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Impostors raise real concerns for police

Threat of violent crime, detriment to public trust

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It looked like just another routine traffic stop last month in North Laurel: A man in a Dodge Stratus that appeared to be an unmarked police car with flashing red lights had pulled over a driver on an industrial stretch of U.S. 1.

Except the man wasn't a Howard County police officer. And the car - despite the flashing emergency lights on the dashboard - was not an unmarked police cruiser. A real Howard police officer who stopped to assist quickly discovered the ruse and arrested a suspect - the second police impersonation case in Howard in less than three weeks.

Police officials say the problem of "wannabe cops" is not exactly an epidemic, but they express concern that even a few incidents can harm the public's trust in law enforcement.

Pulling over and yelling at a motorist for an alleged traffic violation, as happened in one of the Howard cases, is a seemingly benign - if creepy - offense. Police are far more concerned about frauds who use a fake uniform or badge to commit such crimes as robbery, rape and, in rare cases, murder.

In many states, including Maryland, impersonating a police officer is a misdemeanor, with maximum jail times of six months to one year and fines of \$1,000 or less.

But some officials and law enforcement experts think it's time to increase penalties, especially since police equipment and accessories can be purchased with little or no oversight through Web sites or catalog companies.

"It's a danger to the public," said Todd Taylor, a Howard deputy state's attorney. "We would like to see stronger penalties. One, [impersonators] reduce the confidence in the Police Department. [The fake officer] can say or do things that hurts the image of cops. Second, if you get pulled over by one of these fakes, you may not want to be pulled over when a real cop tries to stop you."

In extreme cases, police impersonators have committed violent crimes. Colorado stiffened its penalty after an impersonator kidnapped and killed a 20-year-old female college student in January.

In New York City, problems with police impersonators prompted its Police Department several years ago to form a unit in which real officers investigate the fake ones and the crimes they commit.

Drug-dealer ruse

But in Baltimore, incidents of impersonators are still rare, said Chief Edwin Day, who leads the department's detectives.

Before coming to Baltimore, Day served in New York City's police force as a lieutenant commander of detectives. One problem in New York, he said, was drug dealers who would wear clothing with police logos and "raid" other dealers to rob them of drugs and cash.

"That's something that, thankfully, we haven't seen here too often," Day said.

Recently, other area law enforcement agencies have collared impersonators who had gone to extremes to look like police officers. In the metropolitan Baltimore area, police have arrested at least four men and charged them with impersonating officers since the beginning of the year.

In an Aug. 10 case, Howard police charged Oley Burgess Rust III, a 45-year-old Laurel man, with concealing a deadly weapon and impersonating an officer.

A Howard officer saw a red Ford Crown Victoria parked on the road's shoulder with the engine running on U.S. 1, without a driver. Believing the car was an unmarked police vehicle, the officer pulled over to help and saw a laminated placard inside the vehicle that said "Police Official Business," according to police charging documents.

When the officer questioned the driver, police said, he admitted that he was a bail enforcement agent. The officer saw a knife in the man's front pocket and put him in handcuffs. He found another knife and two handguns and ammunition in his car.

In the latest case Aug. 29, a Howard officer saw a man in what looked like an unmarked police car make a traffic stop using flashing lights on Washington Boulevard, in North Laurel.

When the real officer pulled over to help the fake one, he noticed the man was carrying a badge on his front belt that said "Special Private Investigator MD," a pair of handcuffs and a knife in his back pocket. The officer also noticed a baton in the man's car.

But the man was unable to provide further documentation that he was an officer.

Police charged Brian F. Rogers, 25, of Baltimore with police impersonation and concealing a deadly weapon, according to charging documents.

The cases this year haven't been limited to local law enforcement departments. In July, state police charged a Stevensville man in Glen Burnie with posing as a trooper - and selling prescription drugs.

Police found a cache of gear and equipment at his home and in two cars, modified to look like unmarked cruisers, that included dashboard emergency lights, a bulletproof vest with "POLICE" emblazoned on it, police badges, a radar unit and a siren, state police said.

"It's nothing that we encounter every day; it's rare," said Sgt. Thornnie Rouse, a state police spokesman. "We normally average one or two a year."

But, Rouse added, "it's always a concern when you have folks pretending to be someone they're not."

Typically a city problem

Despite concerns of law enforcement officials, statistics on police impersonator cases are not tracked nationally. In Howard, police are hard-pressed to recall the last time they arrested a suspected impersonator before the two unrelated cases last month. Experts say it's typically big-city police departments that have more problems with impersonators, mainly because it's easier for a fake cop with an unmarked car to blend in among hundreds or thousands of officers and vehicles.

In a high-profile case four years ago, the District of Columbia Police Department arrested a Prince George's County resident accused of posing as an officer for months. He had a district police uniform, a badge, a 9mm Glock semiautomatic handgun and a radio.

In 1996 in Baltimore, two men impersonating officers falsely arrested a city woman who had been wanted on arrest warrants. They used fake badges to obtain arrest warrant paperwork and got as far as the fourth floor of police headquarters before an alert booking officer figured them out to be frauds.

So what drives someone to dress like an officer - and step over the edge and pull a motorist over?

"They have an image problem, and that's why they're seeking to burnish their image by going into this kind of deceit, this kind of fraudulent behavior," said Robert D. McCrie, a professor of criminal justice at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City.

Some may have some kind of peripheral connection with law enforcement, working as security guards or bail enforcement agents - positions that grant them access to certain kinds of gear and equipment, experts said.

McCrie said the phenomenon of police impersonators has been around for about as long as there have been organized police forces.

But what's different now, law enforcement experts said, is how buying official-looking law enforcement gear - from handcuffs to body armor - through online auctions or specialty Web sites is just a few clicks of the mouse away.

"In the last 20 years, there's been a very dramatic change in how you can buy police equipment," said John Damino, a criminal justice professor at Southern Vermont College in Bennington and a former captain in the Albany, N.Y., Police Department.

For decades, Damino said, local retailers bought from national vendors and supplied departments with virtually all their needs.

These small shops still exist, but catalog businesses and Web sites have flourished over the years as more police departments began giving officers a spending allowance to buy whatever they need.

Supplying police officers

Sam Walters, a retired Baltimore City officer, has owned one of these small shops for nearly 20 years. Walters operates The Cop Shop, which supplies Baltimore and Baltimore County police and other Maryland law enforcement officers with the gear needed to do their jobs.

He sells just about everything an officer might need in the Baltimore store, located a short walk from city police headquarters. The store is bursting with shirts, holsters, batons, flashlights, handcuffs and badge holders. He also sells guns and ammunition.

But behind his desk, he keeps a chart of his store's sale policy: a list of who can and cannot buy certain items. His policy is simple: If you can't prove you're an officer with a law enforcement agency, you won't be buying any piece of clothing that has that department's name or logo, or much of the gear on the walls or in the cases.

"I'm held to a higher standard than everyone else because I'm a retired officer," Walters said in a recent interview at his store.

He said that people come into his shop regularly to try to buy accessories, gear or equipment that he refuses to sell to them. Most of the restrictions he places on his sales are self-imposed, he said.

Walters keeps track of every serial number inscribed on the handcuffs he sells, and photocopies the driver's license of every person who buys ammunition.

"What I don't want is two things: I don't want one of my officers hurt, and I don't want to be in the media for doing anything that's not necessarily illegal, but immoral."

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