

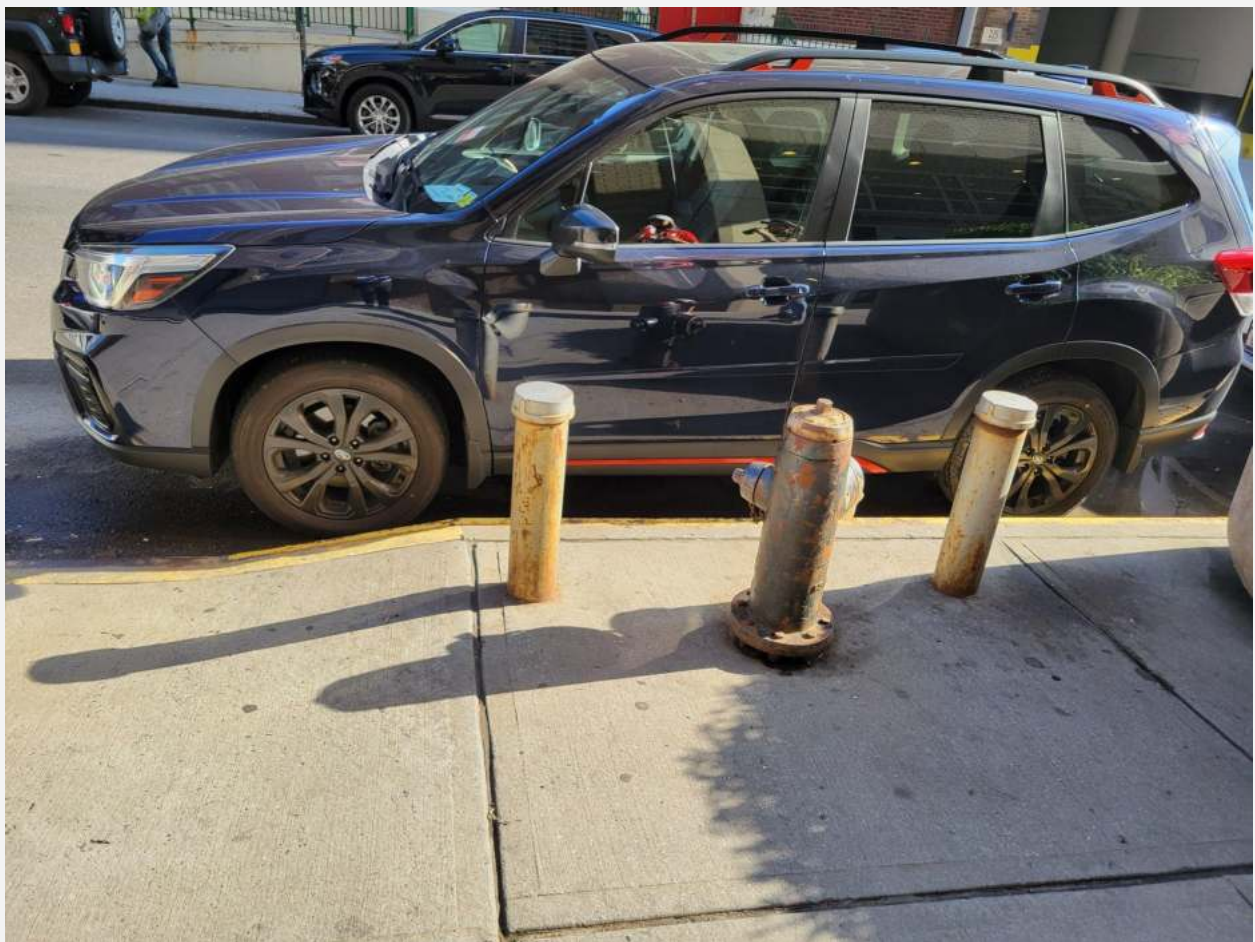
Placard Abuse

A Case Study of Parking
Entitlement in NYC

Marium Naveed
Open Plans

The availability of parking space is a major determinant of whether a person chooses to drive or take public transit to work. In New York City, where streets are congested, parking is often hard to find, and public transit is dense and extensive, most people should be discouraged from driving to work.

Yet, on any weekday, curbside lanes of Downtown Brooklyn and Downtown Manhattan are lined with cars, often parked double and illegally. A major surge for driving and parking in these areas comes from the city administration itself - through the parking placard program.



A car with a placard endangers public safety by parking in front of a fire hydrant.
Photo source: [@placardabuse](#)

What are Parking Placards

Placards are parking permits that are handed out by city agencies to public employees, diplomats, officials, and city contractors. Placards allow holders to park in certain designated areas (these areas are more liberal for certain permit types, such as law enforcement), however, they do not allow holders to park anywhere they find space.

The placard program has long been misused by city officials to abuse their parking privileges, impede on essential public space, and evade being ticketed for illegal parking.

One of the reasons why the program is prone to corruption is that it is poorly systemized. Placards were initially supposedly issued by NYC DOT and their check and balance was to be maintained by the NYPD. Under Mayor Bill de Blasio, other agencies, such as the DOE, were also authorized to give out their own placards.

This significantly increased the number of unregulated placards and encouraged a culture of driving among school teachers and staff.

Problems with the Placard Program

For as long as they have been documented, placards have been associated with abuse of power and privilege. As often reported, city employees do not even use an authentic placard to park illegally. There is a large number of disparate objects, including agency vests, hard hats, slips bearing city agency logos, fake or long-expired placards, etc. that are found on the dashboards of city employees avoiding parking fines.

Placards have been considered a perk of public work for so long that now city employees feel entitled to a parking spot in the city. The culture of entitlement is inflated all the more by lack of enforcement against placard abusers and the NYPD's nonchalant attitude towards this public offense.

The numbers against how much placard abuse costs the city have not been cracked as astonishingly and publicly as they were in 2006 by a TA study called '[Above the Law](#)'. It found that 77% of placard holders used their permits illegally and that it cost NYC \$46 million per year in uncollected parking meter revenue.

More than a decade later, the city continues to suffer from the monetary losses of free illegally parked cars. However, more damaging is the culture of entitlement towards free parking and disrespect for public space and right of way that the placard program has fostered among placard holders.

Everyday actions of placard holders disrupt the system of the street and impede on essential public space in following ways and more.

Disruption on the Street

- Due to their parking privileges, many commuters who could be taking transit opt to drive instead, generating unnecessary traffic in several ways.
- Often placard holders endanger public safety by parking in front of fire hydrants, on sidewalks, in crosswalks, in intersections, and in bus stops/bus lanes.
- Curbs in many areas are saturated with illegal parking causing other vehicles, especially delivery trucks, to troll to find ever-elusive curbside space elsewhere
- When vehicles cannot find a spot, they double park, compounding traffic problems by blocking bike lanes and forcing erratic maneuvers.
- Illegal permit parking degrades the quality of the air that New Yorkers breathe, which contributes to increased risk of health problems like asthma, diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.

Loopholes in the System

- Placards that may actually be assigned for real useful purposes get colluded with fake ones and ones that are being misused. The placard design is vague and inconsistent. It varies from agency to agency and from year to year
- The placard application process is not transparent and kept intentionally vague. As [journalists in the past have revealed](#), sometimes placards are renewed and issued over text messages and phone calls, instead of due procedures.
- There is no transparency on the number of placards issued, who issues to whom, and what are their specific privileges. City administrations in the past have failed at keeping inventory of the number of placards issued. All this vagueness creates room for abuse of privileges, corruption, and lethargic enforcement

Damage Incurred by the Government

- When placard holders cannot find a designated spot (aka placard zone), they often park in illegal spaces at the curbside and important metered spaces, hurting businesses that rely on parking turnover and sharply cutting into city revenues that would be generated by meters.
- Illegal permit parking erodes the trust of government and law enforcement in the communities that are overrun by vehicles.



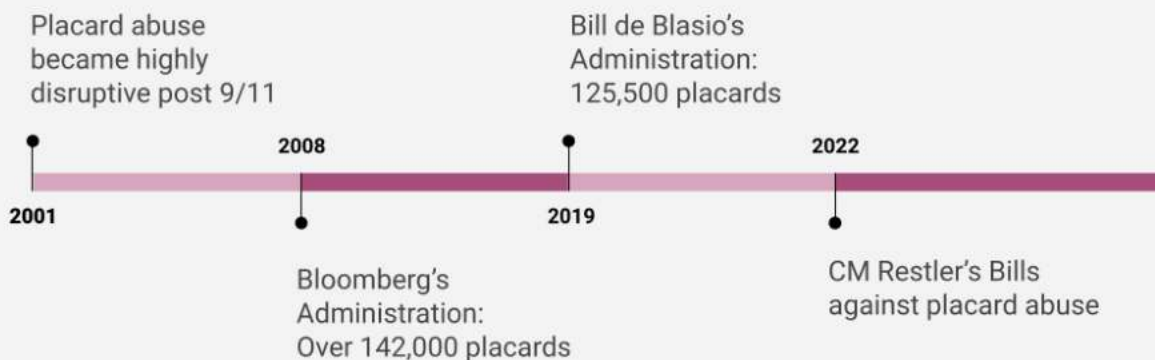
Car with a placard in the window parked illegally in front of a bus stop disrupting the system of the street. Photo source: [@placardabuse](#)

Placard Abuse - A Brief History

The placard program has been in place for a long time. The placard abuse became highly disruptive after September 2011. Aaron Naparstek, in a [blogpost](#) about his campaigning against the placard abuse, recalls:

“In the immediate aftermath of September 11, the New York City government had more important things to do than enforce parking regulations against the police, firemen and numerous other government employees and first-responders who had raced to the rescue of Lower Manhattan and kept the city running through the crisis. But four years later, parking regulations still weren’t being enforced, and the streets of Lower Manhattan had become a veritable parking lot for the private motor vehicles of government employees.”

Placard abuse has been campaigned against several times by neighborhood volunteer groups, advocates, council members, and sometimes even policemen. The program has changed and attempts have been made to curb placard abuse by each administration - some successful, some perfunctory.



Over 142,000 free parking permits were rolled out to public employees and others during Bloomberg’s administration. This number, higher than the administration had expected and hoped for, was concluded after citizens and council members voiced concerns about increased placard abuse and campaigned against it.

The administration had been pushing for a congestion pricing plan and introducing transportation initiatives that reduced the use of automobiles. When people saw agency cars and private vehicles of city employees parked freely on bike lanes that DOT had just newly painted, it muddled the message.

Similarly, in 2019, news from the Office of the Mayor addressed the broken placard system under Bill de Blasio's administration. The office admitted to a number of 125,500 city-issued placards which were largely distributed by DOT, NYPD, and DOE. This announcement and the program came at the hands of persistent tweets and calling out from the Twitter account [@placardabuse](#) and rising 311 complaints about illegal parking in bike lanes, in front of fire hydrants, etc.

[The Mayor's office claimed](#) to have introduced a detailed plan to curb placard abuse through a scannable sticker system, a digital placard reader, a strict three-strike policy, stricter enforcement, and a study of the hotspots of placard abuse to track the success and metrics of the plan.

Unfortunately, this extensive plan was detailed only in the statement and, to-date, there is no confirmation that any of these initiatives were put to practice, piloted or enforced. The administration had an extensive plan to crack down on placard abuse as it was 'simply a question of fairness' but the administration had no intention of reducing or eliminating the placards issued/placard program.

Council Member Lincoln Restler in 2022 is bearing the torch of many elected officials who have previously sought to curb placard abuse. Fortunately, CM Restler is taking it a step further.

[One of the two bills](#) introduced to the council committee prohibits city agencies from issuing parking permits to private vehicles and revoking all such permits out there. This bill will drastically reduce the number of placards issued and will rule out the possibility of city employees using placards for personal gains.

[The other bill](#) presents a system for better enforcement through a civilian reporting program managed by the DOT. It creates a new violation and civil penalty for hazardous obstruction by a vehicle of a bike lane, bus lane, sidewalk, crosswalk, or fire hydrant when such vehicle is located within a radial distance of 1,320 feet of a school building, entrance, or exit. The two bills, together, are integral to decades long fight against the placard abuse. In this day and age, they are also important because of their citizen-centered nature.

After all, it is the bicyclists, the pedestrians, delivery workers, and neighbors that are the most affected by this act of petty corruption.

Recommendations

There is a culture of parking entitlement among government workers that has serious and damaging impacts on city streets, on relations between the public and the government, and on commercial and neighborhood vitality. Not only does placard abuse degrade quality of life, in many cases it creates dangerous public safety hazards by inhibiting municipal functioning and emergency response. Because the NYPD does not consistently and equitably enforce parking laws, everyone who has a placard - legitimate or fake - is encouraged to abuse the privilege.

Until there is further action taken on the two bills, there are short-term measures that can help curb the abuse of power associated with parking placards.

1. Enforcing the law and involving communities, neighborhood groups and coalitions in reporting and penalizing placard abusers
2. Standardizing the placard system across all agencies and making the application process more transparent, taking yearly inventory of the issued placards, sharing the number of placards issued and the privileges of different placards publicly
3. Updating placards to a standard design that displays the same kind of information and connects back to a central portal where information of all verified, legal placards can be found
4. Updating street signage to clearly create and reflect placard zones. Especially updating neighborhood loading zones as no parking zones for placard holders
5. Introducing e-bike and MTA passes as a means to encourage city employees to travel to work using active modes of transportation
6. Eventually, eliminating placards for all private vehicles to nip the problem in the bud

Conclusion

The solution to placard abuse seems intuitive and the issue itself seems infuriating because it is essentially an abuse of power and privileges. However, it helps to view the issue from the broader lens of entitlement for parking that most New Yorkers feel towards their streets. Pinning down on placard abuse may help reduce car congestion and hogging of curbside space in the short term. The city, however, has the long and arduous task of changing mindsets around driving and free parking in the city, for city employees as well as the general public.

Charging people for something that has otherwise always been cheap, or even free, can be a difficult sell. Even harder can be the task of making people realize that the small temporary discomfort that comes with metered parking benefits the larger public and city streets in the long run. The placard program is just an apt beginning.