A Study of Parking Permit Abuse in NYC

*Permits above depict a ratio of city-wide permit use: 43 percent permits used legally vs. 57 percent used illegally*
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NEW YORK CITY MADE SWEEPING CHANGES TO THE CITY’S FREE PARKING SYSTEM for government workers in 2008. The number of parking permits was slashed by 46 percent, to 78,000 permits. By handing out fewer parking passes each year, the City is encouraging more civil servants to ride public transit, easing traffic congestion while freeing up parking spots for others.

Despite the reduction in city-issued parking permits, the system remains broken. Each step in the process—from creation of the permits, to distribution and enforcement—is fatally flawed, creating a system wrought with abuse and lacking effective oversight.

In the present study, researchers at Transportation Alternatives canvassed five New York City neighborhoods and found that a majority of permit holders—57 percent—were either agency permits used to park illegally—double-parking or ditching their cars on sidewalks and bus lanes, or totally bogus permits. The study found that 24 percent of permits on display were illicitly photocopied, fraudulent or otherwise invalid.

Clearly, further reform is needed. Modernizing New York City’s two-tiered parking system can help local businesses by freeing up space for customers and deliveries. It can boost the City’s bottom line by increasing meter collections. It can even make the City safer by increasing the odds that police will flag suspicious vehicles, like the van that parked for two days in Times Square last year with no license plates and a bogus permit until the NYPD’s bomb squad arrived. Finally, parking permit reform is necessary as a simple matter of fairness for residents unable to find parking in their neighborhoods.

The study focused on five neighborhoods where concentrations of city, state and federal offices have led to ongoing complaints from residents about parking abuse: Downtown Brooklyn; Civic Center in Manhattan; Jamaica, Queens; Saint George, Staten Island and Concourse Village, the Bronx.

KEY FINDINGS

- 57 percent of the permits in the survey were either legal permits used illegally or illegitimate permits.
- One in four permits was a fake, suggesting that citywide there are at least 10,000-25,000 thousand fraudulent permits. (That’s more fake permits than the 12,000 New York City yellow cabs).
- Manhattan’s Civic Center neighborhood led the survey for highest rate of permit abuse; less than 5 percent, or 11 of 244 permits surveyed were being properly used.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

T.A. highlighted the problem of government workers using permits to park illegally in our 2007 report, *Above the Law*. This earlier study found that 77 percent of drivers were using their permits to park illegally, wherever, whenever. The current study confirms that the problem persists—with 57 percent of drivers using legitimate and bogus permits as a park-anywhere-they-want-for free pass. This form of permit abuse leads to more cars cruising for scarce parking spaces and prevents delivery vehicles from reaching the curb leading to more double-parked vehicles. It degrades air quality for New Yorkers, leading to added health risks for asthma, diabetes, heart disease and cancer. Finally, illegal permit parking erodes the public’s trust in government and law enforcement.

The problem of bogus permits, also identified in the 2007 study, is still rampant. Bogus permits include official-looking permits unrecognized by the City, photocopies of real permits, expired permits and personal effects masquerading as permits: transit vests, patrol manuals and even a sheet of paper scrawled with the letters “NYPD.” In the case of the bomb scare in Times Square last year, the Dodge van that came under suspicion had tinted windows and no plates but a permit on its windshield claiming that its driver was a detective in the crime unit of “Metropolitan New Jersey and New York,” a nonexistent agency. The phony permit fooled the NYPD for two days, accounting for the agency’s slow response, NYPD spokesman Paul Browne later admitted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Add bar codes to parking permits.** Bar codes, those black stripes used by businesses to track product inventory, would vastly cut down on fraud. With a quick swipe, parking enforcement officers would be able to tell the real permits from the fake. In February 2011, City Councilmember Dan Garodnick introduced a bill that would require all new parking permits to contain bar codes, bringing the system into the electronic age.

2. **More enforcement of illegal and bogus permits.** The NYPD and DOT, the two agencies that jointly oversee city-issued permits, need to send a message that improper use of parking permits will not be tolerated. The NYPD should ticket employees who park illegally—with or without a permit—as well as anyone posting phony permits or personal effects on their dash to evade parking laws.

3. **Annual tracking of permit use and abuse.** The NYPD and DOT should release a report each year tallying the number of permits issued and violations handed out. Annual tracking will allow the public to tell how much enforcement is happening and whether it is making a difference.
Researchers at Transportation Alternatives surveyed five New York City neighborhoods to find out if Mayor Bloomberg’s parking permit reforms have cut down on abuse. In 2008, Bloomberg cut Department of Education permits by 83 percent and remaining permits by 32 percent, leaving a total of 78,026 permits. Bloomberg also authorized just two agencies — NYC Department of Transportation (DOT) and NYPD—to issue permits. Additionally, the NYPD was ordered to create a permit enforcement unit with “enforcement procedures to prevent the abuse of placards.”

But anecdotal evidence suggests that permit abuse is as bad as ever. From Jamaica to Brooklyn Heights, residents continue to complain about a two-tier parking system that “adds a sense of lawlessness in the community,” according to Michael Burke of the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership. Businesses suffer from diminished parking spaces and loading zones.

Why is illegal parking so common among permit holders? The evidence suggests that there are too many cars for too few spaces. According to a Lower Manhattan parking study by the DOT and the New York City Economic Development Corporation, “vehicles with law enforcement permits use 127 percent more space hours than are designated for them from 9AM-5PM.” A Schaller Consulting study, Top 10 Drive-To-Work Census Tracts in Manhattan, found that “government workers are twice-as-likely to drive to work than private sector workers.” With so few parking spaces available and an incentive to drive to work, permit users double-park or leave their cars blocking fire hydrants, sidewalks, bus lanes or at unfed meters. According to Councilmember Leroy Comrie, the result is traffic mayhem. In Jamaica, Queens, “double-parking can bring streets to a standstill, but any laminated dashboard card can usually ward off hefty fines,” said Councilmember Comrie.

Why do some many New Yorkers use fraudulent permits? Though it may not be explicit policy, the NYPD’s traffic enforcement division essentially operates under the premise that citywide there is a “no hit” policy on vehicles with permits in the window. Permit abusers talk of the NYPD extending a “courtesy” to agencies to break the law.

In January, T.A. revisited its 2007 study sites to find out if the reduction in parking permits had translated into less abuse.

“Double-parking can bring streets to a standstill, but any laminated dashboard card can usually ward off hefty fines.”

—COUNCILMEMBER LEROY COMRIE, DISTRICT 27, SOUTHEAST QUEENS
METHODOLOGY

Because so many permits are issued by city, state, and federal agencies, and so many others are fraudulent, this study was unable to document permit abuse on all city streets. Therefore, this study is a snapshot of systemic problems.

On Wednesday, January 20, 2010, volunteers with Transportation Alternatives fanned out across four neighborhoods: Downtown Brooklyn; Civic Center in Manhattan; Jamaica, Queens and Saint George, Staten Island. A fifth neighborhood, Concourse Village in the Bronx, was surveyed months later, on Tuesday, August 24, 2010.

T.A. analyzed the permits according to the following criteria:

- The number of legal permits used legally
- The number of legal permits used illegally
- Total permits used illegally
- Number of counterfeit permits
- Types of counterfeit permits

RESULTS

- 1450 Total permits used legally and illegally
- 57 percent Agency permits used to park illegally or totally bogus permits (820)
- 33 percent Agency permits used to park illegally (477)
- 43 percent Permits used legally (630)
- 24 percent Bogus (343)

TYPES OF BOGUS PERMITS

- 63 percent Union (215)
- 8 percent Xeroxed (29)
- 9 percent Fake (32)
- 11 percent Expired (38)
- 8 percent Personal effects masquerading as permits (29)

OVERVIEW OF RESULTS

- 57 percent of agency permits used to park illegally or were totally bogus permits
- One in four permits was bogus
- 8 percent of permits were personal effects thrown on a dashboard
- Manhattan’s Civic Center neighborhood led the survey for highest rate of permit abuse; less than 5 percent, or 11 of 244 permits surveyed, were being properly used.

CITY-WIDE RESULTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Legal and Illegal</th>
<th>1450</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>57% Permits used illegally</td>
<td>820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43% Permits used legally</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Agency Permits used to park illegally & Bogus Permits

| 58% Agency permits used to park illegally |
| 42% Bogus |

Types of Bogus Permits

| 63% Union |
| 11% Expired |
| 9% Fake |
| 9% Xeroxed |
| 8% Personal effects masquerading as permits* |

*Personal effects including but not limited to transit vests, patrol manuals and even a sheet of paper scrawled with the letters “NYPD”
COMMUNITY PROFILE OF PERMIT ABUSE:

- **584** Total permits used legally and illegally
- **43% (254)** Permits used legally of total permits
- **57% (330)** Permits used illegally of total permits
- **21% (124)** Bogus permits of total permits

DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN

CENSUS TRACTS
9, 11, 13, 25, 27, 37, 41, 43

STREETS SURVEYED
Livingston, Schermerhorn, State, Pacific, Gold, Pearl, Jay, Bridge, Duffield, Lawrence, Court, Adams, Smith, Hoyt, Nevins, Bond, Montague, Pierrepont, Middagh, Boerum, Remsen, Joralemon, Clinton Streets; Red Hook Lane; Aitken Place; Atlantic Avenue; Brooklyn Bridge Boulevard; Cadman Plaza

FACILITIES IN THE AREA
- Brooklyn Borough Hall: 209 Joralemon Street
- Main Post Office, Brooklyn: 271-301 Cadman Plaza East
- Main Courthouse: 360 Adams Street
- 84th Police Precinct: 301 Gold Street
- NYC Fire Department and EMS: 9 Metrotech Center
- Brooklyn Family Court: 238 Adams Street
- NYC Transit Headquarters: 370 Jay Street
- Department of Motor Vehicles: 10 Metrotech Center
- Brooklyn House of Detention for Men: 275 Atlantic Avenue
- Brooklyn House of Detention Center: 121 DeKalb Avenue

Total Legal and Illegal: 584

- **43%** Permits used illegally
- **57%** Permits used legally

Agency Permits used to park illegally & Bogus Permits: 330

- **62%** Agency permits used to park illegally
- **38%** Bogus

Types of Bogus Permits: 124

- **65%** Union
- **11%** Personal effects masquerading as permits*
- **9%** Expired
- **9%** Xeroxed
- **6%** Fake

*Personal effects including but not limited to transit vests, patrol manuals and even a sheet of paper scrawled with the letters “NYPD.”
**Civic Center, Manhattan**

**Census Tracts**
21, 33

**Streets Surveyed**
Elk, Center, Chambers, Reade, Duane, Thomas, Worth, Leonard, Franklin Streets; West Broadway; Broadway

**Facilities in the Area**
- City Hall
- The Municipal Building: 1 Centre Street
- Police Department Main Headquarters: 1 Police Plaza
- Federal Plaza: Broadway between Worth and Duane Streets
- U.S. Courthouse: 40 Foley Square
- Surrogates Court, Municipal Archives: 31 Chambers Street
- Tweed Courthouse: 52 Chambers Street
- New York City Department of City Planning: 22 Reade Street
- Engine 7, Ladder 1: 100 Duane Street
- Satellite Academy: 51 Chambers Street

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**Community Profile of Permit Abuse:**

- **244** Total permits used legally and illegally
- **5% (11)** Permits used legally
- **95% (233)** Permits used illegally
- **38% (92)** Bogus permits

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**Agency Permits used to park illegally & Bogus Permits**

- **233** Permits
- **61%** Agency permits used to park illegally
- **39%** Bogus

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**Types of Bogus Permits**

- **92** Permits
- **41%** Union
- **19%** Fake
- **16%** Expired
- **12%** Xeroxed
- **12%** Personal effects masquerading as permits*

*Personal effects including but not limited to transit vests, patrol manuals and even a sheet of paper scrawled with the letters “NYPD.”

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**Community Profile of Permit Abuse:**

- **244** Total permits used legally and illegally
- **5% (11)** Permits used legally
- **95% (233)** Permits used illegally
- **38% (92)** Bogus permits

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**Permits used legally and illegally**

- **95% (233)** Permits
- **5% (11)** Permits
JAMAICA, QUEENS

CENSUS TRACTS
238, 240, 244, 276, 446.01, 446.02, 460

STREETS SURVEYED
88th, 89th, 90th, 91st, 146th, 153rd, 160th Streets; Archer and Jamaica Avenues; Sutphin Boulevard

FACILITIES IN THE AREA
- 103rd Police Precinct: 168-02 91st Avenue
- Engine Company 233 and Ladder Company 176: 82-68 164th Street
- Queensborough Public Library, Central Branch: 89-11 Merrick Boulevard
- Kings Manor Museum: 90-04 161 Street
- Hillcrest High School: 160-05 Highland Avenue
- Jamaica High School: 167-01 Gothic Drive
- P.S. 86: 87-41 Parsons Boulevard
- P.S. 182: 90-36 150th Street
- Mary Immaculate Hospital: 90-10 150th Street
- Jamaica Station: Sutphin Boulevard and Archer Avenue

COMMUNITY PROFILE OF PERMIT ABUSE:

188 Total permits used legally and illegally
41% (78) of total permits
59% (110) of total permits
15% (29) of total permits

Types of Bogus Permits
- 21% Personal effects masquerading as permits
- 21% Xeroxed
- 4% Union

Agency Permits used to park illegally
- 29
- 74% Agency permits used to park illegally
- 26% Bogus

Total Permits
- 188
- 59% Permits used illegally
- 41% Permits used legally

*Personal effects including but not limited to transit vests, patrol manuals and even a sheet of paper scrawled with the letters “NYPD.”
CONCOURSE VILLAGE, THE BRONX

CENSUS TRACTS
59.01, 59.02

STREETS SURVEYED
158th, 159th, 161st, 162nd Streets; Sherman, Walton, Sheridan, Grant Avenues; Grand Concourse

FACILITIES IN THE AREA
- Bronx Borough Hall: 851 Grand Concourse
- Bronx County Courthouse: 851 Grand Concourse
- Bronx Borough President’s Office: 851 Grand Concourse
- Yankee Stadium: East 161st Street and River Avenue
- New York Public Library, Melrose Branch: 910 Morris Avenue
- Montefiore Medical Center: 305 East 161st Street
- P.S. 35 – Franz Siegel School (K-4): 261 East 163rd Street
- P.S. 156 - Benjamin Banneker School (Pre K-6): 750 Concourse Village West
- Cardinal Hayes High School: 650 Grand Concourse
- Bronx High School for Law, Government and Justice: 244 East 163rd Street

COMMUNITY PROFILE OF PERMIT ABUSE:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Permits Used</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legally and Illegally</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legally</td>
<td>60% (157)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegally</td>
<td>40% (105)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bogus</td>
<td>27% (71)</td>
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Agency Permits used to park illegally & Bogus Permits

- Total Permits: 262
- Legally: 60% (157)
- Illegally: 40% (105)
- Bogus: 27% (71)

Types of Bogus Permits

- Total Bogus Permits: 71
- Expired: 63%
- Fake: 9%
- Xeroxed as permits: 9%
- Personal effects masquerading as permits*: 8%

*Personal effects including but not limited to transit vests, patrol manuals and even a sheet of paper scrawled with the letters “NYPD.”
SAINT GEORGE, STATEN ISLAND

CENSUS TRACTS
3

STREETS SURVEYED
Hyatt, Bay, Hamilton Streets; Central Avenue; Stuyvesant and St. Mark’s Places; Richmond Terrace

FACILITIES IN THE AREA
• St. George Ferry and Bus Terminal: 1 Bay Street
• Staten Island Borough Hall: 10 Richmond Terrace
• Staten Island County Courthouse: 18 Richmond Terrace
• Borough President’s Office: 120 Borough Hall
• 120th Precinct: 78 Richmond Terrace
• The Staten Island Museum: 75 Stuyvesant Place
• The Richmond County Bank Ballpark: 2025 Richmond Avenue
• The United States Coast Guard Station: 1 Bay Street
• New York Public Library, St. George Branch: 5 Central Avenue
• St. George Station Post Office: 45 Bay Street

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<th>Permits Used Illegally</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>172</td>
<td></td>
<td>52% (89)</td>
<td>48% (83)</td>
<td>26% (45)</td>
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<tr>
<td>83</td>
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<td>54%</td>
<td>46%</td>
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Types of Bogus Permits

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<tr>
<td>45</td>
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PARKING PERMIT ABUSE CONTINUES TO BE A CITYWIDE PROBLEM. There are fewer permits out there, but still not enough spaces to go around. As a result, more than half of the drivers in our study used their permits to park illegally. Leaving cars in bus lanes, bike lanes and on sidewalks jeopardizes public safety and sets a double standard that erodes the public’s confidence in government. While this problem may have declined in some neighborhoods since our last study, illegal parking in Manhattan’s Civic Center actually increased. Also troubling is the apparent proliferation of bogus permits. Our researchers counted twice as many phony permits in this study than in 2007.

To reduce parking abuse, New York needs to modernize its parking permit system. The current permits are little more than laminated strips of paper. Any union or association can easily mint their own official-looking parking pass. Putting bar codes on permits can stop this abuse. With one quick swipe of the scanner, traffic agents would be able to weed out bonafide permits from the bogus.

Transportation Alternatives has three recommendations to the City to further reduce parking permit abuse: bar codes on permits, added parking enforcement and an annual permit tracking system. By modernizing its system, the City can crack down on the worst offenders—those passing off phony permits. And by redoubling its parking enforcement efforts, the City can free up added parking for shoppers, collect more revenue from meters and send a strong message that parking rules apply to everyone. Finally, a tracking system will provide New York City’s parking permit system with a sense of order and accountability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Bar codes on permits
2. Enforce the law
3. Annual inventory and permit tracking report
References


