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No Parking Spot? Here Are About 142,000 Reasons

By [WILLIAM NEUMAN](#) and [AL BAKER](#)

Why is it so hard to find a parking place in New York City?

There are a lot of reasons, but this may be the most infuriating: The city has given out no fewer than 142,000 free parking permits to public employees and others. That's twice as many as City Hall had estimated were in circulation.

And after two months of research, city officials cannot say who has them all.

Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) announced in January that he would crack down on the perk and would cut by 20 percent the number of permits on the streets by March 1. The mayor was under pressure to do something about the permits, in part because he had been pushing for a congestion pricing plan that would charge most drivers who bring their cars into Midtown Manhattan.

But Bloomberg administration officials now say that given the discovery that so many permits have been distributed, it will take more time to cut back on them. Deputy Mayor Edward Skyler cautioned this week that the inventory of parking placards had not yet been completed and that the number could change.

"It's obviously a practice that has proliferated to an unacceptable amount," Mr. Skyler said. He predicted that after the cuts were completed, the number of placards would be reduced by more than the mayor's 20 percent target. Officials said the minimum cut would result in the reduction of about 28,000 permits.

The inventory found that more than 500 placards belonged to the mayor's office alone, but Mr. Skyler would not reveal the names of those who had received them. In addition to members of the mayor's staff, the group includes elected officials, city marshals and community board leaders, among others.

Former Mayors [Edward I. Koch](#), [Rudolph W. Giuliani](#) and [David N. Dinkins](#) also have placards, according to a spokesman for the Police Department.

The placards include about 120,000 used by the police, teachers and others to park near their workplaces, and about 22,000 that allow penalty-free parking at meters and in no-parking zones

for vehicles on city business.

The placards have been a source of frustration to New York drivers for decades. In 1987, The New York Times reported that to ease traffic around City Hall, the number of placards issued to public employees would be cut to 15,000 from an estimated 50,000.

But the numbers continued to grow. For example, there are now some 50,000 permits that have been issued to Police Department employees to park around station houses and other workplaces, a number close to the 59,000 police and auxiliary officers and civilian employees who are eligible for them.

Even Mr. Bloomberg, when he took office in 2002, ordered a cut in the number of placards, but his administration at that time did not undertake an exhaustive inventory or the strong enforcement measures currently under way.

More recently, several advocacy groups have highlighted the proliferation of placards and said that it encourages city workers to drive to work rather than use mass transit.

The numbers grew, in part, because city agencies were allowed to issue their own permits with no central accounting of whom they went to or why. In addition, the placards were easy to duplicate, creating numerous fakes on the street.

From now on, only the Police and Transportation Departments will be allowed to issue them. That will make them easier to track; it will also make it easier for the police and traffic agents to tell the difference between legitimate and bogus placards, city officials said.

“We want to do this, and we want to do it right, and it’s going to take some time to go agency by agency and figure out who needs one for the course of business and who doesn’t,” Mr. Skyler said.

He said that while administration officials have come up with preliminary totals for the number of placards each agency holds, they have not compiled the names or job titles of the people who have them.

The Police Department is the first city agency to begin cutting the number of placards it issues, according to Paul J. Browne, the department’s chief spokesman. The 20 percent cuts began to take effect on Sunday and will be finished by mid-March, Mr. Browne said.

He said that the department’s Internal Affairs Bureau has been put in charge of issuing the placards and investigating any abuse of them by department employees. For the first time, the department will create a database of officers and other police employees with placards.

Mr. Skyler said the reductions would be imposed on most other city agencies by May 1, and on the Education Department by the start of the next school year. That effort is being coordinated by the Transportation Department, which is contacting city agencies to determine how many placards they truly need.

Mr. Browne said that generally, enforcement of placard use on the streets would remain in the hands of the Police Department's traffic enforcement agents.

But critics have long charged that enforcement has been lax and that the police and traffic agents look the other way if officers abuse the placards.

"Enforcement is the most essential piece of this entire effort, and if the police do not start ticketing and towing the cars of workers who abuse their permits, then none of this amounts to anything," said Wiley J. Norvell, the communications director for Transportation Alternatives, a group that has pushed for reform of the placard system.

Mr. Browne said that if traffic agents failed to ticket abusers, they could be disciplined.

There are two basic types of placards: those used by the police, teachers and others to park near their workplaces, and those that allow penalty-free parking at meters and in no-parking zones for vehicles on official city business.

The larger category, numbering about 120,000, allows city employees to park in specially designated areas on the street near their workplaces. These include 49,876 permits issued to police officers, civilian employees of the Police Department and auxiliary police officers, and about 63,000 permits given to teachers and other Department of Education employees, city officials say.

Even if these permits are reduced by 20 percent, it is not clear how much the reduction can ease the difficulty of parking in neighborhoods around precinct houses or schools, because the specially designated zones remain.

The other category of placards allows those on official business to park free throughout the city, including at metered spaces, no-parking zones and commercial and loading zones. It does not, however, allow them to park on sidewalks, at bus stops, in driveways or in front of fire hydrants.

The Police Department has 8,603 placards of this type, about half of them for use in department vehicles, including unmarked cars used by detectives, Mr. Browne said. The police have also issued 5,144 additional placards to federal law enforcement agencies, including the [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#) (which has 1,530) and the [Drug Enforcement Administration](#) (which has 720). The district attorney's offices in the city's five boroughs have 964.

Mr. Skyler said that there were about 5,600 additional citywide parking placards used by city agencies, ranging from the [Administration for Children's Services](#) to the mayor's office to the Tax Commission.

He said that the preliminary total inventory of 142,000 parking placards did not include an unknown number of permits issued by federal and state agencies for their own use or about 2,000 placards the city issues to members of the news media.