

# AN EVALUATION OF THE IMPACT OF CRIMESTOPPERS

## Briefing Note 10/01

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***"The views expressed in this briefing note are those of the authors, not necessarily those of the Home Office (nor do they reflect Government policy)."***

### Summary

This briefing note describes the evaluation of the Crimestoppers scheme. Crimestoppers provides free, anonymous telephone access to police services across 29 regions of the British Isles. To evaluate its effectiveness, the study analyses both national data and information from three Crimestoppers regions. It assesses Crimestoppers contribution to the detection, investigation and prosecution of crimes, attempts to quantify the inputs, outputs, outcomes and cost effectiveness of the scheme and identifies areas where the performance of Crimestoppers might be improved.

#### Impact of Crimestoppers

- The study found that Crimestoppers' own figures for effectiveness underestimate their actual worth.
- From the half a million calls received in 2000, at least 17% of the calls on which action was taken resulted in an arrest, charge or caution.
- In addition, Crimestoppers was responsible for the recovery of at least £3,773,616 worth of stolen property. In financial terms, Crimestoppers appears to yield benefits at least equal to and possibly well in excess of its cost.

#### Recommendations for improving Crimestoppers

- The amount of corroborative research undertaken before information from Crimestoppers calls is passed onto an investigating officer should be increased.
- There should be more feedback from investigating officers to the Crimestoppers units.
- Efforts should be made to increase the numbers of calls to Crimestoppers that are answered by an officer.

### Introduction

Crimestoppers has been in operation on a national scale since 1988 and now covers every part of the United Kingdom, operating across 29 regions. The main function of the service is to provide free, anonymous telephone access to one of twenty-nine Crimestoppers units based in police services throughout the country, using one consistent free telephone number (0800 555 111). Callers are guaranteed anonymity and offered cash rewards of between £50 and £500 for information that helps the police to detect or prevent a crime. Calls to Crimestoppers are answered by police services in individual regions. The Crimestoppers Trust, a registered charity, is responsible for strategic direction, fundraising and promotion. This model has generally been regarded as a successful means of assisting police forces to respond to crime and Crimestoppers schemes have now been established in more than twenty countries around the world.

This briefing note summarises research undertaken for an evaluation of Crimestoppers in the UK. The main objectives of the study were:

- To identify the types of information gained from Crimestoppers calls and to assess its contribution to the detection, investigation and prosecution of specific crimes;
- To quantify the inputs, outputs, outcomes and cost effectiveness of Crimestoppers, where possible comparing it to alternative methods of intelligence collection;
- To examine the role that Crimestoppers plays in the generation of police intelligence generally;
- To identify areas where the performance of Crimestoppers might be improved.

The study analyses national data and also looks at local information from three Crimestoppers regions (London, Tyne-Tees and Dorset) to see how the system worked in a range of policing conditions.

Information was gathered from interviews with a range of stakeholders and those involved in Crimestoppers work such as:

- Members of The Crimestoppers Trust and boards at national and regional levels;
- 12 Police officers in Crimestoppers units;
- 39 Intelligence Officers and Detectives in divisional units;
- 7 senior officers of participating police services, as well as representatives of ACPO and the National Criminal Intelligence Service.

Other research methods were used such as;

- workplace observation of Crimestoppers units;
- call tracking of a sample of calls within three Crimestoppers Units through to investigating officers; and
- examination of a range of documentation including financial and operational data from the Crimestoppers Units, Crimestoppers Trust, Home Office, National Criminal Intelligence Service and other relevant sources.

## Performance of Crimestoppers Units

### National Performance

According to figures received by the Crimestoppers from British Telecom nationally Crimestoppers received around half a million calls in 2000 (536,477 calls). Of these, British Telecom classified 454,085 as effective i.e. they were connected, although many of these were, in fact, connected to an answer machine or held in a queue<sup>1</sup>. Based on Crimestoppers Trust national data, 12.5% of the connected calls nationally to Crimestoppers result in actionable intelligence - information that is passed on to operational units or other relevant agencies for further investigation.

In total 9.6 percent of those calls classed as actionable resulted in an arrest, caution or charge (1 percent of the total calls to Crimestoppers). This proportion of actionable calls received which played a positive role in the successful resolution of an investigation has remained constant, at just under 10%, each year between 1988 and 2000, while the number of calls received had increased (as had the number of Crimestoppers units open around the country.)

The Crimestoppers Trust gathers data on the nature of actionable calls received. Nationally, actionable calls to Crimestoppers relate to a variety of crimes but most common are drugs (34%); vehicle crime (13%); theft (10%); violence against the person (7%), burglary and robbery (both at 4%).

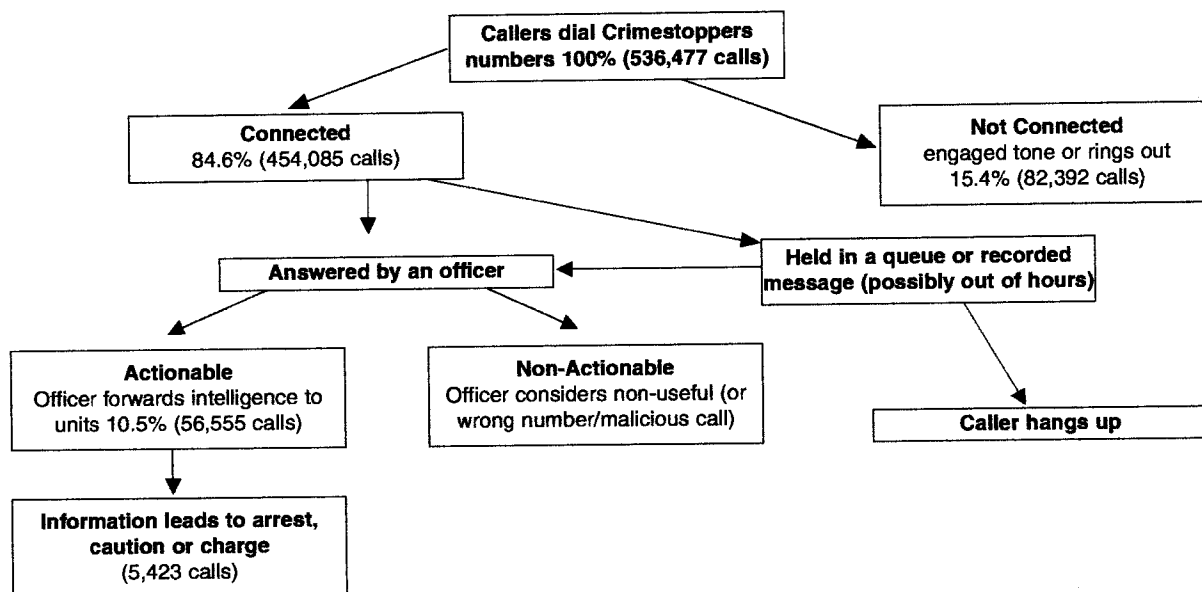
Crimestoppers appears to achieve a high success rate in solving drug-related offences, with 41% of all successful resolutions relating to drug offences, although no further breakdown of the category is possible. However, 30 calls were received which led to an arrest or charge in relation to murder, 25 in relation to attempted murder and 28 in relation to sexual assault.

### The impact of Crimestoppers on police investigations

A sample of actionable calls were tracked in each of the three regions selected for in depth study to give a clearer picture of the impact that the Crimestoppers information has on police investigations.

Overall in the three regions, 72% of actionable calls provided a name of a suspect and eighty-five percent of actionable calls provided a crime location. In addition, Investigating officers interviewed stated that overall almost half (46%) of actionable calls tracked provided some useful information; 14% of which was considered by investigating officers to be vital to the resulting investigation.

Flowchart showing process following a call to Crimestoppers



<sup>1</sup> For example, in the year 2000 British Telecom recorded 67,000 effective (connected) calls in London. However, only 28,078 resulted in an actual conversation with an officer in the unit. So, in London, where 96.7% of calls are met with a 45-second recorded message, a majority of effective calls are unsuccessful, in that they are terminated before any conversation takes place.

From the in depth study, in the three regions, 17% of actionable information resulted in an arrest. This figure could well be an underestimate as, at the time of the research, 21% of the investigations were still ongoing. It is certainly higher than Crimestoppers national figures, which suggest that about 10% of actionable information results in an arrest, caution or charge. This indicates that the lack of feedback may be contributing to an underestimation of the true impact of Crimestoppers information.

In keeping with the national picture the largest proportion of actionable calls received by the three regional units selected for in depth study were drug-related; though there were variations between the units.

### **Factors affecting performance**

Nationally, there are regional variations in performance of the Crimestoppers units as measured by the ratio between actionable calls and numbers of successful outcomes (number arrested and charged). This ranges from between one in four actionable calls in London and Jersey resulting in a positive outcome and one in seventy in the Isle of Man.

Table 1: Performance in three regions in 2000

	London	Tyne Tees	Dorset
Actionable calls received by the unit	2,154	2,294	414
Actionable calls leading to an arrests, cautions and charges	521	251	54
% of actionable calls leading to arrests, cautions and charges	24	11	13
% of total UK actionable calls received by the unit	4	4	0.7

An in-depth investigation of the call handling procedures and organisational structures in three areas identifies a number of factors that impact on effectiveness. From the three areas studied, it can be seen that London appeared to be more successful than Tyne Tees and Dorset in turning actionable intelligence into arrests and charges. This may be due to the following reasons which are discussed in turn:

- Resources and staffing
- Logging the calls and corroborative research
- Opening hours
- Feed back
- Publicity, media and training

### **Resources and staffing**

There were differences in the amount of resources in the regional units, however, it proved extremely difficult to cost the police involvement in the three regions. In the absence of exact figures relating to the cost of staffing and running the regional units, officers were asked to estimate the costs per annum:

- London - £210,000
- Tyne Tees - £149,776
- Dorset - £20,000

### **Opening hours**

The level of staffing provided to the Crimestoppers unit also inevitably affects the opening hours. There are differences between the opening hours of the regional units studied.

The London unit is usually staffed from 8.00am to 10.00pm, Monday to Friday. A queuing system is used when lines are busy. In Tyne Tees the unit is open between 9.00am and 5.00pm, Monday to Friday. Officers in Dorset are normally available to take calls on a Crimestoppers line between 8.30am and 4.30pm. The Crimestoppers officers in Dorset do not operate a separate unit on a full-time basis. An answering machine is used for out of office hours calls.

These differences in opening hours clearly affect the number of calls that could be answered directly by officers.

- In London, only 14% of calls to the unit were made between 10pm and 8.00am, when it was not staffed.
- In Tyne Tees 42.9% of all calls to the unit in 2000 were made after normal working hours. When weekend calls are taken into account, it is highly probable that a majority of calls are made when the unit is unstaffed.
- In Dorset as a whole, 31.9% of all calls to the unit occur outside normal working hours.

None of the three case study regions have units staffed at weekends, although calls on Saturday and Sunday accounted for one fifth of all calls to Crimestoppers nationally.

There is no way of knowing what proportion of the out of hours calls would have produced actionable intelligence or whether the caller calls back again at a later date. However, it is fair to assume that a proportion of the information is lost.

### **Logging the calls and corroborative research**

Crimestoppers information has to be logged onto a database which is used to produce figures on effectiveness of Crimestoppers information. There were variations in the way in which calls were logged. In two of three regions, obviously unproductive calls were rarely logged. This would have the effect of increasing the percentage of apparently actionable calls those regions received. In addition, all actionable calls in London and Tyne Tees were logged onto the Crimestoppers database while, in Dorset, 43% were not which would influence the apparent percentage of actionable calls resulting in an arrest, caution or charge.

The procedure for assessing data from callers was similar in all three of the regions studied. After a call is logged the information is normally first considered by the officer taking the call. A report is then dispatched to the appropriate divisional intelligence unit, incident room or specialist agency (such as Customs & Excise or Local Authority) depending on the nature of the intelligence. There were variations between the units. In particular, London officers were able to make a more thorough

preliminary assessment of information before it was passed on to investigating officers in divisions. This reduces the proportion of such intelligence items that are subsequently found to be of no value.

### **Feedback on data**

Investigating officers are supposed to provide feedback information to the Crimestoppers units about the use made of the actionable calls. Officers interviewed at the regional units felt that feedback was somewhat variable and this could mean that the information on the usefulness of the calls is inaccurate. From the call tracking process in the regions a higher proportion of calls were found to be useful than the nationally collected figures and a higher proportion resulted in arrest or charge suggesting that lack of feedback does lead to an underestimate of call usefulness.

Several explanations as to why the variations in feedback occur were offered;

- Officers were over-stretched. Feedback to Crimestoppers was just one more, apparently inessential, piece of form filling.
- The time between the supply of the original information and the resolution of the case sometimes meant that the role that Crimestoppers information played in the investigation was lost amid a myriad of documents.
- The investigating officers received information from intelligence units without being made aware, at least at the investigative stage, that it originated from Crimestoppers.

The level of feedback from divisions varied between regions and was generally higher in London than in the Tyne-Tees forces, perhaps reflecting the fact that the London unit is operating within a single force area.

### **Publicity, media support and training**

Interviews with officers in the regional units suggested that the amount of publicity given to Crimestoppers in the areas was variable. Nevertheless, in the three regions 21% of actionable calls studied were in response to media appeals for information.

It may be that the Crimestoppers scheme is not promoted internally in police services as well as it might be. Officers interviewed in both Tyne Tees and in London said that there was a need to train and increase awareness among other officers in the way in which Crimestoppers could be used to aid investigations.

### **Why people call Crimestoppers**

The police officers interviewed in this study considered the motivation for calling Crimestoppers was most frequently community concern. The offer of a reward did not seem to be important since most people eligible for rewards do not actually claim them. For example in the year 1999 only £34,085 was given out in rewards. However, most officers interviewed believed that the possibility of a reward may be important to some callers whose information is especially valuable.

### **Costs and benefits**

There were major difficulties involved in estimating the cost and the benefits of Crimestoppers. The table below shows the imputed costs of Crimestoppers for the year 2000.

#### **Imputed costs of Crimestoppers for the year 2000**

Source	Total
Crimestoppers Trust	£1.648m
Police units	£2.900m
Telephones	£0.116m
<b>Total</b>	<b>£4.664m</b>

When input costs are compared with outcomes, an estimated total financial cost of £4.664m leads to a claimed 5,423 resolutions of crimes (arrests, cautions, charges). This gives a cost of £860 per outcome. The actual number of positive results is probably much higher, as there is widespread under-reporting of feedback. If we assume that the actual level of successful outcome is close to 9,614<sup>2</sup>, the true cost per outcome would be closer to £485.

Against this, Crimestoppers recorded that £3,773,616 of stolen property (based, primarily, on insured value) was known to be recovered. Some of the arrests do not involve recovery of any stolen property and, in other cases, stolen property may be recovered without an arrest being made. But the inference to be drawn from a comparison of the two figures is that, on average, a positive Crimestoppers call brings £695.85 of recovered goods at a cost of perhaps £485.

While the data are imprecise, it is likely that the true yield from Crimestoppers in financial terms could equal or even exceed the costs, especially if savings in police time and costs of crimes prevented or deterred are taken into account. It is also likely that Crimestoppers scheme is cheap compared to other forms of intelligence gathering. Especially where police officers time is factored in to any significant degree, for example, surveillance or house to house inquiries.

### **Conclusions**

- In financial terms, Crimestoppers appears to yield benefits (in terms of arrests and goods recovered) at least equal to and possibly well in excess of its cost.
- Around half a million calls were received by Crimestoppers in 2000 suggesting that Crimestoppers has been successful in getting its message across to the public.
- Of these calls, Crimestoppers own figures suggest that about 11% (56,555) of the calls result in actionable information. That is, information considered to be important enough to pass to investigating officers.
- In the year 2000, 5,423 calls to Crimestoppers resulted in an arrest or charge. This is one percent of all calls or ten percent of all actionable information (though from the in depth

<sup>2</sup> Based on call tracking in the three regions which found that 17% of actionable calls resulted in an arrest, charge or caution although this may also be an underestimate.

studies in regions it is probable that this is an underestimate). In the three regions studied it was found that 17% of actionable information results in an arrest, caution or charge and even that could be an underestimate as some cases were still in progress when the research was concluded. In addition, officers stated that 46% provided useful information.

- Crimestoppers appears to receive a significant number of calls about drugs and has enjoyed particular successes in dealing with drug related crimes. Thirty-four percent of all actionable calls were to do with drugs, whilst drug offences account for two percent of all recorded crimes. Almost half (43%) of arrests from Crimestoppers information were for drug-related offending.
- However, Crimestoppers also makes a contribution towards the investigation of the most serious crimes. In 2000, 30 calls received resulted in the successful resolution of murder investigations, 25 relating to attempted murder and 28 to sexual assaults.
- Despite the successes of Crimestoppers, it has been shown that there are variations in performance between the Crimestoppers units. In-depth analysis

of the three regions showed that the main factors influencing performance include; the accuracy of the call logging and assessment procedures, the level of staffing and consequently the opening hours, the level of feedback on the usefulness of the information from divisional officers and the use made of publicity.

### **Summary of key recommendations**

- Efforts should be made to increase the numbers of calls to Crimestoppers that are answered by an officer. In addition, police should investigate improved telephone response e.g. a shortened telephone message.
- The variations between the units in terms of performance should be addressed. In particular, increasing the amount of corroborative research undertaken before information is passed onto an investigating officer.
- The amount of feedback from investigating officers to the Crimestoppers units should be increased.
- Efforts could be made to raise awareness of the benefits of Crimestoppers scheme amongst police officers and the general public.

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