

# Counterfeit bills passed regularly

‘Widespread problem’ with 75 probes yearly in region, Secret Service says

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coln have a place there.

And over at the Tip-Top on Turk, Jack behind the counter was just as certain those Jacksons were lacking, as he brandished the \$7.99 pen he keeps handy to ensure he’s only taking honest bucks.

The Extra’s Jacksons looked pretty good to a less-trained eye. A little soft, perhaps, but not to someone who’s occasionally, in a purely innocent manner, laundered his money.

## ANGEL SMELLS A RAT

Across the street from the Mission Cultural Center at La Taqueria, Angel, the owner’s son, was the first to smell a rat. He pointed out the lack of a vertical stripe embedded in the paper about a half-inch from the margin. Held up to the light, the Jackson he pulled from the register had it plain as day. He later told The Extra he intercepts a couple of hundred worth of phonies every year.

A kid working the counter at Rainbow Grocery noticed the funny feeling of these bills. So did the gal working the register at a Telegraph Avenue gas station in Oakland.

“Counterfeiting is such a widespread problem,” said David Thomas, special agent in charge of the Secret Service’s San Francisco office. “We conduct an average of 75 counterfeit currency criminal investigations per year in Northern California,” G-man Thomas told The Extra. “Those investigations result in about 30 arrests per year by the Secret Service.”

“Counterfeit currency-passing activity has increased in Northern California from \$4.6 million worth in 2012 to \$6.3 million in FY 2015,” he wrote in an email. “It appears we are on track for right around \$6 million for FY 2016,” which ends Sept. 30.

Local law enforcement agencies, too, prosecute counterfeiting. “Not all are federally prosecuted,” he said. “We work very often with state and local agencies.”

Back in April, for instance, in a Cupertino apartment across the street from Apple Computer offices, the Santa Clara County sheriff arrested a suspect, Eric Aspden, 43, alleging he’d been making six-figure bank for the past year or two, sending bundles of \$20s across the country.

Santa Clara extradited him to Virginia, one of 30 states he’s alleged to have distributed to. He’d made them, the six felony charges say, on inkjet printers and 100% cotton paper, stuff easily purchased at any office supply store.

Turns out, just holding that phony currency is a crime, too, like possession of other controlled substances.

## BANK TELLERS’ KEEN EYES

“We try to collect all the counterfeit currency that gets passed around the world,” Thomas said. It comes to them, he said, “primarily from police departments or bank deposits.”

Bank tellers, he said, are the best



MARK HEDIN

**Satwinder “Bill” Multani** holds some of the counterfeit money his workers mistakenly accepted. He keeps these two and other fake bills taped to the wall behind the register to remind them to be more careful. He knew right away that the \$20 bills The Extra found blowing down a South of Market alley weren’t the real deal. He even has a phony \$5 bill in his collection.

at spotting counterfeits. Also, Thomas said, they do better at confiscating them when they’re presented, given banks’ generally better security than what mom-and-pop stores have. “We would prefer that they (shopkeepers) do take it,” Thomas said, but “our No. 1 concern is for their safety,” and the official recommendation is that merchants report attempts at passing fake currency, with descriptions of the persons of interest.

Despite his efforts, Tip Top’s Jack says he regularly gets notified by his bank that not all of the money he’s deposited is acceptable.

That money, he says, he never sees again. It’s not a lot, \$40-\$100 every month or two, but it’s consistent, he said.

“Most of the victims are going to be smaller businesses,” Thomas said. “It’s like that old game of hot potato. Whoever’s got it last loses.” Sometimes, he said, they get odd-looking money that’s actually the real deal. “A 1935 series bill looks very different,” he said.

Twenties are the most commonly faked currency, he said, followed by 100s, but he’s seen ‘em all. Multani showed The Extra a fake \$5, a \$10 and a \$20.

## \$61 MILLION SO FAR

Counterfeiting in general, Thomas added, “might not get much attention because the victims are spread so thin,” but nationwide so far this fiscal year, he said, the Secret Service has collected \$61 million in phony currency. In his jurisdiction, which ranges up the coast from San Mateo to the Oregon border, it’s \$2.5 million since Oct. 1.

The inland district, including Fresno, San Jose and Sacramento, he said, has taken in another \$2.25 million in the same time period.

“It has become so easy to do with the increase in technology capacity for copying,” Thomas said. “Sixteen-year-old kids might do it for fun.” The maximum sentence on counterfeiting charges, Thomas said, is 20 years. In colonial times, under British rule, counterfeiting was a capital crime.

## COUNTERFEITING CARTELS

Beyond mischievous teenagers with sophisticated computer ware, a bigger problem, Thomas said, lurks in the jungles of South America, where, he alleged, drug cartels have set up sophisticated printing operations to exploit their countries’ “dollarized” economies.

“It’s easy for them to have these large-scale printing operations in the jungle manufacturing high quantities of U.S. currency,” Thomas said. “Some of that makes its way into the United States.” The Secret Service, he said, has 25 foreign offices, besides its presence in all 50 U.S. states. More sophisticated offset presses, he said, can change the bills’ serial numbers during the press run, to make them seem more authentic.

President Lincoln signed the legislation that created the Secret Service, Thomas said, on April 14, 1865, just hours before he was assassinated at Ford’s Theatre. At the time of the Civil War, counterfeits accounted for 30%-35% of the money circulating, and combatting that was “the sole purpose” for the agency’s creation, he said.

And combatting financial crime remains a key element of the Secret Service’s assignment. Nowadays, that’s grown to include things like credit card and bank fraud and cybercrimes for financial gain, Thomas said.

The Secret Service didn’t begin protecting presidents until 1901, after President McKinley was murdered. Decades too late for Honest Abe. ■