

## Police, federal agents battle bustling trade in phony IDs (The News Journal)

Illegal immigrants willing to pay high prices

By SUMMER HARLOW

The News Journal

The U.S. Express Mail packages delivered to Joan Santiago's house in Blades had originated in Puerto Rico.

Similar parcels were sent to Hugo Olguin-Lopez in Seaford.

Inside were dozens of Social Security cards and birth certificates.

The documents weren't stolen, nor were they fake.

Instead, according to federal officials, U.S. citizens in Puerto Rico willingly were selling their identification papers, which then were shipped stateside and sold on the black market to immigrants living here illegally.

The trend is showing up in Sussex County, where U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents already have made eight arrests, including Santiago and Olguin-Lopez, as part of a continuing investigation.

"There's a large market for fraudulent documents, but the Holy Grail is to obtain valid U.S. documents," said William Lowder, resident agent in charge of ICE in Delaware.

Stepped-up work-site immigration raids, employers' intensified scrutiny of work authorization papers and the continuing stream of immigrants illegally crossing the border have galvanized the fraudulent document industry, nationally and locally.

And to law enforcement, an influx of people with false IDs means it's that much more difficult to investigate crimes -- not to mention the potential for unauthorized persons to drive, vote, obtain U.S. passports or even buy guns.

"The document industry is 'off the hook,' as my daughter would say," said Georgetown Police Chief William Topping, who said not a week goes by that his officers don't confiscate phony IDs. "In Delaware we have a task force for drugs, a task force for porn and child predator stuff. You could have an entire ID task force, and still have a hard time making a dent."

To address vulnerabilities in the immigration process, ICE in 2006 created Document and Benefit Fraud task forces.

The task forces have busted a fraudulent labor-certification ring involving Indian and Pakistani nationals in Newark, N.J.; dismantled a marriage-fraud ring involving Chinese and Vietnamese nationals in Los Angeles; and halted a family organization in Denver responsible for producing millions of fake identification documents, including green cards, Social Security cards and driver's licenses that since have been seized in all 50 states.

Last fiscal year, ICE made 2,995 arrests nationally for document and benefit fraud, agency spokesman Michael Gilhooly said. That's up from 1,300 in 2004. He could not provide correlating data for Delaware.

The problem with fake IDs, Topping said, is that police don't know who a person really is.

"They're not just using fraudulent identification to drive cars," he said. "But we're also dealing with ID theft and forgeries and counterfeiting."

Worth hundred of dollars

Depending on the quality of the document, a fraudulent Social Security card can go for anywhere from \$50 to \$500 on Delaware's streets. The valid Puerto Rican papers sold for as much as \$1,000.

Earlier this year, Pedro Altatenco-Luna, a Mexican national living illegally in New Castle, was arrested for producing and selling fake green cards, Social Security cards and licenses.

Police seized more than 400 fraudulent documents he'd made using his home computer. Court papers showed he'd sold the fakes for \$20 to \$50.

Agents often are surprised by how realistic the phony documents are, Lowder said.

And as more sophisticated technology meets the increased demand for quality, the fakes keep getting better, which exacerbates the problem for employers and police alike.

"There are documents out there as an employer I definitely would accept, and that's the challenge," Lowder said.

Perdue Farms Inc. in Georgetown uses E-Verify, a federal database that confirms legitimate Social Security numbers, spokeswoman Julie DeYoung said.

"We want to use every tool available to ensure people we hire are eligible to work in the United States," she said.

The program has its shortcomings, she said, as it doesn't address problems like identity theft or the duplicate use of a Social Security number.

Rep. Mike Castle, R-Del., said one of his goals is to implement a federal employment database that uses biometrics to verify the person applying for the job actually is the true owner of the Social Security number he or she is using.

"It's a way to hold employers accountable, which is hard to do now," Castle said. "If there's a secure method to check who people say they are, it ultimately would discourage illegal immigration."

Topping's officers have binders full of fraudulent identification cards that they've collected over the years.

"This is just the tip of the iceberg," he said, fanning out a stack of more than two dozen such IDs already confiscated this year.

They include driver's licenses from North Carolina, Ohio, Virginia and Florida, and brown Delaware licenses that even an untrained eye would know were fraudulent. Officers have seized phony worker identification cards bearing Perdue and Mountaire logos. A few international and Guatemalan driver's licenses also were in the mix.

"They try and pass all these off as legitimate driver's licenses," Topping said.

Then there are those identification cards that clearly state they are not legitimate or to be used for official purposes.

They carry brand names like AmeraCard and InterCard.

Starter kit for ID business

AmerCard's Web site, boasting "Se habla español," offers a business starter kit for would-be ID makers, complete with wall, door and desk signs, a Polaroid camera and two sample IDs.

Delaware State Police know such cards are sold at the New Castle Farmer's Market.

They are legal because it's not illegal to make them, as long as they state that they are not an official means of identification, said Cpl. Jeff Whitmarsh, Delaware State Police spokesman.

But immigrants might not understand that the cards are not official or legitimate, especially when the cards bear the state's name above an identification number and the words "residence identification."

Valid documents available

It's not just forged and unofficial documents glutting the black market -- there are plenty of valid Social Security cards and driver's licenses, too.

Galindo, a Guatemalan immigrant who didn't want to provide his full name even though he's working with a legal work permit at Perdue, said everyone in Georgetown knows how to find someone selling phony documents.

The 23-year-old knows that when he returns to Guatemala later this year, his work and identification papers will become a hot commodity.

Many former immigrants sell their documentation, he said.

But not him.

"I need to take care of my papers," he said. "I don't want to get in trouble."

Imports from Puerto Rico

In Sussex County, the latest trend -- and the top priority for ICE -- is Puerto Ricans selling their Social Security numbers and birth certificates, allowing people living in the United States illegally to obtain real identification papers.

"We're focusing on those particular documents because they're valid and can be used to obtain firearms and valid passports so people can come and go through our borders," Lowder said.

In Delaware, those authentic Puerto Rican documents are being used primarily to obtain jobs, he said, "However, vendors and brokers don't discriminate who they sell them to, so it's still a national security concern."

James Brose, Santiago's attorney, said that in cases like Santiago's, those people purchasing the identification papers are not doing so with nefarious plans.

"They want to live and work in America, and there's nothing new or eye-opening about that," he said.

As such, six Guatemalan migrants arrested in Georgetown earlier this year for purchasing the Puerto Rican documents were not prosecuted criminally, but instead were placed in deportation proceedings, Lowder said.

"Our focus is on the vendors and brokers," he said. That investigation continues, with the "ringleaders" yet to be arrested, Lowder said.

Santiago, a Puerto Rican and thus a U.S. citizen, was sentenced last month to three months in federal prison and three

months of home confinement for his role in the Puerto Rican document scam.

Olguin-Lopez pleaded guilty and earlier this month was sentenced to time served.

The fraudulent driver's licenses mean a lot to police, Topping said -- more than just who a person is or isn't.

"I'd rather you not give me anything than give me something fake, because then I think you're trying to conceal a whole other kind of crime," Topping said. "You're telling me you don't want me to know who you are."

The answer lies with work-site enforcement, Lowder said.

"Once we shut down one type of document, another type of document comes up," he said. "I'd like to think our efforts with employers in Sussex County have made an impact. But whenever you have an employment magnet ... I think we'll always be fighting this problem."

```
if(typeof gcion_enable_bt != 'undefined') {  
  if(gcion_enable_bt) {  
    document.writeln(  
  
    ');  
  }  
}
```