didn't know it was Nazareth at the time but confirmed it later when Streetsblog showed him photos of Shahinian.

Nazareth told Streetsblog that he met a man in Fort Lee to give him temp tag paper, but said the man presented himself as a dealer, or a friend of a dealer, and that it was an “honest deal.”



► Nazareth Shahinian in Fort Lee, New Jersey, in May. Kareem Ulloa-Alvarado said Shahinian gave him paper to print and deliver illegal temp tags.

Photo: Johnny Milano

Then there is the Zelle account that King David told Kareem to send payments to, which was enrolled under the name “AIDA” and used an email address that included the word “inga” and six digits. Asked whether that email address belonged to his wife, Aida Yeginova, Nazareth told Streetsblog, “I think yes.” The email address is also associated with Yeginova on Skype. Nazareth has [referred](#) to his wife as Inga—possibly a nickname. And the six-digit number matches Yeginova’s birthday, voter records show.

Finally, there is the phone number that Kareem called to get the job. It also appeared in [Armenian](#)- and [Russian](#)-language newspapers in Canada last year, in classified ads seeking laborers, next to the name Nazareth. And Nazareth, in an interview in May, described the number as a “business line” used by Gift Cars. Notably, that same number has also appeared in Facebook [ads](#) offering New Jersey temporary license plates for sale.

Asked once again in May whether his family was still selling temp tags, Nazareth told Streetsblog, “We not doing it, I’m not doing it, and I think my son also not doing it.” He elaborated: “He’s young guy. He has many partners, friends. He has million friends. Too many friends. I cannot control that.”

Streetsblog repeatedly requested comments from David, Abraham, Aida, and Jessie Granito at phone numbers and email addresses associated with their names in online databases and business and legal records, as well as through Facebook and through Nazareth. They did not respond to those requests.

\* \* \*

Around the time that Gift Cars was caught selling temp tags in 2020, J G Auto Sale, a car dealership in North Bergen, started getting strange phone calls. The callers said they'd bought temp tags from J G online and asked about purchasing more.

J G's owner was confused. He's never sold a tag, he told Streetsblog in an interview in May. (That appears to be true: state data show the number of temps issued by J G has remained consistent and slightly below the average New Jersey dealer since 2019, and a request for commission disciplinary records involving the dealership yielded no results.)

Someone was putting his dealership name on fake temp tags and selling them illegally, it seemed. The owner, who asked not to be named, says he has complained repeatedly to law enforcement and the Motor Vehicle Commission about the problem.

Tags that Kareem delivered listed the dealership name "JG Auto Sales." The tags appear to be fake: neither that name nor the dealer license number on the tags are in comprehensive New Jersey dealer databases. But the name is close enough to the real "J G Auto Sale" to possibly explain the strange calls in North Bergen.

► The real J G Auto Sale in North Bergen, New Jersey.  
Photo: Johnny Milano



Police in Hanover, New Jersey, recently arrested a man for allegedly selling a temp tag under the dealership name “JG Auto Sales.” That man, Rayquan King of Passaic, did not respond to requests for comment.

Hanover police said they did not know whether King was working with anyone else. But they did say that King had business cards that listed the dealership “JG Auto Sales” and the name “Shahaad.”

In the Telegram group chat where Kareem got assignments, the name “Shahaad” appears at the top of a list of couriers.

\* \* \*

Kareem is glad to have some idea who might have been behind the operation that led to his busted lip, but it doesn’t make him feel that much better. He’s still out one iPhone, one wallet, one electric scooter, and one binder full of his art. (He started a [GoFundMe](#) for the scooter.)

In messages reviewed by Streetsblog, Kareem told his dispatchers about getting jumped the day it happened. They were sympathetic, but nobody offered to compensate him for his on-the-job losses. Sophia told him about the importance of releasing “blocked energy” and sent him a YouTube video called “Qigong to Purge and Tonify.”

► Kareem Ulloa-Alvarado in January 2022, holding paper he was given to print and deliver illegal temp tags.  
Photo: Jesse Coburn



That's when Kareem started to get angry. He was the fall guy, he realized. These people had implicated him in a criminal operation without telling him what they were really doing or making clear the risks involved. And when those risks materialized, it was Kareem getting punched in the face, not them.

Now he's just trying to move on. He's taking barbering classes, and he's thinking about getting into real estate, too. Talking about what happened has helped.

"I just wanted to tell my story because I just don't want anyone else going through it," he said recently. "I was just duped."

**STREETSBLOG**

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