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HOUSTON

The United States Secret Service says \$103 million in counterfeit bills were taken out of circulation last year. Surprisingly, it's not the people who created the fake bills who are passing them along, but the general public.

In Houston, businesses and law enforcement agencies are trying to keep up with the onslaught of bogus cash. In fact, after reviewing two months of Harris County records, 11 News learned that nearly every day somebody in our community is charged with attempting to pass counterfeit money.

One of these alleged counterfeiters was Paul Thomas. Police say he knowingly tried to buy something with a fake \$100 bill. Thomas isn't the only one going to jail. Clement Porter was sentenced to three years after trying to pass a counterfeit \$10 bill. He has a lengthy criminal history. But despite all the arrests, fighting this crime is especially difficult because most of the fake money is not passed on by criminals, but by everyday people who have no idea the money in their wallet is counterfeit.

Some people and businesses are worried about receiving phony money. They are arming themselves with counterfeit money detector pens. If the bill is fake, the pen will leave a permanent dark mark. However, these pens are not foolproof. In some cases, innocent people, like Valarie Phillips and her husband, Clyde, have been arrested and briefly taken to jail.

Last month, the couple says they withdrew \$300 from an ATM on Tidwell. But when Valerie tried to pay her cable bill with the money, Comcast used the pen and told her the bills were counterfeit. Valarie and her husband went back to where they had withdrawn the cash. However, the clerk wouldn't reimburse them, so they called the police. "I hope no one else is going through this, but if they are, I feel their pain," said Clyde Phillips.

After the ordeal, a bank determined the \$300, which was dispensed in \$20 bills, was not counterfeit. In other words, the counterfeit pen didn't work the way it should have. But that's only part of the problem. HPD says counterfeiters have found a way to beat the ink detector, as well as laser machines that are supposedly more accurate.