

Fake documents swamp Houston

Rise in demand is putting pressure on authorities

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ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

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Illegal immigrants fearful of being caught in stepped-up workplace raids are fueling a growing market in Houston for phony immigration and work documents.

The result, experts say, is a glut of false, altered and counterfeit documents that are easily obtained at Houston-area flea markets, businesses and clandestine printing shops set up in homes and apartments. The bogus documents include counterfeit Texas driver's licenses, fake Social Security and "green cards," and even worthless international driver's licenses sold here and in other states.

"You could put all of HPD full time on this thing, and I don't think we could put a dent in it," said Lt. Robert Sells, with the Texas Department of Public Safety's driver's license fraud unit.

The demand has been so strong that law enforcement officers in Texas have been bribed in recent years to sell the valuable documents, and several dozen have been caught.

An ex-federal prosecutor said heightened enforcement has not only boosted demand for counterfeit documents, but increased the price and quality of the fakes.

"You're seeing stepped-up law enforcement of the worksite, and that leads to more identity theft and false document prosecution," said Kevin Lachus, a former Immigration and Customs Enforcement attorney now with the Tindall & Foster immigration firm in Houston. "That results in more training for human resource officials, which makes them more expert in spotting documents, and results in even more sophisticated counterfeit identity documents."

On Houston streets, a top-quality counterfeit green card proving legal residency commands \$500, federal agents say. Even shabby green cards bring \$15 to \$100 while a good-quality package — a driver's license, green card and Social Security card — can cost \$350.

Immigrants sometimes resort to buying real documents from corrupt officials at steep prices.

The most significant recent case involved five immigrants from India and the Caribbean who were fooled by immigration agents posing as crooked law officers. Three were

videotaped in a Houston government office last summer as they handed over \$15,000 apiece for green cards, according to court records.

Increase in prosecutions

In the Southern federal district, which runs from the South Texas border to Houston, prosecutions for using fraudulent immigration documents have doubled from 10 cases in 2005 to 21 in 2007, while false identification cases — such as with Social Security cards — have tripled from 14 to 43 during the same time. The number of cases related to immigration and work document fraud filed by the U.S. Attorney's Office has spiked nationally as well in the past three years.

"I am seeing an increase in individuals trying to purchase immigration documents," said Assistant U.S. Attorney Michelle Englade in Beaumont. "Obviously, they want (legal) status here so they don't get picked up by immigration officials."

The underground market has snared 24 state employees at DPS driver's license offices caught taking bribes to sell authentic documents to those who don't qualify.

"Houston poses a large portion of our investigations in that regard," said unit director Major Rhonda Fleming, referring to corrupt DPS employees. "We do seem to have a lot of internal crime in Houston. I don't know what the deal is. Maybe it's because it's such a big city."

Of the 24 fraud cases against DPS personnel in the state since 2003, seven were from Houston. Since the fraud unit began in May 2004, they have investigated 1,670 cases and made 593 arrests, according to agency records.

"A lot of what we see ... are illegal aliens who are here in the state, and they need to get a driver's license for employment and to drive," Fleming said.

Many of the document fraud cases are also investigated by ICE agents.

"Document fraud is major problem here in Houston, and we at ICE are addressing that as resources and other priorities allow," said Robert Rutt, agent in charge of the Houston ICE office.

Rutt said two years ago ICE officials formed document fraud task forces in 11 major cities and have investigated 1,198 cases. Though Houston doesn't have a formal task force, Rutt said ICE, the U.S. Justice Department and local law enforcement cooperate informally on investigations.

"Immigration benefits are a very valued commodity," Rutt said. "With the advent of technology such as digital printing, desktop computers and software, it gives an opportunity for people who want to violate our immigration laws to exploit those who are desperate to obtain immigration benefits or status."

Recent cases

The increasing value of immigration documents in Houston was demonstrated in several recent cases.

Last summer, Ki Sun Park, 53, and Man Hui Cho, 55, both of South Korea, were arrested and accused of paying an ICE agent \$10,000 for two green cards for workers. They owned two Houston sexually oriented businesses. Park and Cho pleaded not guilty and await trial.

In March, five immigrants were sentenced to time served in federal detention after admitting buying green cards from ICE agents posing as corrupt officials. The ringleader and two other immigrants went to a north Houston ICE office to pay agents up to \$15,000 in cash, as hidden cameras recorded the exchange.

The ringleader, Steavan Boxie of Trinidad and Tobago, was deported in March after a federal judge sentenced him to the seven months he served in federal detention.

Too long a wait for some

Michael Herman, who represented Boxie, said his client and the four other immigrants entered the country on work visas and tried to stay after their visas expired.

"They all came from impoverished backgrounds, and some had been victims of violence in their country," said Herman, with the federal public defenders office. "They came to the United States to work ... to try and build a better life, and they went out and tried to buy documents."

Gordon Quan, partner in a Houston immigration practice, said immigrants have few options due to long waits to obtain legal status.

"Because the system takes so long, you see more people breaking the law," Quan said. "It's not that they want to, it's because there are very few avenues."

And even when visas are obtained legally, fraud can be involved.

Houston federal prosecutors last month charged two local men and four others with securing fraudulent H-2B work visas for 80 unskilled workers recruited in India. The foreign workers, who paid between \$20,000 to \$80,000 each for the visas, arrived in Houston but were not required to work for the construction company that applied for their visas.

Instead, the Indian workers simply scattered across the country.