

Students Easy Target For Counterfeiters

By Mike OLIVEIRA, Ryersonian

TORONTO (CUP) -- It's late Friday night and you're at a dark, smoky bar, winding down after a long week of school. You fight for the bartender's attention, pay for a drink with a \$20 bill, and quickly collect your change before slipping back into the crowd. You don't know it yet, but that drink cost you a lot more than you realized. You've been passed a counterfeit \$10 bill and have no recourse but to accept the loss, or face some very serious consequences if you try to pass it on.

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Fake \$10 bills have become the note of choice for counterfeiters these days and students have become a primary target, experts say. Denis Abbott, spokesman for the Bank of Canada, said students and clubgoers have become "easy marks" for counterfeiters because the dark atmosphere and the crowded, hurried pace of transactions in bars, make it easier for fake money to be passed undetected. "We've seen an increase in what we call 'casual counterfeiting,' (which is) people trying to pass just a few bills at a bar or a corner store," Abbott said. "Bars are vulnerable because the lighting is often not as good ... and people aren't checking [a bill's] security features like they need to. "And sometimes the bars aren't vigilant enough in checking (either.)"

It used to be that counterfeit money was mostly a problem for merchants. Businesses have been scammed so

many times by fake \$50 and \$100 bills that they stopped accepting them and the notes nearly disappeared from circulation. But

now, counterfeiters are adjusting their strategies by mainly copying small bills. The problem, Abbott said, is that most consumers don't expect small bills to be counterfeit and assume only large bills get copied.

"When someone counterfeits a low denomination like a \$10 bill they think they can pass it because no one ... thinks anyone would try counterfeiting a ten. No one thinks to check it," Abbott said. "Counterfeiting is (a crime) of opportunity. Our review is that people are trying to pass counterfeit tens because they don't think anyone's going to check them."

In 2001, the \$100 bill was the note of choice for counterfeiters but that's changed dramatically, said RCMP Staff Sgt. Paul Marsh.

The \$10 bill emerged as the most popular bill to counterfeit last year, accounting for 55 per cent of all fakes police found; the \$20 bill followed at a 25 per cent frequency. Although experts say Canadian currency is among the most high-tech in the world when it comes to anti-counterfeiting measures, it took only months for new fakes to begin making the rounds after the newly redesigned \$10 bill was issued in early 2001.

Now that the smaller fake bills are the most prominent on the street, students are more likely to get stuck with one.

But for those victims thinking about trying to pass on a counterfeit bill, think again.

"It's a very dangerous game to play," said Marsh. The maximum penalty for passing a counterfeit note is up to 14 years in prison.

"It's a terrible risk to take," added Abbott. "It's a serious crime and not something the bank, police or the courts take lightly. It's not something people should attempt to do."

Sgt. Robb Knapper of the Toronto Police said that if caught, the onus is on the individual to prove they didn't intentionally pass a counterfeit bill. He said victims of counterfeiting should

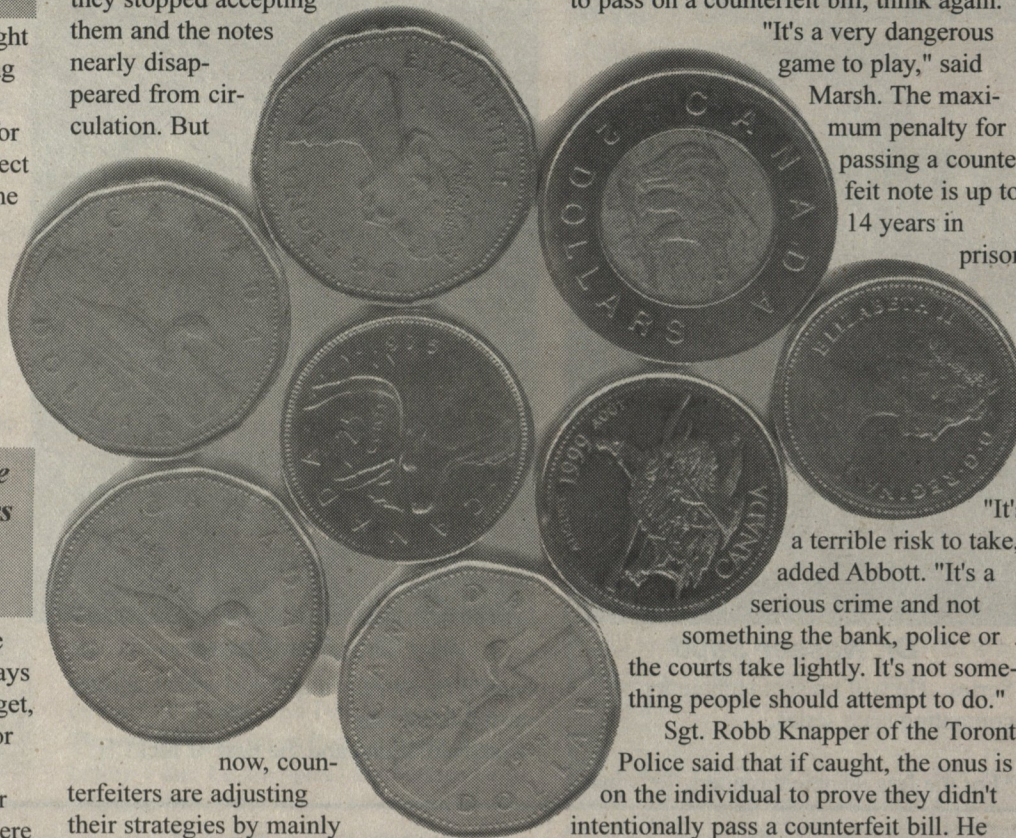
immediately call police, who will pick up the bill, ask questions about how it was passed and start an investigation.

"Normally we ask you to touch it as little as possible, so we can try to lift fingerprints and possibly get the person who originated the bill," Knapper said.

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Police won't reimburse victims for their fake bill, no one will, said Knapper. But there is one "rare case" in which restitution is possible. It's unlikely but if a consumer can prove they received a counterfeit bill from the bank, a refund may be negotiated with the institution.

"It has happened. It's a case where someone makes a deposit and it gets cycled back into the system. But it's very, very rare," Abbott said.



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