

1.800.Speak Up  
**Crime Stoppers of Michigan**

## **Summary of Neighborhood Focus Groups**

Wayne State University  
Urban Planning Program  
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# Themes

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It is important to note that most of the participants in these discussions were older, had lived in these neighborhoods for many years, and they were among some of the most active people in these neighborhoods.

There appear to be two interconnected threads: The nature of life in the neighborhoods themselves has likely contributed to the reduction in call volume. And, the simple fact is that people do not see, hear, remember and act on information like they used to.

## **Pockets of Violent Crime – Intermittent and Distributed Locations**

Crime does not happen persistently everywhere, and not all crime is seen as equal. There are undoubtedly “hot zones” – areas where crime is more frequent and therefore more likely, but even in these areas crime is not happening every minute of every day. The odds that someone will see a crime is affected by this property. Coupled with the thinning of the population and neighborhoods and the changing character of life in the neighborhoods, it appears that some reduction in call volume would be attributed to this simply reality.

The most violent and sensational crimes are perceived as the only crimes police and media are interested in, and some believe that these are the only crimes the tip line will take. Yet these crimes are not nearly as voluminous and persistent as crimes against person and property. “No one seems to be doing anything to help prevent these crimes!” These beliefs can produce a variety of responses, including the dismissal of the tip line as an effective crime fighting tool, and an overall reduction in vigilance and in willingness to participate in intervention.

## **Efficacy of Criminal Justice System- Fear of Reprisals**

Beyond this, beliefs about inadequacies in the criminal justice system (poor police response / response times, low levels of success in criminal prosecution, perpetrators released without conviction or given early release, and the presence of former felons within the community combine to erode faith in the system, and weaken any belief that a tip will prove efficacious and that it won’t result in reprisals.

Fear of reprisal is both very real to many we spoke with, and also perceived as simply the way it is. To be sure, there are ‘Good Samaritans’ and those willing to stay in the fight. But many readily conceded that this was a very real concern given the perceived inadequacy of the criminal justice system, the tightly bound nature of some criminal elements (extended family, gangs), and concern about ‘breaking from the code of the streets’ – This has several possible meanings, but the most common and simplest version is this: No police. And anyone who strays from this will suffer the consequences.

## **Violent Crimes versus Crimes of Property, Assault and Battery**

Generally, the concerns expressed reflected a perception that violent crime grabs the attention of media outlets and the police – and the tip line. The day-to-day crime witnessed and endured by so many is simply not as ‘newsworthy’ or important, and the perception that the tip line is not geared toward this type of crime would make it less memorable and important to any individual. In a phrase: “No one seems to care or do anything about these crimes.” Further, while those in the neighborhoods deeply believe that prevention is critical response to the situation, there are few police patrols, and almost no

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police response to reports of suspicious activity. The 'after-the-fact' nature of life in the neighborhoods can easily produce a diminished regard for the neighborhood. There is no effective 'control' in place, and this can easily produce one of two responses: We take control, or we resign ourselves to our fate.

## Self-Sufficiency: Jackrabbit

Through a combination of neighborhood watch, call trees and notification systems, private security and a sort of 'vigilante policing' many we talked to have responded to the conditions noted above by creating conduits to the police and by taking care of some of this on their own. Regular 'private' patrols (stepped up at certain times of the year/ month/ week) are well meaning, but appear to be spotty in both volume and persistence. Some neighborhoods did not appear to have any. Some guarded certain areas (e.g., community center or commercial areas), but streets and homes at a distance from these areas were not patrolled. In one community, an individual referred to as "Jackrabbit" appeared to have a status similar to a frontier sheriff – given by the town folk, called upon to intervene (which he and his team had done on many occasions) and expected to be watching out.

## Thinning and Changing Character of Neighborhoods

A decades long loss of population produced lower occupancy rates, which increased blight, increased the odds of and instances of arson and criminal use of many structures was further exacerbated by the number of homes added to this 'inventory' following the mortgage and foreclosure crisis. This shockwave produced further tears in the fabric of many neighborhoods, and the abrupt thinning of the neighborhoods undoubtedly contributes to a reduction in call volume: There are simply less people sheltered in place to observe and want to report crime. It is not as stark as this, but it may well be that in some neighborhoods the ratio of 'law abiding citizens' likely dropped precipitously over the past several years. In some neighborhoods, immigrant population and a more transient population has replaced those who have left, with the perception that these individuals have limited understanding of and motivation to work with the criminal justice system, and less concern about the upkeep of the neighborhood and the properties in which they reside. Simply put, the possibility of diminished neighbor-to-neighbor connectivity could produce less overall concern about 'combating crime' and a diminished belief (and possibly an actual diminished likelihood that) others are looking out for each other. In some areas, we may be observing a transition to neighborhoods as strangers together rather than as neighbors. There were comments regarding 'renters' and 'absentee landlords' and a perception that those moving in were transient, detached and maybe 'undesirable.'

## Resignation

All told, there seems to be some degree of resignation, even among these active and concerned citizens: Life in Detroit means living with your eyes diverted, shades drawn, and lights low. The blight and lighting conditions and degradation of the public safety system seem to have established a perverse norm: Mind your own business and hope that crime does not come knocking at your door. You are on your own if it does.

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## General Lack of Awareness, Confusion and Miscomprehension

It is very clear that many of those we talked to had vague awareness and knowledge of the program.

Recollections of the last time they had seen or heard anything about CS were very fuzzy, non-specific, and seemed more distant than recent. Some mention of hearing or reading “on the news” or “In the news” – but only a few mention this, and this may reflect the lack of clear, consistent standards for saying and showing. We have noted that a quick mention often occurs either in the introduction to a news story, or as a quick mention at the end. Often a graphic display of the number is not provided, and if it is, it is fleeting and competing for attention.

There was some awareness of ads on buses and billboards – but this is again a fuzzy, general awareness (“Seems I have seen these on...”) even though there were several current instances while these discussions took place. The location of the billboards may be an issue, (e.g. freeway systems), but the larger problem maybe that these blend into the background and become part of the ‘noise.’ Clutter is a significant marketing challenge for every communication/ marketing organization. It appears to be taking a heavy toll here. One individual suggested posters in store windows and places frequented by those who live in the neighborhoods.

Another suggested persistent education campaigns, in the schools and with community groups. There would likely need to be multiple touchpoints, and some frequency in these efforts. Understanding at present seems inferred and not the result of a dedicated awareness and education effort. Most individuals have only a crude/ approximate idea of how it works. One may want to look at the Department of Homeland Security “IF YOU SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING” campaign as a model.

Areas potentially requiring attention:

- Anonymity – While the majority remembered there was something about this, it is unclear and many simply did not seem to accept it. This also refers back to the criminal justice system and police as much as anything.
- Anonymity and reward – How can one get a reward if they are anonymous? They don’t understand how it works. Open question remains whether the rewards are necessary/ sufficient and, if this undermines the anonymity mechanism, maybe these are done away with. One suggestion was to take the money and plow it into prevention, or education, or private security patrols, or street lights instead.
- Reward/ Payment itself – Comments ranged from unnecessary to too little. One point which jumped out: The amounts are perceived to vary for no particular reason, suggesting someone somewhere is making ‘value judgments’ (with concerns expressed about ‘what’ seems to be of most concern to ‘someone out there’)
- Perception that it is only used for the most violent/ sensational crimes, amber alerts [children], or cold cases. Beyond direct observation of a crime, can they use it to report something suspicious, a condition observed?

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## Competing for Clarity and Memory

The name and number itself could be part of the problem: Despite the fact that there were posters in the room with the phone number clearly visible, most individuals could not accurately recall the number. There was also concern about how they would locate the number, should they see a crime and wish to report a tip.

In fact, individuals would use the Speak Up, Crime Stoppers, Tip Line, Neighborhood Watch and other short hand interchangeably. This presents a challenge above and beyond how to use it/ how it works.

The number is probably an issue because people basically did not recall the number, and dialing/ converting the words to numbers was a problem reported by some. Many had cell phones and the numbers they call 'are in there.' This one was not. The number to report any crime was also not recalled. A few people mentioned they had magnets with the number on their refrigerator. They did not recall the number, but knew where to find it. Generally, they reported relying on contacts lists in their cell phone-- they don't remember numbers anymore, but several noted they could still recall their first number from decades ago. This is a reflection of a general trend.] I believe the solution cannot compete with 911/ police/ fire / emergency – if there are too many choices [and 911 or 1800speakup would be a choice] people often simply opt out because they cannot remember which.

The website has not used/ accessed by most, would not be turned to. Those who had used/ looked at it found it confusing. However it works, it will likely need to be optimized for mobile, tied more emphatically to social media, and possibly integrated as stand-alone web app.

## Attitudes

We would suggest a fresh look at the basic 'skin and bones' of CS. Following any upgrades/ rebranding/ creation of a new improved platform and architecture, we would suggest that a campaign be undertaken to change attitudes toward use of the tip line. Such a campaign would have four focal points:

1. What it is called
2. How one uses it
3. The difference it makes in the form of two or three simple/ core beliefs about efficacy – these can be embellished over time and are best told in story form/ narrative
4. Norms – importance of what others are doing/ expect / need – perhaps make it about the children.

We would point you toward the millage campaign for the DIA as a superb model.