Latest counterfeit IDs are so good they're dangerous

By Ashley Halsey III, Published: July 30

When the fleeing motorcycle hit the curb, scraped past a utility pole and hurled 20-year-old Craig Eney to his death, a bogus South Carolina driver's license was in the hip pocket of his jeans.

He spent the final hours of his life trading on that phony license to buy shots for his buddies at two downtown Annapolis bars, places so popular among underage drinkers that bouncers are stationed outside to check everyone's ID.

Yet scores of young people flash fake driver's licenses and waltz on by to the bar.

The days when faking driver's licenses was a cottage industry — often practiced in college dorm rooms by a computer geek with a laminating machine — have given way to far more sophisticated and prolific practitioners who operate outside the reach of U.S. law enforcement.

In an era when terrorism and illegal immigration have transformed driver's licenses into sophisticated mini-documents festooned with holograms and bar codes, beating the system has never been easier.

Just wire money to "the Chinese guy."

"He's like some sort of genius in China," said a 19-year-old for whom Eney bought shots that night. "Every kid in Annapolis has one of his licenses."

The "Chinese guy" — whose e-mail address is passed around on college campuses and among high school kids — is actually a Chinese company that mails untold thousands of fake driver's licenses to the United States. They have been turning up in states from coast to coast.

To the naked eye — even the practiced eye of most bartenders and police officers — the counterfeits look perfect. The photo and physical description are real. So is the signature. The address may be, too. The holograms are exact copies, and even the bar code can pass unsophisticated scans.

"We're seeing these false IDs being generated from the same source out of China," said Steven Williams, chief executive of Intellicheck, which supplies detection equipment to federal agencies, law enforcement and businesses. "There's a rampant distribution of false IDs … from China, from one source."

The IDs have shown up in various states, each license carrying a mysterious hidden tip-off in the bar code that points directly to the same Chinese company.

Eney's 19-year-old drinking companion said she can't recall who gave her the e-mail address for "the Chinese guy." She soon discovered that friends on campuses in California and New England had it, too.

More than just the rage among underage drinkers, the top-flight bogus licenses are a hot item among practitioners of credit-card fraud.

But it is among those too young to drink legally that these forgeries contribute to the worst carnage.

Every day between Memorial Day and Labor Day, an average of 16 people age 20 or younger die on the nation's highways, according to the National Transportation Safety Board. Forty-one percent of 20-year-olds who die in accidents have been drinking. The number dips to 38 percent of 19-year-olds.

Many teenagers view drinking as a rite of passage to adulthood, and for suburban teens who spend their high school years hanging out at the mall, the bar offers an alluring venue for socializing.

There are an estimated 10 million underage drinkers in the United States, according to the National Institutes of Health. The NIH cites a 2008 survey that found alcohol use by 39 percent of eighth-graders, 58 percent of 10th-graders, 72 percent of 12th-graders and 85 percent of college students.

Underage drinkers are more prone to binge drinking, the NIH says, consuming, on average, four to five drinks per occasion about five times a month. By comparison, the NIH says, drinkers age 26 or older consume two to three drinks per occasion about nine times a month.

As Craig Eney prepared to leave the Acme Bar and Grill on Main Street in Annapolis on June 16, his drinking buddies and a couple of guys who played lacrosse with him in high school said they thought he was too drunk to ride the bike.

But that didn't stop Kelcey Silva, 19, who police say didn't even know Eney. She was sitting on the back of the powerful blue Yamaha sport bike when police caught up with it a few minutes later.

Camouflaged contraband

The shoe box that arrived in the mail from China contained a cheap pair of shoes.

"We thought the Chinese guy had ripped us off," said the 19-year-old who shared shots with Eney the night he died.

Until then, the transaction had gone smoothly. She made first contact through an e-mail address supplied by the acquaintance. A prompt e-mail reply laid out the deal.

"It was $300 if you just wanted one" license, she said. "It was $200 [each] for two and $75 [each] if you wanted more than 20."

Photos, names, signatures and physical descriptions were e-mailed to the address. Money was collected from friends, many of them former classmates at the Severn School, from which Eney also had graduated, and wired to an address in China specified in the e-mail.

"You can pick from a list of about 10 states," she said. "I heard that the Pennsylvania license was the best one."

The shoe box with postmarks from China arrived in a matter of days. After initial consternation, she flipped over one of the shoes and ripped open the sole. Out tumbled 22 brand-new, visually perfect driver's licenses.

"And my friend's license came in this," she said recently, flipping to a picture on her iPhone. It showed a necklace box with a sparkling brooch.

This spring, federal authorities in Chicago intercepted thousands of fake licenses hidden in jewelry boxes and the soles of shoes shipped from China. Most of them appeared to be addressed to college students.

Border Patrol officials, who made the seizure in Chicago, are cracking down on phony licenses, but the IDs usually come disguised in individually addressed packages, making the task difficult.

Goodbye, motorcycle

The underage drinkers who spend so many summer nights in Annapolis bars that they can recite the weekly specials say they are careful to use a designated driver. And Eney's friends say that there was designated driver the night he died but that Eney wanted one last night out on his motorcycle before he put it up for sale on Craigslist the next day.

He pulled a buddy out of the first bar the friends visited to have a last look at the machine.

Sometime after midnight, the group decamped from a bar on the waterfront, friends and police said, and headed up Main Street to finish the night at the Acme Bar and Grill, undeterred by the bouncer checking IDs at the door.

All-purpose identification

Driver's licenses took on a new significance in the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001, when it was discovered that the hijackers carried several that had been fraudulently obtained.

Then the 9/11 commission weighed in: "Sources of identification are the last opportunity to ensure that people are who they say they are and to check whether they are terrorists."

"The driver's license became something far, far greater than it was ever intended to be," said Geoff Slagle, director of identification standards for the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators. "No one had a clue 30 years ago that the driver's license would have the importance that it does."

Now a license gets you through airport security checkpoints and past the lobby guard in secure buildings, and it lets you cash a check.

Transportation Security Administration personnel at airports check holograms and other security features on IDs, but they have yet to make widespread use of more-effective scanners.

The desire to verify licenses has spawned companies such as Intellicheck that supply military bases, credit-card companies, department-store chains, law enforcement agencies and security firms with an array of electronic devices to detect counterfeits.

The technology ranges from simple card-swipe devices to scanners that cost thousands of dollars and supply detailed information about valid cardholders. Intellicheck recently came out with an iPhone device that provides near-instant verification.

Remarkably, fake IDs so good that they escape visual detection often are caught by machines because they are too perfect.

"About 89 percent of genuine driver's licenses don't comply with their own specifications 100 percent,"

Williams said.

Intellicheck feeds the imperfections into its database. A license perfect in every respect immediately reveals itself as a fraud when compared with the flawed real ones.

The "Chinese guy" operation has been linked to a company called PARTiTek that is based in Nanjing, China. What's surprising about the connection is this: When the bar code on the back of the phony licenses is scanned, at the very end of the readout appears "by PARTiTek."

PARTiTek, responding to an e-mail inquiry, acknowledged that the bar code is the company's but said it doesn't produce the licenses. ID experts Williams and Slagle said they had no idea why the telltale company name would be included in the bar code.

Williams, whose company supplies handheld devices used on military bases and card-swipe machines used by merchants, said Intellicheck has the inexpensive iPhone application and a swipe pad that can sit on top of a bar, both of which could be used to check for phony IDs.

Williams said one of Intellicheck's founders was a bartender who thought that electronic detection could be used to combat underage drinking.

But "the company never made any money [selling to bars,] because bars won't do it," said Williams, who added that Intellicheck does make some sales to bar owners. "Unfortunately, we don't see a lot of business from bars."

Slagle, who once worked as a salesman for Intellicheck, gave this explanation: "The first knee-jerk reaction of people was, 'Wait a minute — you want me to spend money on something that's going to take money out of my pocket?' "

Ironically, although problems related to fake IDs touch virtually every federal, state and local law enforcement agency in some way, no one encounters them more often than the bouncer outside a college bar.

The last ride

Well past midnight, the memories of people who have been drinking shots and beers for hours tend to get fuzzy. Friends say Eney was on Main Street outside the Acme Bar and Grill, getting on his motorcycle. They say they didn't want him to, but short of wrestling him off it, they didn't know what to do.

He asked if anyone want to go for a ride. Kelcey Silva was standing outside the bar with friends and hopped on the back. Her brother ordered her to get off. But when he went back into the bar, she sped off on the bike.

A few blocks away, an Annapolis police officer pulled them over because Eney had given the lone helmet to Silva.

As the officer left his car to approach the bike, police say, Eney gunned it and roared away. The officer radioed ahead but did not pursue.

The bike turned onto King George Street, which runs straight and true for eight-tenths of a mile from the

main gate of the U.S. Naval Academy until it makes a dogleg to the right. The state trooper who is piecing together the accident said it's impossible to know how fast the bike was going.

But a man who had stepped outside to smoke a cigarette estimated that it was going 100 mph when it missed the dogleg. After catapulting Eney and Silva into a chain-link fence, where they died instantly, the machine broke into pieces as it clattered an additional 100 feet down the road.

Turned away at the door

Late on a Thursday night, five weeks after the accident and a month after the funerals, a bouncer checked driver's licenses outside the door of the Acme Bar and Grill, swiping them through a handheld electronic scanner

"You just get that?" a young woman asked as she handed him her license.

"Yeah," the bouncer said, "the police." Annapolis police had just cited the bar for serving four underage women the night of the accident. One of them was Silva.

The new scanner was put to a test a few minutes later when a young woman in gray summer dress handed the bouncer a Maryland license that looked genuine but was flagged as bogus three times by the scanner.

"I can't let you in," the bouncer said, handing the license back.

She flipped out her cellphone as she moved up the street, calling a friend already inside the bar.

"Kristin," she said loudly. "Can you hear me? It's Leah. I can't get in. It didn't scan."

Staff researcher Madonna Lebling contributed to this report.