

## Fake IDs: an Evolving Trade

*Students Seek to Thwart Age Restrictions as Officials Struggle to Keep Up*

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Part one of a two part series

What's your zip code? the manager asked, curtly.

248, the young man stumbled, mixing up digits.

This isn't you, the manager snapped, handing his ID back.

The confident look on the other side of the counter receded, eyes now averted. A mumbled sorry accompanied a swift, empty-handed exit. The beer remains on the counter.

The manager inside, served the next customer, unfazed and unsurprised. And so the battle continued of underage drinkers challenging business owners and law enforcement in an area that has seen penalties and enforcement ratcheted up since 2000.

I'm so pissed, the young man said standing on the sidewalk, outside of Wagner's Liquor on Wisconsin Avenue. This is the first time I've been rejected with that fake. I guess I got lucky nothing happened.

A month later, he would be arrested trying to get in with the same fake at Rhino Bar and Pumphouse on M Street.

You can tell three feet before they get to you if they are using a fake, David Nelson, the manager at Rhino said.

Every day in Georgetown, college students lie about their age to buy liquor. They take considerable risks to drink, playing a cat and mouse game with bars, liquor stores, clubs and local law enforcement.

Businesses and city government are using increasingly sophisticated techniques ID scanners, undercover raids to catch underage drinkers. But students still attempt to drink before their 21st birthday, despite the added difficulty and increased stakes.

Today, restaurant and bar owners are trying to make it harder than ever for people under 21 to use fake IDs.

Rhinos Nelson bought a \$4,000 Intertech ID scanner in 2001 when human checks were not catching every fake. Fake IDs had become amazing, Nelson said, noting that even his best



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Tombs Employee Brett Burns checks the IDs of students waiting to enter the popular Georgetown bar.

bouncers were making mistakes.

Since the purchase of the scanner, every person who goes into Rhino on a busy night faces two checks from bouncers and a scan for anyone who looks under 35 years old. Nelson estimated that 3 percent of IDs shown to bouncers at Rhino are rejected as fakes.

IDs are not the problem they were in the past, he said.

Christopher Lee, a manager at Wagner's Liquor on Wisconsin Avenue, still relies on human checks.

Scanners slow everything down, Lee said, also noting that only the most expensive scanners (similar to Rhinos Intertech) can read IDs issued in all states.

The range in scanning equipment is enormous, both in price and capability. Cheaper devices rely on licenses having a magnetic strip on the back, which not all do. The best scanners can also read an IDs barcode, which approximately half of all states have, according to Iuval Hatzav, vice president of Marketing with Card Scanning Solutions in Los Angeles, a nationwide vendor of ID readers. Model prices range from \$395 to \$4,000. All rely on reading an IDs magnetic strip, barcode or both, but some can display basic biographical information including the date of a patron's birth.

Some go so far as to identify lists of VIPs as well as people blacklisted from specific establishments. Others have a special mechanism so an ID cannot be used by two people in one night.

Lee said that Wagner's will probably buy a scanner when a model comes out that can scan all states (strip and barcode) for under \$1,000. Scanners that have barcode capabilities are generally more than double the price of strip scanners. At Card Visor, a web-based vendor, the costs are \$395 for the cheapest model versus \$990 for strip and barcode scanners, respectively.

The technologies are in balance, Hatzav said. They are still making good fakes.

But in two years, he continues, the technology will be unbeatable. Improvements to scanners will allow them to test the sources of the ink used, making all non-government printed IDs detectable. Card Scanning Solutions could not provide specific data on the amount of scanners sold in the DC-area in since 2000, but Hatzav estimated sales were in the thousands.

Matthew Frutig, a senior doorman at The Tombs, like many Georgetown bouncers, has had extensive training to stop underage drinking.

Technically we are supposed to scan and black-light everything, he said, referring to the ID scanner and a \$10 black-light that picks up special holograms invisible to the eye on real IDs.

But [the doormen] get a feel for stuff ... if it looks fishy after eyeing it, we'll light it, and, if all that is not convincing, we'll scan it. If there is any doubt, we turn them away, he said.

Frutig recalled his three-day training to become a bouncer. On the first day, he observed other doormen check IDs, with the veterans sharing their expertise while they worked.

With New York drivers licenses, Frutig learned of the three tests bend to see if the date of birth is marked over to change the number, black-light it to see if it has a hologram and scratch it to test the type of material it is made with.

On the second day, he studied the ID book, a directory of all 50 state IDs with pictures and descriptions. On the third day, he was given a 20-question test of ID checking, including the three New York tests. He got 100 percent.

Reggie [the Tombs manager] expects potential bouncers to get all the questions right, Frutig said.

Nelson confirmed the rigorous training for doormen in Georgetown. At Rhino, it includes 20 hours of observation before working the door and 10 hours of training on types of real IDs and their fake counter parts.