

Police impersonators preying with ease Officers' tools available online

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Their tools -- blue lights, badges, batons -- are easier than ever to buy on the Internet, law enforcement officials say. And their methods are frighteningly effective. Police say it takes very little to persuade motorists and others to obey commands from someone they believe is a police officer.

Two weeks ago in Chelsea, a man with a two-way radio clipped to his shirt ordered pedestrians to put their hands on a wall and give him their wallets. Then he grabbed their cash, dumped the wallets, and drove away. Working with another man who had a badge hanging around his neck, the two robbed five people, Central American immigrants they believed would be too fearful to report the crimes, police say.

Then early Sunday morning, a burly man with a crew cut used a flashing blue light on his car to stop a driver on Route 24 in Randolph. Police say the man, who wore a blue shirt emblazoned with a shield, ordered the woman out of her vehicle, then sexually assaulted her .

Authorities say the crimes emerged from a dangerous subculture of police impersonators.

While some pursue nothing more than the thrill of using a police officer's authority to get someone to pull over, others exploit the power of the badge to rob and assault, often targeting women, immigrants, and others they believe will be most likely to obey their orders.

In either case, the public's trust in law enforcement is corroded.

"All too often, we've seen it happen," said Thomas J. Nee , president of the Boston Police Patrolmen's Association. "This uniform that distinguishes us in society, and the apparatus that we use, is too easily available to the public."

Police - gear vendors typically require identification from would-be buyers to prove they work for law enforcement, but say the proliferation of online sales of official equipment has made it much easier for people to get the trappings to impersonate an officer.

"If you look up badges and patches on the Internet, and you pay the money, you can buy Boston police badges, State Police badges, anything you could possibly want," said Paul Barry , president of Doughboy Police and Fire Supply, which has stores in Boston, Kingston, Revere, and Rockland. "The person that gets the order on the telephone is just taking the order, and they don't know if they're sending it to Lee Harvey Oswald or a police officer. There's no checking. They don't ask for ID."

Barry said he always checks identification. But would-be police impersonators still try to find suppliers who are not as scrupulous. "We have people all the time who try," said Chip Ziegler , director of marketing at V.H. Blackinton & Co. Inc., an Attleboro manufacturer of police badges. "They just call up and say they want a badge, and we know they can't have it and say, 'You can't get this without proper authorization.' And you never hear from them again."

"Do they get through," Ziegler asked. "Maybe they do once in a while, but it's not because of our lack of effort." N.G. Berrill , a forensic psychologist at New York's John Jay College of Criminal Justice, said some impersonators are simply criminals who use the gear as the easiest means to rob and assault. Others are driven by a more pathological desire to feel powerful. He once treated a patient who wore Ray-Ban sunglasses and a crisp suit and persuaded a real estate agent to let him use a house in the Hamptons for what he said was a two-week FBI stakeout.

"Owing to some deficiency in their masculine identity, they feel not terribly powerful in their lives and feel that by dressing up and playing cop, it bolsters this fantasy that they have some power and authority," Berrill said. "They get caught up in this illusion or delusion."

Police say there was apparently no other motive than assault in Sunday's attack on Route 24. The suspect, who had a goatee and was driving a late 1990s vehicle with faded paint, drove off after assaulting the woman shortly after 1 a.m. He remains at large.

While such cases are relatively rare, they make it more difficult for real officers to do their jobs, police say. "It's

something that does affect the trust that we have with the public -- that when individuals are stopped by members of the police, that they're going to be treated properly, with respect, and sent on their way without harm," said Sergeant Robert M. Bousquet Jr. , spokesman for the State Police.

State Police advise motorists unsure whether a real officer in an unmarked vehicle is trying to pull them over to turn on their hazard lights and drive slowly to a well- lighted area where other people are present before stopping. Motorists will not be charged with resisting arrest. Chelsea police are still trying to untangle the case of the men who flashed a badge and a two-way radio to rob pedestrians. Police say the men struck after dark between June 29 and July 1 and then drove away in sport utility vehicles. "They were focusing on Central American individuals -- perhaps believing in their own mind that these people may be not citizens and thinking that they may not report it," Chelsea police Captain Brian Kyes said. "But they did report it and these people were citizens."

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