n some respects, there was nothing unusual about the killing of Walter Gonzalez.

Eighty-six pedestrians had already died in car crashes in New York City last year by October 23, when a driver slammed a pick-up truck into Gonzalez in Brooklyn. It was not out of the ordinary that the driver was speeding, nor that his license had been revoked months prior.

But there was one thing that stood out about the crash: the paper license plate hanging from the back of the truck.

It was a New Jersey temporary tag, the kind that dealerships affix to newly sold cars so that customers can drive off before receiving permanent metal plates. During the pandemic, cars with paper tags suddenly seemed to be everywhere, not least in New York City. Drivers were using them to mask their identities while evading tolls and traffic cameras, or while committing more serious crimes, authorities said. Many were counterfeits.

But the temporary tag on the truck that killed Walter Gonzalez wasn’t
fake. It was issued by a licensed New Jersey car dealership. It was registered to the truck. From the perspective of law enforcement, it appeared to be legal.

Vehicle history records obtained by Streetsblog suggest otherwise.

New Jersey dealerships can only legally put temp tags, as they’re known, on cars they’ve just sold or leased. But the records indicate the truck was last sold in 2017—years before the temporary license plate was issued. And the dealership that issued it might as well not exist.

ECL Auto Empire, as the business is called, has no lot full of cars for sale at its dealership address. You cannot read reviews of the company or look at its inventory online. The phone number listed on its website is disconnected. And yet, ECL Auto Empire printed more than 600 New Jersey temporary license plates last year, according to data obtained by Streetsblog through public records requests. That’s far more than the number of cars sold by the average New Jersey dealer. But Thomas Burke, a recently retired NYPD auto crime detective who has investigated temp tag fraud, doubts ECL owner Christopher Lizardo is actually selling that many cars.

“He may be a licensed dealer in New Jersey, but he’s definitely doing something fugazi,” Burke said when informed of Streetsblog’s findings. “Like selling temps.”

Lizardo did not respond to requests for comment.

Such stories are not uncommon. A Streetsblog investigation uncovered
scores of used car dealerships that have fraudulently issued temporary license plates, which flow through a thriving black market to drivers who use them to skirt accountability on the road. Streetsblog found still more dealerships that, like ECL, issue large numbers of tags with little or no other discernible business activity. Some of these companies are run by New Yorkers but registered elsewhere, in states where loose regulations make it easier to obtain dealership licenses and print tags.

Officials in New York and across the country have sounded the alarm about fraudulent and fake paper tags, which have been used in hit-and-runs, robberies and shootings. One hit-and-run in Queens last year claimed the life of a five-year-old boy, who was struck by a driver with a suspended license and a counterfeit New Jersey temp tag. Temps from New Jersey are among the most common on the streets of New York City, as are tags from Georgia and Texas.

Reviewing state data and documents obtained through records requests, Streetsblog found that at least 109 dealers in Georgia and New Jersey have been caught violating temp tag regulations in recent years. Those dealers have printed more than 275,000 temp tags since 2019, the data show.

They include Jose Cordero, who estimates he made $18,200 by selling just 200 temp tags through his New Jersey dealership before the state caught on. His dealership license was suspended, he said, and he was fined around $1,000.

Other dealers told Streetsblog they sold thousands of tags.

“This is a big business,” Cordero said in an interview.

Streetsblog identified another 25 dealers in Georgia and New Jersey that collectively issued 67,000 temp tags last year alone while displaying few features of a normal retail car business. They have no company websites featuring cars for sale, no online customer reviews and no listings on Google Maps. But, on average, each purportedly sold or leased more than seven cars per day last year—a rate of commerce that industry veterans said was improbable without an online presence.

More than one third of those 25 dealers appears to live in New York City, in Westchester or on Long Island. Some of them print tags mainly for New Yorkers. Streetsblog even found one man who was caught illegally issuing temp tags from a New Jersey dealership, only to open
another dealership in Georgia that has generated hundreds of temp tags for out-of-state customers. He lives in Brooklyn.

Texas’ problem with sham temp tags came to light two years ago, prompting legislative changes and resignations at the state Department of Motor Vehicles. In New Jersey and Georgia, no major reforms have come.

Fraudulent temp tags can make cars virtually untraceable. Some tags are registered to a false name and address, enabling motorists to pass toll, red light and speed cameras without getting billed. Other drivers use sham tags because they lack car insurance or want to avoid sales taxes and registration fees. Both real and fake temp tags are available on the black market, but real tags command higher prices, as they are less likely to stand out to the police.

Many of New Jersey’s and Georgia’s real temp tags trace back to a network of unassuming warehouses and office buildings, each of which serves as the business address of dozens or even hundreds of licensed used car dealers. The buildings appear designed to minimally comply with the states’ modest requirements for used car dealerships.

That’s true of the compound in Bridgeton, New Jersey, where ECL Auto Empire and hundreds of other used car dealers are registered.
On paper, the facility in Bridgeton—a small post-industrial city in southern New Jersey—is the most bustling site of used car sales in the state. At least, that is the case when counting by the number of temporary license plates that dealers there are churning out: 137,000 in 2021, a 500-percent increase over 2019, data show. But a gate blocks the entrance, few people ever appear to be coming or going, and the vast parking lot to display cars always seems to be empty.

The New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission—the equivalent of other states’ department of motor vehicles—has suspended or revoked the licenses of dozens of Bridgeton dealers for violating temp tag rules in recent years, records show, and the number of temps printed by New Jersey and Georgia dealers has fallen since the height of the pandemic.

But when New Jersey’s MVC or Georgia’s Department of Revenue, which oversees used car dealers in that state, do punish dealers for temp tag abuses, the fines they impose are typically small compared to the large sums that dealers may be making from illegally selling temps.

One example is F&J Auto Mall, a dealer that was officially based in Bridgeton, although the primary owner listed an apartment in upper Manhattan as his address when forming the company, business records show. F&J issued 36,000 temporary license plates in 2021—more than any other dealership in the state, including the used-car juggernauts Carvana and CarMax combined. Authentic temp tags typically sell for $100 to $200 on the black market, sellers and buyers told Streetsblog, meaning if F&J sold all 36,000 tags, it could have made millions of dollars. But when the MVC shut down F&J for fraudulently issuing temps, the agency sent the dealership a letter saying its fine would be only $500.

“It’s not a deterrent. It’s merely the cost of doing business,” said Kathy Riley, a spokeswoman for the New Jersey State Commission of Investigation, when informed of Streetsblog’s findings. The commission has investigated abuses in the state’s used car industry.

Felix De Jesus Jimenez, who is listed in business records as one of F&J’s principals, denied that the business was shut down for selling temps but declined to discuss it.

Streetsblog’s findings are based on thousands of pages of state documents and four years of temp tag data obtained through public records requests, and on interviews with dozens of temp tag sellers and buyers, legitimate car dealers, industry representatives and officials.
from motor vehicle and law enforcement agencies.

The cost of temp tag fraud to New York taxpayers is difficult to calculate, but it’s significant. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority alone loses around $11 million annually in unbillable tolls at its bridges and tunnels due to bad paper tags. Traffic tickets, sales taxes, registration fees and other tolls that go unpaid because of sham paper tags likely bring the total cost in New York into the tens of millions, if not higher. And with toll cameras set to encircle lower Manhattan when New York introduces congestion pricing next year, demand for fake temps may only grow, a market that unscrupulous car dealers would be eager to serve so long as weak regulations enable them to.

“The system has so many loopholes that you can’t really stop it,” said Abdul Cummings, a used car dealer in Jersey City who watched demand for temp tags explode during the pandemic. “The system allows it.”

In a Wednesday afternoon in January, one block of Sheridan Boulevard in the Bronx hosted a curious gathering: more than a dozen parked cars bearing Georgia temporary license plates.

There was little to explain the sight. It was as if more than a dozen people had just purchased cars in Georgia and all happened to drive to the same street in New York City, some 700 miles to the northeast.
Coincidentally, that same stretch of Sheridan Boulevard appears in the background of Instagram photographs posted by Herrera Auto Group, a used car dealership registered to a remote office building in LaGrange, Georgia, a small city near the Alabama border.

The dealership opened only last year, but it’s been remarkably busy since then. Data obtained by Streetsblog show that Herrera issued more than 20,000 Georgia temporary license plates from June through December—the most of any dealership in the state in that period. Yet Herrera has few other features of a successful retail car business, like an online inventory, online reviews or a listing on Google Maps. The dealership office in LaGrange was locked on a recent afternoon during business hours, and the parking lot had only one car in it.

Also curious: nearly all the temp tags generated by the dealership went to out-of-state buyers—transactions that car dealers told Streetsblog typically receive less scrutiny from state auditors than those involving in-state customers. And dealership CEO Jefrey Herrera told Streetsblog he lives in Yonkers.

Herrera denied he was selling temp tags but declined to discuss his business.

“I don’t have to give you my fucking information,” he said in a brief phone interview.

It takes some effort to become a used car dealer. In Georgia, as in New Jersey and other states, applicants for dealership licenses must undergo background checks, fingerprinting and site inspections. Still, some states make it easier than others.

Pennsylvania requires used car dealerships to have display space for at least five vehicles. New Jersey requires space for just two vehicles. In Georgia, there’s no statewide minimum display space.

New York requires dealers to have surety bonds of up to $100,000—in Georgia it’s $35,000, in New Jersey $10,000. Connecticut requires an applicant to submit letters of reference from prior employers or calls them directly. Neither New Jersey nor Georgia do that. Georgia does not require dealers to keep a minimum number of business hours per week.

The regulatory differences are greater when it comes to temp tags. In Connecticut, Pennsylvania and New York, licensed dealers must
go through an additional application process before they can give customers temporary plates. That process includes a mandatory training course in Connecticut and Pennsylvania. If granted permission, dealers in all three states can only issue temp tags to out-of-state customers.

By contrast, dealers in New Jersey and Georgia can begin printing tags soon after receiving their dealership licenses, and they can issue them to state residents and non-residents alike. There’s no limit to the number of tags that dealers in Georgia can print, and they can print them from any computer. (The same might be true in New Jersey, although the MVC did not answer Streetsblog’s question on the topic.) The states’ online temp tag systems do not require dealers to upload documentation verifying key details of supposed sales, such as copies of buyers’ driver’s licenses, before printing tags.

“You can put a John Doe at 123 Main Street,” said Jon Salmon, the finance manager of a used car dealership in Alpharetta, Georgia, of the state’s online temp tag printing system. “It’s not going to verify it or anything like that.”

It’s rare to see temp tags from Connecticut, Pennsylvania or even New York in the five boroughs. Meanwhile, tags from Georgia and New Jersey—like the one on the truck that killed Walter Gonzalez—are ubiquitous in the city. And they have been since the pandemic began.
The pandemic threw DMVs into disarray. Offices closed to the public. People buying cars from private sellers couldn’t register them. Unable to get license plates, some started approaching dealers asking for temps. Struggling with sudden inventory shortages, used car dealers obliged. (New car dealers abstained, as they face oversight from vehicle manufacturers.)

The market attracted less scrupulous actors, like buyers who wanted temps because they couldn’t legally get plates, and upstart dealers who began printing remarkable numbers of tags. New Jersey used car dealers went from issuing 324,000 temp tags in 2019 to 510,000 in 2021, a 57-percent increase, data show. Georgia also saw a brief increase during the pandemic: from 362,000 tags in the first half of 2020 to 409,000 tags in the first half of 2021.

And it wasn’t just those states. Suddenly, suspicious paper plates were everywhere: in Louisiana, Maryland, Arizona, Wisconsin and beyond. For a while, Texas was the epicenter of temp tag fraud, which grew into a scandal there that brought down top DMV officials and led to new state legislation enabling the DMV to limit the number of tags that dealers can produce and to quickly cut off dealer access to the tag printing system. Members of one criminal ring were indicted by the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Texas after issuing more than 700,000 Texas temp tags through sham dealerships. One of the defendants was from New York, as were many of the buyers. He pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit wire fraud.

Some New York City blocks suddenly seemed to be full of cars with out-of-state temps. They started popping up in crimes across the city, like a shooting in Brooklyn, a robbery in Manhattan and a hit-and-run in the Bronx in which a driver plowed into a family of six on the sidewalk.

It got bad enough that then-Mayor Bill de Blasio held a press conference in the summer of 2021 to announce a crackdown—and his successor Eric Adams did the same one year later. But their focus was drivers sporting paper tags, not the dealers across state lines pumping them out under the noses of industry regulators.

Authorities in Georgia and New Jersey have taken action on the problem, fining dealers caught violating temp tag rules and putting them on probation or suspending or revoking their licenses. The
number of temps issued in those states has fallen from high points during the pandemic; used car dealers in New Jersey printed 343,000 tags last year.

The Georgia Department of Revenue declined a request to interview Commissioner Frank O’Connell. In a statement, department spokesman Austin Gibbons said:

“The Department of Revenue is aware of and condemns the actions of bad actors who abuse the state’s system to avoid title ad valorem taxes, use dealer plates to advance their criminal enterprise, and stain the reputation of hardworking Georgians engaged in the business of buying and selling motor vehicles. The Department will continue to work alongside the Governor’s Office, the General Assembly, other law enforcement agencies, and the industry to address these concerns.”

Four days after Streetsblog shared its findings with the agency, a Georgia state legislator introduced a bill that would create a committee to study temp tag fraud.

Lewis Page, a member of Georgia’s used car dealers licensing board, said the board is “well aware” of the state’s temp tag problems and that “it’s something that we’re investigating and working on.” He said the board disciplines dealers for misusing temp tags and is seeking to stiffen penalties, although he could not say which dealers the board has punished for the violation.

The New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission declined a request to interview MVC Chief Administrator Latrecia Littles-Floyd. In a statement, MVC spokesman William Connolly said:

“The MVC maximizes its regulatory authority under New Jersey law to combat all forms of fraud related to temporary tag use and dealer activity. In recent years, we have promulgated regulations to close loopholes and curb abuses, hired more investigators, launched more audits to detect improper activity, added several anti-fraud measures to our e-temp tag system, and more.”

Connolly did not respond to questions from Streetsblog, including which loopholes have been closed and which abuses have been curbed.

But problems with the temp tag system were common in New Jersey even before the pandemic, with the MVC as early as 2010 finding evidence of suspicious temp tag activity at the Bridgeton compound,
according to one state report.

And the permissive rules that enabled temp tag abuses to flourish in Georgia and New Jersey during the pandemic have not been significantly tightened.

The agency “has never been able to stop this, and they can never stop this the way the system is,” Cummings, the Jersey City dealer, said in an interview at his office.

To prove his point, Cummings swiveled around to his computer and navigated to the New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission website from which dealers print temp tags. Once logged in, Cummings prepared a paper plate for a special new customer. Buyer: Phil Murphy (the governor of New Jersey). Address: 354 Stockton Street in Princeton (the address of Drumthwacket, the governor’s mansion). For the vehicle information, Cummings plugged in a Dodge Durango he had sold previously.

All the information was fake. The MVC portal raised no objections.

“All boom, I’m done,” Cummings said, laughing. The temp tag was ready to print. “Phil Murphy just bought a Durango.”
any questions haunt Ana Mercado about the death of Walter Gonzalez, the man who was run over in Brooklyn last October. Somewhere on the list: how did a New Jersey temp tag end up on the truck that killed him?

Mercado was there that night. She was the one who sent Gonzalez out of their small Crown Heights apartment to pick up cream at the corner store. She was the one who sat in her wheelchair on Eastern Parkway for nearly three hours after the crash, in disbelief that the human form lying under a blood-stained blanket in front of her was her romantic partner of nearly 30 years. She wailed for Gonzalez, urging him to get up. Nearby, the hazard lights of a blue truck blinked. Its hood was rumpled like an accordion and one headlight was blown out of its socket. A New Jersey temp tag hung from the back.

How did that sheet of paper make its way from an enigmatic used car dealership in New Jersey to a fatal car crash in Brooklyn? Few seem to know, and those that do won’t say. But Roody Louinis has a story to tell about it.

The New York City Police Department’s crash report says the truck was registered to Louinis and listed an address for him in upstate Schenectady. But Louinis, in an interview with Streetsblog, said he didn’t register the car, let alone buy a temp tag for it on the black market.

Instead, Louinis said he purchased the truck a couple weeks before the crash from a mechanic in the East New York neighborhood of
Brooklyn, where Louinis said he originally is from. The truck needed repairs, which the mechanic offered to complete before handing over the keys. Louinis said he next heard about the truck when his insurance company called him about the crash.

“I didn’t give nobody that truck to drive around, especially—you know what I’m saying?—a maniac who’s killing somebody,” Louinis told Streetsblog.

Vehicle history records that Ana Mercado shared with Streetsblog show the truck was owned by Safeway Motors, a seemingly defunct repair shop in East New York. The truck previously had a New York license plate on it that racked up $8,000 in tickets in 2020 and 2021, all unpaid.

Robert Zelazny, the owner of Safeway Motors, did not respond to multiple requests for comment. New York business records say the company has dissolved. From Safeway’s garage in East New York, a sign was hanging in January advertising a new business: “RJ’s Collision Concepts.”

The garage was closed on weekdays in January, RJ’s did not respond to requests for comment and the New York Department of Motor Vehicles has no record of the business. But the business name, or something close to it, did pop up in one notable place. “RJ’s Collision Concept” was printed on the sweatshirt worn the night of the crash by the driver who allegedly killed Gonzalez.

That driver was Jefferson Springer. The 26-year-old lived in Brooklyn, not far from the Safeway Motors shop. Two months before the crash, the DMV revoked his license after cops caught him speeding for the third time in 18 months. The police report on the crash says Springer was driving “at an apparent high rate of speed down the center median” before hitting Gonzalez.

Springer declined to tell Streetsblog where the temp tag came from or answer other questions. He has pleaded not guilty to three felony
charges, including manslaughter. The Brooklyn district attorney did not bring any charges related to the tag, and the office declined to explain why to Streetsblog.

The unanswered questions have deepened Mercado’s grief. Now she lives alone in the apartment she used to share with Gonzalez. Her windows look out onto Eastern Parkway, not far from where she saw his body lying in the street. The sound of traffic fills her apartment.

“I’m just brokenhearted,” she said recently. “My life is upside down.”

As Mercado sees it, the dubious temp tag shows it’s not just Jefferson Springer who is allegedly to blame for Gonzalez’s death.

“The dealership is responsible,” she said. So are the agencies tasked with regulating it, she said.

“They gotta do something and check these businesses,” Mercado said. “It bothers me that you can just go and get a tag for a car, hit somebody and kill them.”

Reporting contributed by Blake Aued in LaGrange, Georgia.