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Crime Stoppers—
A National Evaluation

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One of the fastest growing, most visible crime control programs in the United States is *Crime Stoppers*, also known as Crime Solvers, Secret Witness, Crime Line, or other names.

These self-sustaining programs join the news media, the community, and law enforcement as an alliance to involve private citizens in the fight against serious crime.

Assuming that some individuals are unwilling to volunteer information to the police either because of apathy or the fear of criminal retaliation, Crime Stoppers offers cash rewards as an

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From the Director

Research over the past decade has revealed what many practitioners are now realizing—citizen cooperation and participation in solving crimes is crucial. Law enforcement officials alone cannot control crime.

Information is the lifeblood of a criminal investigation. In gathering information about a crime, the criminal investigator seeks as primary sources eyewitnesses or people with knowledge about the crime to provide essential details that will lead to its solution.

One of the goals of the National Institute of Justice is to make people aware of the important role they play in preventing and controlling crime. To this end, the Institute has translated research findings into a series of four public service announcements. This series, *Report—Identify—Testify*, uses the influential medium of television to encourage citizens to cooperate with the criminal justice system by reporting crimes, identifying criminals, and testifying in court. The product of a cooperative effort between the public and private sectors, the announcements are being shown nationally on all major networks.

Despite increasing awareness of the role of citizens in crime control, there are many who, for whatever reason, are reluctant to provide information

known about a crime that has been committed. "Crime Stoppers" was developed as a way to open investigative doors that would otherwise remain closed and to assuage citizen anxieties when "official" procedures cannot.

Creative use of the local media and other resources in Crime Stoppers programs enables the criminal investigator to obtain often critical information about a case, including those that have defied solution through traditional investigation.

By participating in Crime Stoppers programs, local media are sending the message that fighting crime is not a responsibility of law enforcement alone—community cooperation and support is needed. At the same time, local media help reduce fear of crime in the community by providing tangible assistance in solving crime.

The National Institute of Justice sponsored the first social-science inquiry into whether Crime Stoppers as a policy strategy works to accomplish the described goals. The findings of the national evaluation, summarized in this *Research in Brief*, are encouraging but not conclusive—Crime Stoppers programs reportedly are helping to solve felony crimes and recover narcotics and stolen property.

One indicator of the success of the Crime Stoppers concept is the substan-

tial public support it has received. From its inception in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1976, Crime Stoppers programs have increased to an estimated 600 throughout the United States, and a steady growth of new programs continues.

However, simply establishing a Crime Stoppers program is no assurance of its effectiveness. The evaluation found that the success of programs varies. This *Brief* discusses what causes the variation, so that jurisdictions starting Crime Stoppers programs can benefit from this knowledge and existing programs can do an even better job in their cooperative efforts to solve crime.

Crime stoppers has emerged as a significant "grassroots" movement, locally funded and controlled. It has arisen because our justice process has become narrowly focused, often unbalanced, and less able to handle anonymous leads.

Perhaps more important, it provides all participants—the media, contributors, volunteers, people with information about a crime—with a positive, productive way to help solve terrifying crime.

James K. Stewart
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inducement and anonymity as protection to persons who provide details leading to the arrest or indictment of suspected criminals.

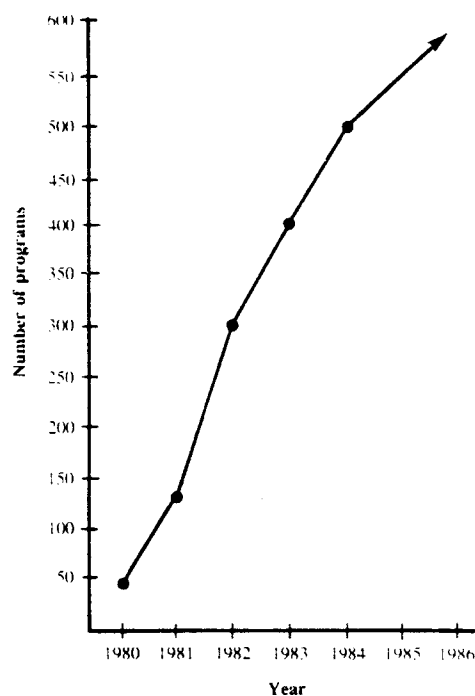Without reliable information from witnesses about the identity of criminals, the chance of solving any particular crime is drastically reduced. Recognizing the citizen's critical role in successful investigations, Police Officer Greg MacAleese started the first Crime Stoppers program in 1976 in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Although earlier programs had used cash rewards and anonymity as incentives, MacAleese was the first to cast news media in a central role.

From 5 programs in 1978, Crime Stoppers grew to an estimated 600 in the United States by 1986 (Figure 1). To this list Crime Stoppers International adds programs in Canada and New Zealand.

Figure 1

Number of crime stoppers programs by year

Year

Program organization

The proper functioning of Crime Stoppers hinges on joint cooperation and concerted efforts of its three elements—community, media, and law enforcement.

In a typical Crime Stoppers program, the nonprofit corporation's board of directors represents the community's contribution by setting policy, coordinating fundraising, and formulating a system of rewards.

The media educate the public about the program's objectives and achievements and regularly publicize details of unsolved offenses by presenting an account or reenactment of a selected "Crime of the Week." Anyone with information about this crime is encouraged to call Crime Stoppers. If the information results in an arrest, the caller is likely to receive a cash reward.

Police or other law enforcement personnel staff the program, receive the information reported by anonymous callers, and direct it to detectives for further investigation. The program's police coordinator has such other duties as selecting the crime to be publicized and serving as liaison between media, public, and investigators.

To explore the extent to which Crime Stoppers might be an effective strategy for crime control and enlisting citizen participation, the National Institute of Justice sponsored the first independent national evaluation of these programs, conducted by researchers at Northwestern University.

This *Brief* reports some of the most notable findings of that evaluation. This information should be of use to existing programs in improving their operations and also to jurisdictions

considering such programs, so they may know some of the factors that can contribute to their success.

Perceptions and public attitudes

To test media perceptions of Crime Stoppers, two samples of news executives were drawn. The first random sample was taken from an industry yearbook. The second was from cities believed to have Crime Stoppers programs.

The first, broader group judged Crime Stoppers highly visible and well received: 90 percent of respondents were aware of the program, even though a large majority said their news outlet was not participating at the time. Nearly two-thirds said their organization would be "very likely" to participate if a local program were to start.

The survey of news executives in Crime Stoppers cities showed warmly enthusiastic perceptions of the program. Other people involved with Crime Stoppers shared the enthusiasm. National surveys of police coordinators and board of directors chairpersons also ranked the program worthwhile and successful.

Some critics, however, including journalists, defense attorneys, and legal scholars, continue to express concerns. Given the emphasis on anonymity and sizable rewards, questions arise ranging from civil rights and privacy to complaints about undermining citizens' civic duty to report crime without pay. Survey results in one major city show the public sharing some of these reservations.

Nevertheless, many feel that Crime Stoppers can be a worthwhile tool for arresting criminals.

Effectiveness of program

Crime Stoppers is generally considered to be effective in solving certain felony cases that are unlikely to be solved through traditional criminal investigations or through a reasonable amount of law enforcement resources. The program was specifically developed to handle "dead-end" cases and indeed has repeatedly broken a number of cases that remained unsolved after substantial investment of investigative time.

Statistics released by Crime Stoppers International tend to support these anecdotal reports. The group claims 92,339 felonies solved with $562,219,371 in narcotics or stolen property recovered—an average of $6,089 a case. The organization says 20,992 defendants were convicted out of 21,959 tried—a 95.5 percent conviction rate. Rewards (reported by Crime Stoppers through the end of 1985) totaled $6,728,392.

However, there is little reason to believe that Crime Stoppers programs will immediately or substantially reduce the overall crime rate in most communities. While numerous crimes are cleared through these programs, they amount to only a small fraction of total serious crime in most communities.

Impact on citizen participation

The Crime Stoppers program is intended to stimulate involvement of citizens as callers, contributors, and board members. The thousands of anonymous calls received and the millions of dollars paid in rewards do indicate community support and participation. But, as with many crime control programs, community involvement seems to be concentrated in certain subgroups of the population:

The business community provides most of the *financial support*, although telethons and other broad appeals are increasingly popular as sources of funding.

Criminals themselves, and people associating with them, provide most of the *anonymous tips*, according to survey respondents.

For this evaluation, a special impact study surveyed a new program in Indianapolis, Indiana, and indicated that with strong media cooperation, Crime Stoppers can quickly and dramatically increase people's awareness of this opportunity to participate in activities against crime. For example, 38 percent of citizens surveyed had heard of Crime Stoppers at the beginning of the program—and 92.9 percent 6 months later.

On the other hand, the same findings also indicate that 6 months is not long enough for residents, police, or business people to change their attitudes about crime prevention or Crime Stoppers.

Many give credit for the success of Crime Stoppers to the use of large rewards. Yet a controlled experiment in Lake County, Illinois, showed that variations in reward size had virtually no effect on the tipster's satisfaction and intention to participate in the program in the future (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

How callers' feelings varied with size of reward

Moderately high reward ($400) ☐
Moderate reward ($250) ◩
Low reward ($100) ■
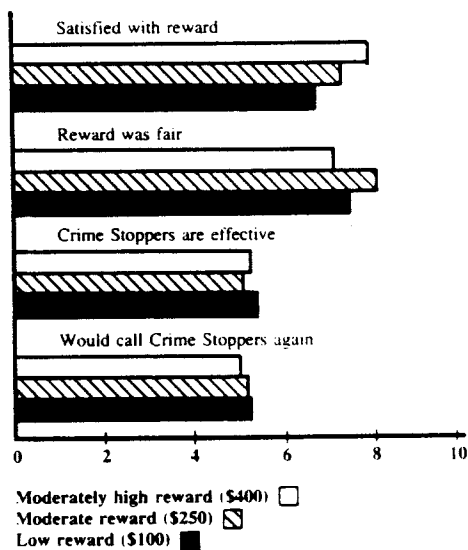
Respondents rated strength of their perceptions on subjective numerical scales which, for purposes of this graph, have been converted to 0 through 10.

How programs differ

The basic motivators for Crime Stoppers tipsters—rewards plus anonymity—are the same everywhere, as are the basic participants—a

coordinator usually from the police, news media, detectives, and directors representing the community. But media patterns and reward patterns tend to change with population density.

Table 1 shows media patterns and demonstrates that programs serving less populated areas tend to rely most heavily on radio and weekly newspapers to publicize Crime Stoppers. Programs serving larger populations are most likely to use broadcast television. The larger countywide or urban programs tend to use the full range of available media—weekly *and* daily newspapers, radio, cable *and* broadcast TV.

Media competition for exclusive handling of Crime Stoppers has become a problem in several cities. Although 29 percent of programs report exclusive media arrangements, fierce competition is usually limited to broadcast television outlets in larger cities.

Table 2 shows how award amounts differ. Highest awards tend to be in larger programs—and, in larger programs, highest awards tend to be for the Crime of the Week rather than for a specific variety of crime, usually a "personal crime."

Aside from the severity of the crime, there was little agreement across programs on criteria to determine size of the reward. Most boards of directors decide rewards on a case-by-case basis.

Indicators of program success

Program productivity was measured by the number of calls received (per 100,000 population), the "quality" of calls (how many were forwarded to an investigator), the number of suspects arrested (per 1,000 reported crimes classified as "Part 1" for the Uniform Crime Reports), and number of cases cleared (per 1,000 Part 1—see Table 3).

Within the police or other law enforcement component, the best indicator of program productivity was the program coordinator's level of effort and job satisfaction. Coordinators who work more hours, make more speeches, and report more satisfaction were involved in more productive programs. Assum-

Table 1

Size of population served by type of media participation in 1984

Size of population	Type of media									
	Daily newspaper		Weekly newspaper		Radio		VHF/UHF television		Cable television	
	Percent with	Avg. no. ea.	Percent with	Avg. no. ea.	Percent with	Avg. no. ea.	Percent with	Avg. no. ea.	Percent with	Avg. no. ea.
Less than 50,000	51	.75	59	1.25	73	1.83	15	.22	35	.41
50,000 to 99,999	73	1.11	59	1.52	75	3.48	52	.86	23	.39
100,000 to 249,999	86	1.44	8	1.50	86	4.75	69	1.19	36	.44
250,000 or larger	75	3.34	61	3.18	80	7.50	89	2.68	36	.55

Table 2

Average reward size (in dollars) by type of crime and size of population 1983

Size of population	Type of crime				
	Personal[a] crimes	Narcotics	Property[b] crimes	Crime of week	N[c]
Less than 50,000	289	177	171	165	61
50,000 to 99,999	406	146	139	344	47
100,000 to 249,999	394	271	203	676	38
250,000 or larger	400	253	178	774	46
Overall average	379	207	171	505	192

[a] Includes homicide, rape, robbery, and assault.
[b] Includes burglary, theft, and auto theft.
[c] Average sample size.

ing a causal relationship, it was unclear whether the coordinator's activities caused the productivity or the reverse—that program success kept the coordinator busy. But it is widely believed that failure to select the right person as coordinator limits the success of the program.

Field observations indicate that the quality of information sent by Crime Stoppers to detectives helps determine the likelihood of arrest. It also tends to control whether or not detectives find the program worthwhile.

Sending *all* the tipster's information, or "underscreening," may flood detectives with information of little value. Other programs suffer from "overscreening," in which the staff not only eliminates useful tips but also virtually takes over the role of the

detectives, "all but making the arrest." Either extreme tends to undermine success.

The location of the Crime Stoppers program within the police department affects the program's prospects. The criminal investigation bureau seems best. Programs assigned to crime prevention, administration, or elsewhere *usually* face an uphill struggle. Another source of problems is inadequate training of police personnel with regard to Crime Stoppers.

Although the *number* of media participating in a program did not affect the level of program performance, the *prominence* of coverage (e.g., front page or prime-time news) characterized more successful programs, as did a consistently cooperative relationship with the media.

In fact, ratings of media cooperativeness were the most important predictors of program success—better even than the work ratings of the police coordinator or of the board of directors (whose devotion of time and energy was the best predictor of successful fund raising).

Conclusions and recommendations

The information gained through national and local surveys, existing records, meetings, interviews, and site visits has resulted in a number of conclusions and policy recommendations.

Recordkeeping. Crime Stoppers appears to be a highly productive program from the taxpayer's point of view: The program is usually financed by contributions, not appropriated funds. On a national average, each crime solved recovered more than $6,000 in narcotics or stolen goods; each felony arrest cost only $73 in award money. Assessing how meaningful these figures are would require better statistics on the cost of other crime control strategies.

Crime Stoppers itself needs better—and better standardized—recordkeeping. Few programs maintain a full range of basic productivity statistics. There are few standardized goals or definitions across programs by which effectiveness can be compared.

The terms "cases solved" and "property recovered" are biased in favor of larger programs and those with a high volume of narcotics cases. Nationally

accepted standards for measuring performance are needed—standards that are fair to most programs regardless of the size of the population served or the volume of crime reported.

Legal issues. Questions have been raised—and there are no final answers yet—about (a) protecting Crime Stoppers personnel from liability for false arrest, defamation, invasion of privacy, civil rights violations, and the like; (b) using paid callers to establish probable cause for arrests or searches; or (c) upholding the legal privilege of maintaining the anonymity of callers.

Crime Stoppers participants at all levels need to stay informed on these issues, and programs should adopt safeguards against harmful litigation—incorporating the program, invoking government immunity, buying damage-claim insurance, retaining legal counsel, documenting decisions and correspondence, and carefully using waivers, releases, and other legal instruments.

Training. Groups apparently in need of more extensive training about the program include patrol officers on the street, communications personnel who handle calls, and civilian volunteers who contribute time either on the phone or at clerical jobs.

Establishing and teaching proper interviewing techniques would benefit Crime Stoppers by ensuring that the first (and frequently only) contact with the informant yields enough hard information for the investigators to go to work.

State, regional, or national organizations planning seminars for Crime Stoppers should keep in mind that most programs are relatively small, serving populations of under 100,000, with resources and needs quite different from those of large urban areas.

Program networking has developed at the local, State, regional, national, and international levels. Two-thirds of the programs, during their startup periods, received substantial help and advice from existing programs. A widespread practice of sharing services and resources continues between jurisdictions.

Leadership. The best coordinators, located within the investigations division, are highly motivated, with skills that include not only investigation but also public relations and program management. Police chiefs,

deputy chiefs, and other upper echelon officers must also show their support.

To avoid the problems that often arise among different components of the program (such as meeting deadlines, disclosing case information, sharing responsibilities), every effort should be made to maintain open channels of communication among the media, law enforcement, and the board to assure open discussion of mutual expectations, policies, and problems.

Boards of directors should try to spread the work among their members, rather than let the hardest working burn themselves out raising funds.

Board members also can develop more objective guidelines for setting the size of caller rewards, keeping in mind the reward experiment in Lake County, Illinois, that suggests the size of the reward may not be as important as many believe—or at least that the usual advice "when in doubt, pay more" may not be appropriate.

Although the impact study in Indianapolis demonstrated that Crime Stoppers can be very effective at stimulating awareness of the program among law enforcement officers, business persons, and city residents, it is important not to expect too many changes in attitudes and behaviors in a relatively short time.

Creating statewide programs through legislation would ensure adequate staffing and financing, but it might also run the risk of politicizing the program. The alternatives must be carefully weighed.

Since the evaluation reported here was the first social science inquiry directed toward this relatively new strategy of crime control, many of the observations and conclusions reached are tentative and require further substantiation through controlled research.

Table 3

Program productivity by size and type of population

Size of population	Productivity measures					
	Calls received[a]	Calls investigated[a]	Suspects arrested[a]	Crimes cleared[a]	Funds raised[b]	N[c]
Less than 50,000	118	122	39	63	$37,838	61
50,000 to 99,999	382	247	53	50	$11,012	47
100,000 to 249,999	616	280	128	173	$ 9,519	38
250,000 or larger	234	136	20	49	$ 547	46
Type of population						
Mostly urban	350	151	62	67	$13,811	48
Mostly suburban	244	166	32	36	$12,102	30
Mostly rural	273	69	68	52	$ 7,754	13
Mixed	355	223	66	114	$24,514	97

[a] Per 1000 Part 1 Crimes reported to the police
[b] Total funds in the corporation's bank account per 100,000 population
[c] Average sample size.