



Community and Law Enforcement Alignment to Resolve Shootings

Recommendations for Law Enforcement
Agencies on Anonymous Tip Reporting Programs

Final Report

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Introduction

Both law enforcement and community members acknowledge that lack of community participation in investigations is a major barrier to successfully clearing fatal and nonfatal shooting cases. A common investigative tool is the promotion and use of anonymous reporting programs, typically through the Crime Stoppers program. These programs encourage the sharing of tips to law enforcement in exchange for a financial reward. They use various platforms and settings, including mobile applications, websites, calls, and texts, which are advertised broadly in the community or specifically within schools. The goal is to offer community members a way to provide information yet protect their identity and decrease fear associated with retaliation for participating in an investigation.

To learn more about how these programs operate and are perceived by the community, Project CLEARs (Community–Law Enforcement Alignment to Resolve Shootings) researchers engaged with 11 law enforcement agencies (LEAs), interviewed nearly 90 leaders of community-based organizations (CBOs), and held nearly 20 focus groups with residents living in areas disproportionately affected by violence. We also interviewed detectives and supervisors investigating shooting cases and personnel who facilitate Crime Stoppers or other anonymous reporting tiplines for an LEA. By far the most common reporting program identified in CLEARs sites was Crime Stoppers. We also reviewed public-facing content about each site’s relevant programs to understand how these programs are presented to the community. We were interested in what details were shared about these programs—for instance, explanations of how anonymity of tipsters is protected throughout the reporting and reward process, along with other information that may affect participation.

Despite the widespread adoption of Crime Stoppers by communities across the United States, there is limited evaluation of the effectiveness of Crime Stoppers programs. Studies that have examined the Crime Stoppers program have mostly relied on data from law enforcement personnel or Crime Stoppers staff to inform perceptions about the reasons for the program’s effectiveness in promoting community participation; the reasons have mostly centered on the program’s ability to keep tipsters’ identities anonymous. The limited evaluation evidence suggests that Crime Stoppers can be effective for solving certain “dead-end” felony cases—those unable to be solved after substantial investigative time and effort¹—or for alerting law enforcement about crimes that they otherwise would not have known about.² In Canada, actionable calls provided a suspect name in 72% of cases, gave a crime location in 85% of cases, and resulted in an arrest in 17% of cases.³ Most prior studies were conducted before the proliferation of social media. LEAs have expanded their use of it to advertise cases and suspects and to invite community tips.

Common themes were identified through Project CLEARs that may affect community members’ willingness to use anonymous reporting programs. Themes centered around how the program works, how the program is messaged and marketed, what safeguards are in place to protect tipsters, and if they feel that information shared is of value to the LEA. These findings were used to generate recommendations and policy considerations that can guide improvements in how LEAs develop, improve, and sustain anonymous reporting programs, with a goal of increasing their utility and participation for solving crimes.

¹ Rosenbaum, D. P., Lurigio, A. J., & Lavrakas, P. J. (1986, September). Crime Stoppers—A national evaluation. *National Institute of Justice Research in Brief*. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/102292NCJRS.pdf>

² Challinger, D. (2003). Crime Stoppers: Evaluating Victoria’s program. *Trends & Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice* (No. 272). Australian Institute of Criminology. <https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-05/tandi272.pdf>

³ Gresham, P., Stockdale, J., & Bartholomew, I. (2003). *Evaluating the impact of Crimestoppers* (Online Report 22/03). Home Office.

Recommendations



Use Crime Stoppers to Solicit Information About Specific Crime Types

Crime Stoppers programs often highlight specific cases or wanted suspects but are also used more generally as a reporting mechanism for any unsolved crime. When specific cases are highlighted, liaisons for Crime Stoppers stated that those cases tend to be those that have no further leads. Drug-related cases are the most likely to receive tips through Crime Stoppers, whereas tips on homicide shootings generally receive fewer leads.

Here are a few examples of marketing strategies to gather more tips on specific crime types. One LEA operates a homicide tip line, separate from its Crime Stoppers program, to connect tipsters directly to investigators. This tip line was developed to ensure that investigative information specific to homicides goes directly to the homicide unit to avoid the possibility that actionable information gets screened out before making it to investigators.

Some LEAs took an alternative approach to creating anonymous reporting programs for specific crimes or settings. Two sites branded their programs as “Fast \$50” and “Student Crime Stoppers,” encouraging students to report drugs, weapons, or conflicts. Another program, “Gun Stoppers,” focused on the reporting of illegal firearms or weapons, offering a cash award of \$250.

- ♦ Analyze program data and solicit insight from community members on the need for specific crime tip lines or programs in schools. Programs geared toward student messaging or slogans may create appeal, leading to increased use.



Focus on Messaging, Marketing, and Awareness

The messaging used to encourage tip reporting can appeal to the morality of doing the right thing, but it largely focuses on identifying suspects in exchange for a financial reward. It is important to understand the various motivators of tipster participation, which can go beyond financial reward or the desire for offender accountability. For instance, some tipsters may want to report to alleviate the burden associated with holding onto information that could benefit a case, to act on their anger associated with a particular crime (e.g., a shooting with a child victim), or to improve the safety of their community. It is critical that the messaging and marketing of these programs tap into factors that can influence buy-in and participation.

Overall, residents reported not seeing sufficient marketing of Crime Stoppers, which can contribute to a lack of awareness and understanding of how the program works. Importantly, the lack of details about the processes and procedures can lead to further questions about the integrity of the overall program and decreased participation from community members. Here are a few recommendations for marketing an anonymous tipline.

- ♦ Focus group participants were active users of social media, which could be a prime method to promote anonymous reporting options to the community, although most focus group participants do not follow the local LEA’s social media accounts. Consider marketing the anonymous reporting program through other social media sources the community is more likely to follow, in addition to LEA social media accounts.
- ♦ It is important to educate communities and gain their buy-in and trust in the program. Ask representatives from communities most affected by violence inform the branding and messaging about the program. Increase representation in the program’s marketing to include youth, young adults, and other persons from these communities.

- ♦ Those who have lost loved ones to gun violence can be powerful messengers to motivate community participation in investigations. Consider partnering with survivor families or groups working with those families to promote anonymous reporting programs. Survivors who are willing to do so can share how lack of information from the community has contributed to a continued lack of resolution in their loved ones' cases. Providing the opportunity for survivor families to engage in this role empowers them to use their voices to increase community willingness to participate in investigations.



Review Logo and Branding

While most sites' Crime Stoppers marketing displayed neutral logos, some sites' Crime Stoppers marketing and branding was heavily focused on images strongly associated with law enforcement logos, such as portraying handcuffs. CBO leaders mentioned that some written words could be considered off-putting, such as requiring tipsters to text "Bad Boyz" or call "1-800-LOCK-U-UP." These examples signal that Crime Stoppers is linked to the LEA and is not operating as an independent third party, which can deter people from using the program.

- ♦ Review the branding of the anonymous reporting program to see whether it may be perceived as too heavily focused on law enforcement. Ask community members and leaders how they perceive the program and branding to see whether modifications—which could be quick adjustments of logos or messaging—are needed.
- ♦ Be careful of using phrases or phone numbers that associate the reporting of a tip with law enforcement outcomes such as arrest or incarceration or that pit "good guys" against "bad guys." Factors leading to criminal behavior are often more nuanced from the community's perspective. Even though programs' goals are to locate suspects and solve cases, consider messaging and branding that appeal to other outcomes, such as increased public safety, community empowerment, and civic engagement.



Promote Anonymity

Across sites, messaging acknowledged the anonymity of Crime Stoppers, but it rarely described details about how the program works to keep tipsters' identities anonymous. About all of the sites examined stated that tipsters' identities will be anonymous without specifically explaining the process for ensuring anonymity across various tip submission types. Given the community's general skepticism of the anonymity of reporting programs, coupled with concerns around hacking of personal information, community members require more details about how their information will be protected when they report to an anonymous tipline.

Crime Stoppers programs varied in the extent to which they provide community education about the program purpose and function, with some investing considerable effort to build awareness and community trust in the program. Details are needed about how tipsters can check back about whether their tip is eligible for a reward and how they can collect their award and maintain their anonymity. This information may be provided upon submission of a tip, but potential tipsters may benefit from having more of these details before deciding to report.

- ♦ Provide videos or infographics about how anonymity works, describing it throughout the various stages (e.g., reporting through collecting a reward) and methods of participation (e.g., phone calls, online reports, and mobile app submissions).
- ♦ Develop presentations detailing the reporting processes. Deliver these presentations in person or create content such as videos that can be accessed through the program's or LEA's social media or websites. Encourage CBOs to share with their own social media followers.

- ♦ Review current messaging about anonymous reporting programs. If it is true that no one's identity has ever been compromised by the program, explicitly state this fact.
- ♦ Include anonymous reporting options on canvassing materials (e.g., door hangers).



Create Feedback Loops

Criteria as to which tips were passed to investigators varied among Crime Stoppers liaisons. In general, those tips deemed the most credible, useful, or actionable were passed to investigators by the liaison. Liaisons noted a lack of feedback from investigators as to whether tips were actionable. The most cited reason for this lack of feedback, according to investigators, is that it is time-intensive to provide feedback about every tip; however, liaisons consider the feedback to be helpful in closing out non-actionable tips, further refining their pre-screening process, and reporting the outcome back to tipsters. Receiving feedback about tips submitted may increase the likelihood that tipsters will re-engage with the program even if their current tip was not actionable. Feedback allows tipsters to know that their information is being reviewed and considered. Sites varied in whether and how they update the community more generally about cases for which tips led to the arrest of a suspect or to case closure. It was recognized that this feedback can be a motivator for others to engage with the program.

- ♦ Explore ways for investigators to engage with liaisons, such as in a quarterly meeting or email update where investigators could highlight which types of tips or specific pieces of information are useful, even if they do not contribute directly to an arrest in a specific case. This knowledge would help liaisons better understand how to pre-screen tips and decide which to send to investigators.
- ♦ Use social media platforms to update the community on cases closed successfully because of tips.



Recognize CBOs as Civilian Buffers

About 30% of CBO leaders in Project CLEARs said they promote use of Crime Stoppers to community members. Others stated that they were unaware of the program, were not sure of how the program works or distrusted the anonymity of the program, or simply had not thought about promoting the program but were open to the idea. CBO leaders in communities where Crime Stoppers liaisons were heavily invested in community educational efforts about the program were more likely to state that they promote the program.

Findings highlighted the key role that CBO leaders can serve as “buffers” between law enforcement and community members who hold information that could be useful for investigations, particularly for those community members who distrust law enforcement or are otherwise afraid to share the information directly. Well over half of CBO leaders in Project CLEARs stated that they have received information from community members that would be helpful for investigations but varied in what they did with that information. Some have assisted with reporting to Crime Stoppers by making the call on behalf of a community member. Others have facilitated opportunities for community members to provide information to a trusted law enforcement contact. Some CBO leaders stated that community members know the CBO leader will pass the information along to law enforcement in a way that is actionable, but without divulging the identity of the informant.

- ♦ Identify a point of contact for CBOs and actively work to build and maintain relationships with CBO leaders.
- ♦ Create a written agreement between LEAs and CBO leaders serving in this capacity so that LEAs can trust the veracity of the information provided without needing direct contact with the community member who provided it. Set expectations on the information-sharing process. If a CBO leader does not wish to divulge the identity of the community member, those boundaries must be understood and respected.
- ♦ Consider how trusted community leaders may be engaged more formally so they can be present to receive investigative information. Increasing the presence of trusted CBOs in the LEA events may increase the likelihood that someone comes forward. For example, CBO leaders may participate in canvassing efforts with law enforcement in areas that have experienced recent gun violence.
- ♦ Engage in one-on-one outreach and presentations to CBO leaders to increase their knowledge of the tip reporting process. Doing so increases the likelihood they can vouch for the program and provide details about how these programs work to skeptical community members. Be sure that CBO leaders have materials they can provide to the community about the program.

Across all CLEARS sites, law enforcement and community respondents stated that more needs to be done to address the “no-snitching” norm prevalent in many high-crime areas. The anti-snitching norm was characterized as “generational” and hard to overcome. Common recommendations included marketing Crime Stoppers or other anonymous reporting options in schools and among youth. Several CBOs are actively addressing the no-snitching norm by educating youth about the difference between reporting information to law enforcement and snitching. CBO leaders reported that appealing to empathy was one way to encourage people to take the perspective of others and to share investigative information for the benefit of their community, not necessarily the LEAs themselves.



Use Data to Improve Programs and to Highlight Successes

Identify the types of metrics that would be beneficial for community members to understand the impact of providing tips. Consider ways to make these data useful for tracking trends in the program, including findings that can demonstrate how tips contribute to case closure—for instance, the percentage of all tips that are actionable and the types of case outcomes, such as arrests or seizure of property, drugs, or weapons, that result from tips. When possible, publicize incidents in which tips through the program have led to successful outcomes, including clearing cases by arrest.

