



# The Stop Snitching Phenomenon: Breaking the Code of Silence



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The opinions expressed are generally those based on the consensus of Executive Session attendees. However, not every view or statement presented in this executive summary can necessarily be attributed to each individual participant.

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## Foreword

The Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), with support from the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (the COPS Office), is pleased to present this report addressing the “stop snitching” phenomenon that has been glorified in entertainment and sports industries and is a significant issue in some law enforcement jurisdictions. The threatening nature of the stop snitching message intimidates witnesses and erodes trust between communities and police by undermining police efforts to involve communities in preventing and combating crime. This threatens police agencies’ ability to prevent and solve crime because it impedes investigations, arrests, and convictions, and could severely erode the criminal justice system. This problem exceeds the boundaries of traditional witness intimidation and is overwhelming for many police departments.

On numerous occasions, the COPS Office has brought together federal agencies, representatives from the private sector, law enforcement leaders from around the country, and neighborhood leaders invested in their communities to explore solutions to violent crime and social disorder issues. Most recently, on March 6, 2008 in a COPS Office-supported PERF Executive Session titled “Stop Snitching: Policing in a New Era,” key stakeholders explored the issues of the stop snitching phenomenon, identified promising practices, and developed potential solutions to the problem. The discussions included innovative methods for counteracting the intimidating messages and the central role that community policing principles play in responding to this unspoken code of silence.

Through this project, we learned that many communities, police leaders, and prosecutors have been working on the stop snitching problem, and that many of the initiatives they have undertaken have had an impact. The programs represent promising practices for reversing the influence of the stop snitching campaign. Resources for preventing witness intimidation and for establishing witness protection programs available to law enforcement have helped encourage witnesses to come forward and have helped agencies to protect their safety. Agencies highlighted in this report are developing strategies that can counter the stop snitching problem, foster trust between law enforcement and communities, increase clearance rates, and remove violent offenders from communities. The report addresses the factors that have led to the stop snitching movement, what makes the message stick, and what can be done to take back the communities affected by it.

We hope that you will find the report informative and useful as you take on the challenge of restoring confidence in the police and the justice system in neighborhoods where such confidence may be lacking. Together, our goal will be to ensure that crime victims and witnesses once again will be willing and eager to work in partnership with their local law enforcement agencies to do what they can to bring offenders to justice.

Carl R. Peed

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Chuck Wexler

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## Acknowledgments

The Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) thanks the police executives, detectives and patrol officers, federal officials, district attorneys, community leaders, and others who worked with us to address the issue of witness intimidation and the stop snitching phenomenon. Thanks also goes to the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (the COPS Office) for its support of the “Stop Snitching: Policing in a New Era” project. We are grateful to COPS Office Former Director Carl Peed, Chief of Staff Timothy Quinn, and Cynthia Pappas, Senior Social Science Analyst and Program Manager, for their encouragement of this project.

PERF also acknowledges the law enforcement professionals and other experts who worked with us to identify anti-stop snitching initiatives and those who gathered in Washington, D.C., for the Executive Session. A special thanks to the presenters: U.S. Attorney Rod J. Rosenstein, District of Maryland; Baltimore Police Department Commissioner Frederick Bealefeld; Baltimore Police Department Colonel John Skinner; Baltimore County Police Department Colonel Mike McCleese; Baltimore Police Lieutenant Colonel Rick Hite; Baltimore Police Lieutenant Colonel Glenn Williams; Baltimore community member David Scott; Clayton Guyton of the Baltimore Rose Street Community Center; Minneapolis City Council Member Don Samuels; V.J. Smith, President of Minneapolis MAD DADS; Natosha Gale, FBI Community Outreach Specialist; Reverend William “Rocky” Brown of the Philadelphia Millions More Movement; Philadelphia Police Department Deputy Commissioner Richard Ross; Philadelphia Police Chief Inspector Keith Sadler; Philadelphia Police Advisory Council Member Greg Bucceroni; Philadelphia Police Advisory Council Member C.B. Kimmins; Dorothy Johnson of Philadelphia Mothers in Charge; Marc Alexander, United Negro College Fund Special Programs Corporation (UNCFSP) Producer; Gilbert Knowles, Director, Division of Community and Education, UNCFSP; and Michal Handerhan, Barry Nagle, and Nichelle Williams of UNCFSP.



This publication would not have been possible without the valuable contribution of those who were interviewed for the case studies. Our thanks also go out to those who responded to the pre-session survey; their comments provided direction for the frank and thoughtful discussion that occurred at the Executive Session.

In addition, I want to recognize with appreciation the efforts of PERF staffers who contributed to the project. Jessica Toliver carefully managed all aspects of the project and wrote this report under the direction of Homeland Security Director Gerard Murphy. Craig Fischer reviewed drafts of the report, and Greg Galperine performed information searches and provided invaluable organizational assistance. Elizabeth Sanberg, Kristin Kappelman, and Rebecca Neuberger offered technical assistance at the Executive Session.

Chuck Wexler  
Executive Director, PERF

## Background

A disturbing situation has developed in certain communities across the nation: people are not cooperating with police investigations. This phenomenon is due in part to an active campaign urging people to “stop snitching” when they are witnesses to, or victims of, crime. Testimony of law enforcement agents in cities both big and small has revealed that the insidious nature of the stop snitching message intimidates juveniles and young adults, erodes trust between communities and police, and threatens police agencies’ ability to solve and prevent crime. It undermines police efforts to improve community relationships and to involve communities in preventing and combating crime with the result that violent crimes such as murder, rape, and assault are not being solved. The FBI reports that national clearance rates for violent crime, especially homicide, have been declining steadily during the last decade and reached 44.5 percent in 2007.<sup>1</sup> In many cities, rates are dropping dramatically, and many police executives attribute the decline, at least in part, to a lack of witnesses who are willing to speak to the police. Even for homicide, the crime that traditionally has had the highest clearance rates, in 2004 (the most recent year in which we have access to specific city data) those rates were at 59.4 percent in Baltimore, 60.6 percent in Washington, D.C., 37.4 percent in Detroit, and 27.9 percent in Boston.<sup>2</sup> These data make clear that the stop snitching message impedes investigations, arrests, and convictions and has severely eroded the justice system in some jurisdictions.

Stop snitching is not an entirely new phenomenon in the criminal justice system; an unspoken code of silence has existed in many communities for a number of years. The problem, however, gained notoriety in 2004 with the release of the *Stop Snitchin’* DVD that was produced in Baltimore and distributed widely on the Internet, featuring an appearance by a professional basketball player. The video’s purpose was to threaten retaliation against those cooperating with police and frighten potential witnesses. Though the term “stop snitching”

<sup>1</sup>[www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2007/offenses/clearances/index.html](http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2007/offenses/clearances/index.html)

<sup>2</sup>Cronin, James, Gerard R. Murphy, Lisa L. Spahr, Jessica I. Toliver, and Richard E. Weger. *Promoting Effective Homicide Investigations*. Washington, D.C.: Police Executive Research Forum and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2007.

is believed to have originated in Boston, it was the release of the Baltimore DVD that is thought to have spawned t-shirts, hats, and rap CDs with stop snitching messages that threaten violence against those who provide information to the police about crimes.

To ascertain the pervasiveness of this phenomenon, and how it is affecting vitally important issues such as witness cooperation, clearance rates, and police departments' overall ability to bring criminals to justice, the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) embarked on a project supported by the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (the COPS Office) to survey 300 law enforcement agencies and to gather together more than 100 criminal justice officials and community leaders to an Executive Session in Washington, D.C., on March 6, 2008. The goal of the "Stop Snitching: Policing in a New Era," project was to discover what is driving the stop snitching movement and to use that knowledge to develop programs and partnerships to address the issue. The survey results and frank conversations at the Executive Session addressed the factors that have led to the stop snitching movement, what makes the message "stick," and what can be done to take back the communities affected by it. This report, *The Stop Snitching Phenomenon: Breaking the Code of Silence*, addresses the problem and includes case studies documenting successful law enforcement and community approaches that have been implemented.

## Introduction

In preparation for the Executive Session, the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) created a 12-question survey to measure the extent and effect of the stop snitching phenomenon on local law enforcement throughout the nation. Of the 88 respondents that PERF received, **86 percent reported the existence of some form of code of silence in their communities**, with 47 percent identifying the stop snitching phenomenon specifically. Twenty-one percent of the respondents who specifically identified stop snitching indicated that the phenomenon had been present for more than a year and had recently increased noticeably, which could be attributed to the recent sales of stop snitching CDs, t-shirts, and DVDs.

The idea behind stop snitching is not new. For many years and in many different cultures, the practice of reporting misconduct by peers has been frowned upon. School-children are reprimanded for being “tattletales.” In the world of organized crime, those who cooperate with police are known as “rats.” Doctors, lawyers, politicians, and others are often reluctant to report misconduct by their colleagues. And as some community leaders at the PERF Executive Session noted, there is a well-known phenomenon known as the “blue wall of silence” within the law enforcement community itself.

Using the survey responses as a guide, PERF developed an agenda for the day-long conference to explore the causes of the stop snitching phenomenon’s popularity, its effects, and what police can do to counteract it. PERF invited police chiefs and asked them to bring their criminal justice partners, such as prosecutors, as well as community leaders from their jurisdictions who could offer insight into why so many people in high-crime neighborhoods adopt the stop snitching attitude.

According to survey respondents and participants at the Executive Session, a mixture of factors has led to the current stop snitching movement that has taken hold in primarily low-income communities

across the United States. In some of these communities there is a deep feeling of mistrust between the residents and police. Another factor is that the criminal justice system moves slowly; prosecution of a perpetrator can take months or years. This creates an impression that not enough is done by government agencies to keep criminals off the streets, and encourages some people to take justice into their own hands. Conversely, delays in the criminal justice process allow criminals to protect themselves by intimidating or perpetrating violence against potential witnesses. These factors provide a fertile atmosphere for the stop snitching message. Why snitch, say residents, if the cops can't protect you and the criminals remain free to take their revenge against you?

## Framing the Issue

Having many different viewpoints represented at the Executive Session (law enforcement executives, detectives and prosecutors, as well as community activists, some of whom were former drug dealers) allowed for a greater understanding of the issues that contribute to the development of the stop snitching movement and what must be done to counteract its effects. Participants at the Executive Session clearly believe that the phenomenon is still spreading. Originally an East Coast problem, stop snitching is now found in communities nationwide and is prevalent in cities of all sizes. “It’s happening in San Francisco,” said Police Chief Heather Fong. “You have a crowd where a homicide happens, and there’s 50 people standing around, but there’s not a single witness who comes forward.”

“We just had a murder on New Year’s morning of a 15-year-old at a house party where 40 people were in the room,” said Chief Ronald Teachman of New Bedford, Massachusetts. “It took us seven weeks to bring that charge—a case that should have been solved in seven minutes. It took 100 people interviewed, reinterviewed, neighborhoods canvassed, 40 people brought before the grand jury, and a half-dozen criminally charged for obstruction of justice, with more to follow, to bring that case.”

Comments at the Executive Session also made it clear that stop snitching is not merely a matter of a political philosophy or attitude about the police in certain communities. It is also based in a very real fear that many people have about placing themselves in danger if they cooperate with police, or even are perceived to be cooperating. The survey responses broke it down more specifically: When asked to indicate the ways in which a code of silence has been promoted, the vast majority of respondents selected more than one method of promotion, and near the top of the list were the factors of implicit threats (80 percent), explicit threats of violence (63 percent), actual physical violence (53 percent), and property damage (45 percent). When asked about the number of

actual instances of retribution they were aware of, 74 percent of the agencies reported that they had only a few isolated instances. This appears to be an indication that the mere threat of violence and the perception of retribution can be enough to keep communities silent—an important topic that was addressed at the Executive Session.

To be sure, however, stop snitching is based not only on empty threats; for example, “Hot Line Hurt by ‘Stop Snitching’ Campaign” reads a headline in Kansas City, Missouri. The story describes the efforts of LaMont Williams to find out who killed his nephew Marcus, a father of two who had no criminal record. “I’m sure someone knows who did it,” Mr. Williams said. Some residents, however, said they would not call a hot line to report anything they knew. “There’s a lot of wicked stuff going on out there, and I think people don’t speak up because they’re afraid of what might happen to them and their family,” one woman said.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, in Baltimore, police spokesman Donny Moses says that the stop snitching mentality is still one of the biggest problems their officers encounter. It keeps witnesses from talking, which impedes investigations, which is why this year’s homicide closure rate is low, he says.<sup>4</sup>

Captain Alec Griffin of the Richmond (California) Police Department estimates that retaliation against crime witnesses is actually quite rare. In his opinion, “probably about 1 in 1,000 witnesses suffer retribution, but that one case affects us tremendously. That is the incident that people remember.”

David Scott, a former drug dealer from Baltimore who now works with youth to help them “escape that avenue,” said that the stop snitching mentality is far more brutal than ever. “You have to understand how deeply inbred this mentality is,” he said. “When I was out there, Miss Jones would call the police on us. We expected it. And we knew she came home at 5 o’clock, so we’d shut down at 4 and take our shop around the corner. In fact, we helped Miss Jones carry her groceries home. But now in this generation, Miss Jones needs to expect them to kill her whole family if she continues to call the police. You have 16-

<sup>3</sup>[www.kctv5.com/news/18031790/detail.html#](http://www.kctv5.com/news/18031790/detail.html#)

<sup>4</sup>[www.baltimoreexaminer.com/local/crime/120708murdercity.html](http://www.baltimoreexaminer.com/local/crime/120708murdercity.html)

year-olds being groomed by 18-year-olds who don't have respect for the unwritten rules of the street."

In addition to the people who distrust the police and share the stop snitching philosophy, there are many others who might be inclined to cooperate with police but are afraid, officials said. "Our ability to protect people is limited," said Captain Griffin, who serves as commander in a district that he said has extremely high crime rate. "We had a couple of incidents where there were citizens who did the right thing and came forward to testify about crimes, and suffered at the hands of criminals who were still out on the street. So sometimes I understand why that fear exists in the community."

Rod Rosenstein, U.S. Attorney for the District of Maryland also acknowledged that the stop snitching phenomenon is due in part to the failures of the criminal justice system. "We've allowed too many dangerous criminals to continue to walk the streets," he said. "People know that if they cooperate in prosecuting someone, that doesn't mean that person's going to be off the streets and locked up in jail. He's going to be right back on the streets. So one of the things that we've been working to do in Baltimore is to make sure that when we identify violent people in the community, we take them off the streets and keep them off the streets."

According to Executive Session participants, fear of reprisals has hampered police investigations and prosecutions. PERF's survey responses detailed the serious impact that the stop snitching phenomenon has had on law enforcement operations: 45 percent of agency respondents indicated a decrease in clearance rates, 24 percent mentioned a decrease in overall trust in the agency,<sup>5</sup> and 78 percent reported a decreased willingness of witnesses to testify. Agencies also specifically mentioned that the reduction of information received at crime scenes has made solving crimes considerably more difficult.

<sup>5</sup>As measured by the experiences and opinions of the agency respondents.



While youths and young adults are clearly the primary audience for the stop snitching campaign, PERF survey results indicate that the phenomenon has spread to the older adults, as well. Forty-two percent of agencies said that adults are reluctant to report crimes and cooperate, while 89 percent reported that youths and young adults are unwilling to step forward. Gang members of all ages also were mentioned as strongly contributing to the stop snitching campaign.

Baltimore Police Commissioner Frederick Bealefeld described how his department produced its own video called *Keep Talking*, which was intended to counter the claims made in the stop snitching video by noting that many of the drug dealers portrayed in it as brash and confident had in fact been arrested and sent to prison. The goal of the department's campaign was to assure potential witnesses of their safety and stress the importance of cooperating with police in order to prosecute criminals and thus reduce witness retaliation. Commissioner Bealefeld noted, however, that stop snitching remains a severe problem. On the morning of the PERF conference, the *Baltimore Sun* ran a brief story about a murder victim who told police before he died, "If I knew who shot me, I would not tell you. That's the way the street works."

"That's what he told the police officer on the scene," Bealefeld said. "Those were literally his last words."

Many local law enforcement agencies recognize that to counteract the fear of retaliation by criminal groups and the stop snitching message, it is vital to develop and nurture community relations. They have done so through partnerships with other organizations, such as the local prosecutor's office (64 percent), community groups (59 percent), schools (54 percent), religious organizations (43 percent), victim advocacy groups (41 percent), federal law enforcement or prosecutors (33 percent), public housing authorities (32 percent), and the news media (30 percent). Other agencies have successfully partnered with crime victims' relatives, school resource officers, domestic abuse response

teams, youth organizations, offender reentry groups, local antigang commissions, and neighborhood associations.

In addition, 80 percent of the police agencies surveyed said they have adopted methods of allowing crime victims or witnesses to report crimes to the police anonymously. Other police responses include protective measures for witnesses (47 percent), strategies for deterring intimidation (46 percent), new ways of asking for cooperation so others cannot identify the person who is cooperating (41 percent), awareness or education programs (39 percent), and relocating witnesses (34 percent). The Crime Stoppers program and several text message tip programs were mentioned, as well as the granting of temporary visas to non-U.S. citizens in exchange for cooperation in certain communities.

At the PERF Executive Session, the Trenton (New Jersey) Police Department reported success with its witness relocation program, and said that the program is supported in part with funds obtained through a cooperative agreement among local, county, state, and federal agencies. The Palm Beach County (Florida) Sheriff's Office reported that the Crime Stoppers program, in which witnesses can anonymously report information about crimes and receive a reward, has been considerably effective. And several agency representatives said that anonymous telephone text-a-tip programs have noticeably helped them thwart stop snitching and gather information from crime witnesses.

This publication captures the themes, ideas, and promising practices presented at the Executive Session and recommends next steps for law enforcement agencies interested in improving their community relationships. Many participants boiled it down to one main issue: If community members believe that police officers are honest, that the police department and its employees care about their welfare, and that detectives and prosecutors will work hard to incarcerate criminals and protect crime victims and witnesses, only then will more people come forward to testify.

## The Root of the Problem: Why Has “Stop Snitching” Spread?

Some of the most interesting comments at the PERF Executive Session came from community members who explained why stop snitching has become such a powerful force in certain neighborhoods. Many pointed out that any number of groups—including doctors, lawyers, government officials, members of Congress, and police—have a tendency not to report malfeasance by their colleagues, so stop snitching is not a unique phenomenon. Even young children are often told that “no one likes a tattletale.”

This chapter organizes the open and often forthright dialog that took place at the Executive Session into the two major themes that became apparent and were believed to be the dominant issues contributing to the stop snitching phenomenon: lack of trust in the police and the influence of certain rap videos and other media on promoting stop snitching. It is these issues that must be addressed in order to strengthen community ties and erode the pervasive fear that drives the stop snitching mentality.



Source: [www.flickr.com/photos/ponyapprehension/420026426/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/ponyapprehension/420026426/)

## Lack of Trust in the Police Department

In the context of the stop snitching issue, a lack of trust in the police department is twofold. First, some community members fear that the police cannot protect them from retaliation; second, some believe a blue wall of silence exists in police departments, and that it is hypocritical to ask citizens to snitch on each other when officers will not do the same.

Even if a community trusts its police, as Commander James Tolbert of the Detroit Police Department pointed out, no police department can handle the financial burden of protecting all witnesses. And even if there were sufficient funding to routinely relocate witnesses, that often is not an option because victims or witnesses have extended families they do not wish to leave behind—or because family members might themselves become targets of retaliation. Participants at the Executive Session said that the real solution is to get the whole community involved in sending the message that retaliation is not acceptable.

Crime Prevention Coordinator Michelle Milam of the Richmond (California) Police Department agreed. Twenty-four-hour bodyguards are not an option, so police need to develop creative solutions to protect witnesses. Coordinating with the court system and the district attorney's office to protect witnesses is one tactic. But ultimately, communities, working with the police, must change the culture, she indicated. "A lot of this happens because as a community we allow this to happen," Milam said. "There used to be a time when someone was dealing drugs and the grandmother in her home would call it in. Today we don't do that," she said. "Some of the solutions have to come from the community and faith-based leaders, not the police department. We need to have so many people cooperating with the police that there is a tipping point. Then the message will not be 'stop snitching,' but rather, that these are our neighborhoods and we will come forward."

One community organizer at the PERF session noted that there is another reason why witnesses in certain communities hesitate to come forward with information: the police code, often referred to as the blue

code of silence or the blue wall of silence, which discourages officers from reporting incidents of police brutality or corruption. This code is sometimes referred to as a code of honor but, in fact, it should be considered a code of dishonor because it causes mistrust between the community and the law enforcement agency.

James Johnson, a community activist for 22 years in North Charleston, South Carolina, brought up another factor. African-Americans, he pointed out, have been hurt by longstanding disparities in the justice system, such as criminal sentences for crack cocaine offenses that are much more severe than the penalties for powder cocaine. "Our judicial system is unfair when it comes to sentencing Blacks, and the Black community looks at all that," he said. "It's not only young people who won't snitch; we have older people who won't snitch because they know the person is going to get a long sentence." Because this is inherently unfair, they would rather allow a perpetrator to remain free than suffer discrimination, he said.

Some participants at the Executive Session said that racial disparities are a contributing factor to the stop snitching phenomenon, while others expressed a belief that it is more a matter of poverty, not race. But there was general agreement that community policing principles can help counteract the stop snitching message, and that youth programs, scholarship funds, and general community outreach can help police build trust, whether the complicating factor is race, poverty, or both.

Community policing, participants noted, can involve a delicate balance; for example, community residents often express a wish to see more officers patrolling their streets, but others say that police must avoid the impression of being "an occupying army." In Washington, D.C., the Metropolitan Police Department responded to a recent rash of violence by establishing a checkpoint in the Trinidad neighborhood. The goal was to block outsiders from driving into the neighborhood in stolen cars to commit robberies, and then fleeing and abandoning the stolen cars. Some residents of the Trinidad neighborhood appreciated that the

city was trying to protect them and create a secure environment for the community, while others claimed the roadblock amounted to a military-style invasion of privacy.<sup>6</sup>

Participants said that police departments, when implementing community policing initiatives, should also realize that community policing does not involve officers simply driving around a certain block in a neighborhood a specific number of times per day. Rather, community policing requires interacting with citizens, showing a presence, and developing relationships with community members.

Reverend Ray Hammond of the Boston Ten Point Coalition, an ecumenical group of clergy and lay leaders working to mobilize the Christian community around issues affecting Black and Latino youths, said that fear, intimidation, and peer and cultural pressure, aggravated by rap videos and clothing carrying the stop snitching message, build on each other to produce an atmosphere in which it is difficult for witnesses to find the courage or the trust to cooperate with the police. He said that police and community leaders must convince residents that working with the police benefits the community.

“Our grandparents deserve to sit on the porch without fear; our kids deserve to play without fear,” Reverend Hammond said. But to convince residents to have confidence in the system, police departments have to own up to their own problems as well and there should be an honest conversation between police and the community with the message that “we’re in this together.”

Ben David, district attorney in New Hanover County, North Carolina, pointed out that respect is a two-way street. Cops should not aim for “power” because this derives from fear and is a short-term asset. Rather, they should respect the citizens and aim to be respected in return, because that conveys authority, which is long-term. “If you don’t treat every single case equally,” he said, “you undermine your own authority

<sup>6</sup>[www.upi.com/Top\\_News/2008/06/20/Lawsuit\\_challenges\\_D.C.\\_roadblocks/UPI-83011213994698/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/2008/06/20/Lawsuit_challenges_D.C._roadblocks/UPI-83011213994698/)

and respect.” He emphasized that the criminal justice community must care just as much about a case involving two “bad guys” as a case involving a completely innocent victim. “Even a drug dealer is someone’s baby,” he said.

## The Media

Contributing to the problem are public figures who advocate a stop snitching mentality. A number of entertainers have been vocal in their support of stop snitching in videos (such as a professional basketball player’s appearance in the Baltimore *Stop Snitchin’* DVD), interviews (such as rapper Cam’ron’s comments that he would not snitch even to help police identify a man who shot him and tried to carjack his Lamborghini), and music lyrics (albums by Lil’ Kim, 50 Cent, and others).

The shooting of rapper Busta Rhyme’s bodyguard serves as another no snitching example: As many as 50 witnesses observed the event, yet nobody came forward. “Your employee is murdered in front of you, you’d think he might want to talk to the police,” said New York City Police Commissioner Ray Kelly.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, not only does this kind of incident inhibit police departments’ ability to solve crimes, such incidents also serve as a model for many impressionable youths.

Furthermore, individuals can purchase clothing, bumper stickers, and other items that advertise their support of the stop snitching movement. The merchandise is available nationally on web sites such as eBay and Amazon, as well as in local stores. The t-shirts typically feature a stop sign emblazoned with the words “Stop Snitching.” Other shirts are more graphic and feature bullet holes, implying that snitches should (or will) be shot, thus referencing its associated catchphrase, “Snitches get stitches.” Another version of the shirt says “I’ll Never Tell.”



Source: [www.flickr.com/photos/trainor/2888815666/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/trainor/2888815666/)

<sup>7</sup>“Anti-Snitch Campaign Riles Police and Prosecutors.” *USA Today*, March 29, 2006.



Source: Police Executive Research Forum, Executive Session, March 2008.

Reverend William “Rocky” Brown, chairman of the local organizing committee of the Millions More Movement in Chester, Pennsylvania, advocates confronting storeowners who sell stop snitching paraphernalia. He brought 20 examples of shirts that have been sold in his community to the PERF Executive Session. To discourage the shops from carrying such merchandise and thereby promoting the stop snitching message, he and fellow community members published a list of merchants and encouraged community members to boycott those stores. The technique worked, and targeted stores no longer carry items with the stop snitching logo. “As clergy,” he said, “we need to take a leadership role.” He called for the use of counter slogans, such as: “Too many of our people are getting drugged up, too many of our children are getting shot up, too many of our boys are getting locked up, too many of our girls are getting knocked up, and too many of us have been too stuck up to do something about it. Therefore, we need to take a stand, stand up, speak up, and make a difference.”



Councilman Don Samuels, also of Minneapolis, brought examples of shirts that were removed from local shops because of community mobilization on the issue and efforts that involved the press.



Source: Police Executive Research Forum, Executive Session, March 2008.

V.J. Smith, president of the Minneapolis Chapter of MAD DADS (Men Against Destruction) reported similar efforts. He is now flooding the stores and streets with t-shirts that send a more positive message.



Source: Police Executive Research Forum, Executive Session, March 2008.

## Summary

There was general agreement at the PERF Executive Session that there are no insurmountable factors that prevent communities from counteracting the stop snitching message. Mark Spencer, inspector general with the Prince George's County (Maryland) Police Department, summed it up: "What [residents] want from the police is to understand that they can trust the police and that the police can be respected and the police will respect them." This can be accomplished through outreach and awareness programs, by building community partnerships, and by publicizing successful prosecutions of those who spread the stop snitching message and are convicted of crimes.

The next section of this report details anti-stop snitching programs and initiatives that have proven successful in different areas around the county. These examples can be used as a starting point for cities looking to combat violence and strengthen community cooperation and participation in the justice system.

## Promising Partnerships and Programs

Cities across the nation have been experiencing the effects of the stop snitching phenomenon through decreased witness cooperation, lower clearance rates, and increased violence. Using their available funds and resources, law enforcement agencies have successfully addressed the issue in different ways. The following case studies offer a wide range of possible program choices for departments looking for innovative and effective methods of addressing the problem in their own jurisdictions.

### Community Outreach

#### **Rochester, New York**

Rochester had already been experiencing an unacceptable level of violence when the final tipping point occurred, according to Reverend Marlowe Washington of the Baber African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. On October 7, 2007, a highly valued and loved member of the church, James Slater, was killed as he walked home from a community meeting. He apparently was shot for the iPod he carried. This incident incited the church members, who reacted not with outrage or disgruntlement, but instead with a purpose and motivation to make their neighborhoods safer, said Reverend Washington.

Meanwhile, city officials had reached the same conclusion. A week earlier, an incident occurred in broad daylight that left the police department extremely frustrated. Lotasha Shaw was stabbed multiple times in the middle of a busy intersection with as many as 50 potential witnesses in the area, yet no one came forward with details.

Mayor Robert Duffy, the city's former police chief, approached the current chief, David Moore, and asked, "What do you need from me?" Chief Moore said he needed overtime funding to put more officers on the street. The mayor obtained the funds from the city council and the initiative was named "Zero Tolerance." It is an aggressive program that

is still in effect. “This new approach is not just about more officers,” Mayor Duffy said in a “State of the City” speech in April 2008. “It’s about the way we police. It’s about giving our officers the support they need to aggressively prevent crime: to be out of the car dispersing loiterers, keeping the peace, gathering intelligence, and searching for illegal guns.”

Reverend Washington took note of the Zero Tolerance initiative and approached Chief Moore. “Let’s create something that complements this police program,” he said. What Reverend Washington helped to create was the “You Bet I Told” campaign. Reverend Washington invited state, local, and federal law enforcement representatives to a roundtable discussion to determine how to counteract the fear and intimidation that community members were experiencing and to encourage cooperation with police investigations. With the help of Chief Moore, Reverend Washington was able to convince 50 executives and community leaders to attend the meeting. It was at that meeting that an attendee uttered the words, “You bet I told,” in the course of discussion. It struck Reverend Washington that this simple phrase incorporated the essence of their collective community goal.

Soon billboards went up across the city with the “You Bet I Told” slogan. The purpose, according to Reverend Washington, was to end the fear of acting alone, of being singled out as a snitch. The ultimate goals of the billboard campaign were to convey a sense of community, to spark the conscience of those who witness crimes, and to convince victims and witnesses that the community would support their decision to cooperate with law enforcement. “You’re not alone,” says Reverend Washington. “We’ll *all* be telling, so you will get lost in the shuffle. You will not be singled out [for retaliation].”

The campaign was originally funded through church contributions. Later, many other organizations and individuals were inspired to donate. Business leaders, the state Department of Criminal Justice Services, and the county government, to name a few, have

contributed approximately \$30,000 to the campaign, according to Reverend Washington. A local college also donated space for a retreat, where a nine-member “You Bet I Told” board organized by Reverend Washington will decide next steps for expanding the witness cooperation program.

Reverend Washington said the intention was for the board to reflect the community, so there are not too many “influential persons” on it. Among the members are a former drug dealer, two young members of the community, two college professors, and a few church administrators and members. They have employed two interns to assist with planning the retreat.

The program has already expanded to include the related goal of promoting the 311 nonemergency number for local law enforcement. Through collaboration with the mayor, citizens can now call 311 and negotiate where and how they will speak with a member of the department about a crime they have witnessed. They may choose a location away from their homes, or request that an officer come to their home in an unmarked car and in civilian clothes so that neighbors will not suspect that the citizen is cooperating with police and become a target for retribution. The “You Bet I Told” board has also worked with the chairman of the local Crime Stoppers program to promote using its number for reporting criminal activity. Next steps, to be finalized during the retreat, will address a way to expand the program for youths who say, “This violence is all I know.” The goal is to provide other options, a way out, according to Reverend Washington.

Though there are not any statistical measures of success, the willingness of people to make financial contributions to the “You Bet I Told” campaign as well as community interest in the program strongly suggest that it has already had an impact. The Baber AME Church was directly involved with one family who found the courage to come forward after noticing the “You Bet I Told” billboards. In August 2008, members of the family witnessed a terrible crime and for months were torn between

mixed feelings of fear and a sense that they should report the crime. After 5 weeks of private “coaching” sessions with church members, they agreed to make a deposition with the U.S. Marshal’s Office, which led to a positive identification and prosecution of the suspects. The church, through the “You Bet I Told” campaign, was able to create this process and provide protection to the family members, moving them out of their home until the federal government was able to fund a permanent relocation.

As the program continues to develop and grow, the board members hope to have more success stories to share.

### **Oakland, California**

Counteracting the stop snitching phenomenon through community partnerships and outreach was one of the most common approaches put forth at the PERF Executive Session. Deputy Chief David Kozicki of the Oakland Police Department outlined a successful program based on these principles. Oakland police are holding forums with community groups and using street-outreach people who have credibility in the community to talk to young people and encourage them to buy into some level of social responsibility. Police and the outreach workers (many of whom are ex-offenders or former gang members) also demonstrate their concern for youths by helping them find jobs and educational opportunities.

The program is run by the city’s Department of Human Services; however, the Oakland Police Department is heavily involved and participated in the selection of the program coordinator, the three agencies providing program services, and the outreach workers. Furthermore, the police department determines the schedule (days and hours) for the outreach workers and assigns them to areas identified by police district commanders.

The program coordinator, Kevin Grant, is an ex-offender who has turned his life around and has “an incredible history of being able to use his

experiences, both negative and positive, to influence youth and people reentering society from penal institutions,” according to Deputy Chief Kozicki. Mr. Grant has recruited other speakers for the program, and together they engage in street corner interventions where the goal is to provide alternatives to just hanging out and getting into trouble. They have also managed to recruit a number of employers who participate in the program by providing job opportunities. This has proved to be a huge draw for people approached on the street.

The program is marketed to youths and ex-offenders through word of mouth, pamphlets, and information provided to neighborhood crime-prevention councils, faith-based communities, and other civic and community-based organizations. The program is funded through the voter-approved 2004 Violence Prevention and Public Safety Act (Measure Y), which assesses a property and parking tax surcharge to increase the number of police officers and to fund successful programs for intervening in the lives of youths and people reentering society from jails and prisons.

### **Baltimore, Maryland**

The first *Stop Snitchin'* DVD, released in 2004, highlighted the culture of witness intimidation in Baltimore. In December 2007, the sequel *Stop Snitchin' 2* hit the streets, showing a young boy waving a gun and smoking what appeared to be an illicit drug.

Rod Rosenstein, U.S. Attorney for the District of Maryland, reported at the PERF Executive Session that Baltimore officials have counteracted the stop snitching message through a series of actions. First, Baltimore police produced its own video, *Keep Talking*, and spent hours on the street handing it out to citizens in East, West, and Northwest Baltimore, along with their own “Keep Talking” t-shirts. The DVD features scenes from the original *Stop Snitchin'* DVD and background hip-hop music. It opens with police Agent Donny Moses saying, “The men and women of the Baltimore Police Department would like to thank the producers of the *Stop Snitchin'* video. In case you didn't know, you've

made Baltimore a safer city.”<sup>8</sup> By that, he means that several of the people featured in the *Stop Snitchin’* video were arrested for probation violations, and the host “Skinny Suge” was arrested for threatening violence against a storeowner who refused to sell the *Stop Snitchin’ 2* video. This demonstrated that police were actively interested in putting away people who brag about intimidating crime witnesses. This, police believe, was a positive step toward helping residents feel comfortable about approaching the police, anonymously or not.

U.S. Attorney Rosenstein also said that one positive outcome of the *Stop Snitchin’* DVDs was that they encouraged coordination among local, state, and federal law enforcement, and inspired them to join forces to combat the issue. In Baltimore, he said, the state courts are overwhelmed with offenders. “Tens of thousands of people are going through the state system,” he said, “Volume is a definite roadblock that must be overcome.” Federal and local prosecutors now work together to identify the most violent offenders and prosecute them in federal court where penalties are far stricter. He also emphasized that the most effective incentive for witnesses to come forward is the knowledge that criminals will be arrested and detained. People will cooperate only if they can be assured that the criminal will not have an opportunity to retaliate. In the federal system, he said, prosecutors also can assure witnesses that their identity will be revealed only at the last minute or at trial. The state system has open-file discovery and is not able to maintain the same degree of confidentiality.

### **St. Louis, Missouri**

Lieutenant Mike Sack of the St. Louis Police Department pointed out that stop snitching is a cross-cultural problem. His jurisdiction includes a large population of Vietnamese-Americans and a “Black String Gang” that was extorting Vietnamese business owners. Victims lacked trust in the police department’s ability to provide protection, so they did not want to cooperate with the police, making prosecution very difficult. To alleviate the problem, the department hired translators and promoted

<sup>8</sup>[www.baltimoresun.com/  
policevideo](http://www.baltimoresun.com/policevideo)



an anonymous tip line in a specific, violence-prone neighborhood of the city. After a violent crime occurs, police immediately distribute flyers in the area to remind people of the tip line and encourage them to use it. The hope is that is even if no one witnessed the particular incident, the flyers would establish a connection between the police department and residents, which they might use to report other criminal activity in the neighborhood.

Members of the department also frequently attend community and ward meetings to interact with citizens and build trust. And the department has undertaken efforts to recruit new police officers who reflect the demographics of the community, which has helped the situation. “I believe if we can develop trust between the community and the police department, we can make some significant inroads,” said Lieutenant Sack. “A lot of the work is simply networking and relationship-building. Until we’ve built a rapport built on trust, we will not be able to address the underlying problem of stop snitching.”

## Multiagency Partnerships

### Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

In December 2005, a group of officials from a wide range of organizations, including the FBI’s Philadelphia Field Office, Clear Channel Outdoor,<sup>9</sup> the Citizens Crime Commission,<sup>10</sup> and Mothers in Charge,<sup>11</sup> were so concerned about the city’s violent crime problem and lack of cooperation from crime witnesses that they gathered to brainstorm possible solutions. They created a campaign called “Step Up, Speak Up” to encourage community cooperation with criminal investigations. Group members developed a resource guide in the form of a small pamphlet as a way to encourage citizens to report crimes. Acknowledging that witness intimidation—ranging from outright threats to more subtle forms such as stop snitching apparel—is a problem, the campaign offers a message to inspire and encourage people to step forward.

<sup>9</sup>Clear Channel Outdoor specializes in outdoor advertising products and leases billboard space. [www.clearchanneloutdoor.com/](http://www.clearchanneloutdoor.com/)

<sup>10</sup>The Citizens Crime Commission’s mission is “to improve the quality of life for citizens in Delaware Valley by improved safety and security initiatives.” [www.crimecommission.org/](http://www.crimecommission.org/)

<sup>11</sup>Mothers in Charge is a community advocacy group composed of mothers, aunts, sisters, and grandmothers who have lost relatives to violence.



Step up and make a difference  
We need to speak up and be a witness  
Only way to stop this violence  
We're gonna have to break our code of silence

Step up and make a change  
Speak up! Don't let them get away  
Crime and murders on the rise  
We gotta stand and testify  
Undertakers are getting rich  
Cause people say don't snitch  
We gotta Step Up and make a change  
Speak up! Don't be afraid  
Take the Big Step to save a life  
Speak up! and do what's right

How can we save our streets  
If nobody wants to stand for peace  
How will this ever stop  
If nobody won't talk to the cops  
Only way we can win this fight  
Is we got to all unite

In addition to the inspirational message, the pamphlet contains detailed information about ways to report incidents of violent crime. Witnesses who decide to step up have a number of avenues from which to choose, starting with telephone numbers for the FBI Philadelphia Field Office, as well as for six district detective divisions of the Philadelphia Police Department. Those seeking anonymity can call the Live Operator Tip Line Service, run through the Citizens Crime Commission, at 215.546.TIPS. Reward money is available as an incentive. The pamphlet also contains information about the Victim/Witness Services Unit of the District Attorney's Office, which describes the goals of its program and offers contact information, as does the Victim Witness Assistance Unit of the U.S. Attorney's Office. Finally, a number of community programs and support groups advertise their existence and contact information in the pamphlet, including the School District of Philadelphia; Mothers in Charge; Town Watch Integrated Services (TWIS); Philadelphia Anti-Drug, Anti-Violence Network (PAAN); and Men United for a Better Philadelphia.

Although the campaign began as a partnership of the FBI Philadelphia Field Office's Community Relations Unit, Mothers in Charge, and Clear Channel Outdoor, it has since grown to include 26 partners from federal and state government, the news media, private businesses, and religious organizations. The campaign has no official funding, but these organizations have successfully solicited donations of time and money that allow for programs that offer an opportunity for children and the police to build relationships, such as a mural arts program. The goal of the program, in particular, is to "use the power of art and the mural design process as tools for community engagement, blight remediation, beautification, demonstration of civic pride, and prevention and rehabilitation of crime."<sup>12</sup> Other components of the campaign include billboards, t-shirts, buttons, public service announcements, and essay and poster contests.

<sup>12</sup>See web site for more program details: [www.muralarts.org/howeare/mission.php](http://www.muralarts.org/howeare/mission.php)

The news media have played a large role in the campaign. Fox News provided a free public service announcement, and the *Philadelphia Daily News* ran stories about unsolved murder cases on its front page every Monday. Though it is difficult to measure the success of the program, officials note that an aspect of the program that puts information about fugitives on digital billboards has resulted in the arrests of eight profiled fugitives as a result of community calls.

Natosha Gale Warner, program coordinator at the FBI Field Office in Philadelphia, recently trained personnel at the FBI Field Office in Birmingham, Alabama, in the fundamentals of the “Step Up, Speak Up” program. FBI officials in Birmingham have created a similar program titled “It’s Your Call.” Ms. Warner gives presentations to community organizations, university students, public affairs specialists, and others, and coordinates efforts such as the “Step Up to the Plate, Strike Out Violence” program, which pairs law enforcement officers with community softball teams to encourage interaction between local citizens and the police.

### **Chester, Pennsylvania**

The city of Chester’s Anti-Violence Task Force initiative comprises elected officials, police and fire department representatives, leaders of grassroots organizations, private business owners, clergy, and citizens. All work together to “take back their streets,” in the words of Reverend William “Rocky” Brown, associate minister of Bethany Baptist Church and a drug and alcohol counselor at Community Hospital in Chester.

Reverend Brown partnered with the local District Attorney’s Office to eradicate neighborhood graffiti as part of this new antiviolence initiative. The District Attorney’s Office held a press conference to announce that a community team would paint over a “Stop Snitchin’ or Die” warning spray-painted on the side of an old pizza shop. The purpose of the collaborative effort, Reverend Brown said, was to replace that message of fear with one of hope. “We want to send a message that now it’s time to stop the silence and end the violence,” he said.

Measures that have been taken by the Chester police to reduce violence and intimidation include creation of a Homicide Task Force as well as a Homicide Tip-Line program that encourages witnesses to come forward, even if they wish to remain anonymous.

### **Prince George's County, Maryland**

The following is a personal account by Major Henry Stawinski of the Prince George's County Police Department describing his department's collaborative process for addressing the delays in the criminal justice process that exacerbate the stop snitching phenomenon:

Robert Prender, the Administrative Court Commissioner for District 5 in Prince George's County, Maryland, identified a problem with the process by which investigators in our jurisdiction obtain arrest warrants. The former Commissioners' process was first come, first serve *only*. This meant that an investigator had to wait in *court* behind citizens and other investigators trying to obtain Peace Orders, summonses, and warrants for various matters. This could take hours depending on the complexity of the matters that the Commissioners had to address, and the number of individuals seeking the assistance of the Court. Mr. Prender suggested that the Court create a warrant "drop box." First, an investigator can follow the old process of waiting in line if they choose to or circumstances require so. If not, they now have the following option.

The optional process requires the investigator to log in the application so that they are subsequently dealt with in the order that they are received, and then leave the application paperwork in a secure box. Once the Commissioner has handled all of the citizen requests, the warrant applications are reviewed in the order that they were received. Upon review, where the elements of the crime have been

articulated, a warrant is issued. The warrant is then delivered to the investigator via our inter-office mail system within 48 hours.

This process has relieved pressure on the Commissioners, and allowed them to defer part of their workload. Obviously, they have an important role to play that requires particular attention to detail. By reducing their workload pressure, they can be more deliberate in their review of the matters before them and thus reduce the likelihood of mistakes being made. For our part, hours lost waiting for a warrant are now spent conducting investigations and concluding cases faster. As a collateral benefit, our investigators are improving their writing skills to ensure that applications are not “kicked back” for clarification or because they are missing details that establish the elements of the crime in question.

Mr. Prender proposed this to the Honorable Judge Love, Administrative Judge for District 5, who agreed that this was an improvement to the current procedure. At this point, a Memorandum of Understanding was drafted between the Court and the Prince George’s County Police Department. Chief of Police Melvin C. High signed on behalf of the Department, Judge Love on behalf of the Court, and Mr. Prender and I worked together to implement the new process. This is one real example of how the courts have partnered with the police to become more nimble.

## Protecting Witnesses

### Washington, D.C.

An increase in witness intimidation perpetuated by the stop snitching movement has made many citizens fearful of providing information directly to the police. The “text-a-tip” program in Boston, and Crime Stoppers<sup>13</sup> programs nationwide have gained popularity by

<sup>13</sup>Crime Stoppers is a nonprofit organization of citizens against crime. Crime Stoppers offers cash rewards of up to \$1,000 to anyone furnishing anonymous information that leads to the arrest of criminals, including those committing serious felony crimes, and fugitives. Information is received through anonymous Crime Stoppers tips that are sent through a secure tips line or through a secure web connection manned by a professional program coordinator. Each caller is assigned a code number to ensure anonymity. See web site for more details: [www.crimestopusa.com/AboutUs.asp#](http://www.crimestopusa.com/AboutUs.asp#)

encouraging the anonymous sharing of information with the police. The Sixth and Seventh Districts of the Washington Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) introduced their own pilot program, known as "Third Watch," for citizens interested in taking back their communities without suffering retribution or having to live in fear of retribution. The stated goal of the initiative is "to provide citizens with a confidential voice to assist officers in fighting crime and building safer communities." It has proven so successful that it has expanded to nearly all MPD districts.

Third Watch offers a direct link between local police officers and residents who are willing to make anonymous tips to the police about criminal activity in their neighborhoods. Pamphlets about Third Watch were distributed throughout the pilot test area to inform people about the program. The program offers not only an opportunity for residents to report crimes without fear, but also a chance to speak with and get to know local officers.

Persons interested in participating in the program are given a number to call, are asked to fill out a brief application form, and are then screened by MPD personnel. Participants' personal files, including names and contact information, are kept in a secure location and are accessible only to the Third Watch Program administrator. Participants are issued a confidential number by which they identify themselves when they report crimes, instead of using their names. This gives the residents confidence that they can call in a report without officers coming and knocking on their door, and potentially alerting neighbors that they are working with the police. Participants remain anonymous at all times to the officer. The advantage to the officers is that they receive information about crimes and descriptions of offenders from screened, trusted sources.

Citizens are not paid for their participation and there is no fee to join the program. The benefit to all is that police can receive valuable information and residents can help the police while reducing their

vulnerability to retaliation. To maximize the impact of the program, the MPD, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia, and community partners train Third Watch volunteers in safe methods of intelligence gathering. The program is a collaborative effort between Detective Lieutenant Andre Wright of the MPD and the U.S. Attorney's Office Community Prosecutor Nicole Wade. The program administrators meet regularly with a board of citizen advisors to further reach out to the community and solicit program feedback.

Detective Lieutenant Wright used his years of experience in narcotics and working with confidential informants (CIs) to develop the program. He realized that, compared to average residents of a community, CIs enjoyed a special brand of anonymity, a "privileged level" of confidentiality, even though many of them have criminal records. Wright grew up in Washington and has watched firsthand as the stop snitching phenomenon gained ground. It struck him as wrong that law-abiding people fear the police coming to their door because they are afraid of being branded as snitches and suffering retribution from criminals. Therefore, he thought, why not afford upstanding citizens the same privilege of secrecy that CIs enjoy? The infrastructure for CIs already existed—guidelines, approvals, training, and general protocol. It just needed to be expanded to include everyday residents of Washington's crime-ridden neighborhoods.

Once his idea was approved, Detective Lieutenant Wright recruited two officers to help him market the Third Watch program to community organizations, church groups, school programs—any meeting where they could find potential participants. Wright says he gives residents a "hard sell" when he arrives: he gets them angry about the situation in their neighborhoods and then challenges them, saying, "If you don't take action today, what will you do? Freedom isn't free. We want to give you the opportunity to live free. For your children to live free. We're here. The resource is here. Try us and see."



He emphasizes that the entire program is anonymous: “You are never in a room with other program participants. Once your application is approved, you are given a participant number so you never have to use your name. You go through orientation and training with one person, your personal handler. You are then given a special phone number to call when you witness a crime or potentially criminal situation. You do not call 911, you do not call 311, you call a special number that is dedicated only to Third Watch calls. The response time is 20 times faster than calling the nonemergency number because you are not dealing with dispatch; you are dealing with a patrol officer dedicated to your needs who can respond immediately.”

Volunteers are able to avoid going to court where their identities could be revealed. Generally, crime victims and witnesses must go to court because when a suspect is prosecuted witnesses and evidence make the case stronger. But in the case of Third Watch, participants are encouraged to call the officer while the crime is in process and to describe exactly where the crime is being committed and what the offender looks like. This gives the officer enough specific information to arrive quickly, observe the crime himself, and thus become the witness when the offender goes on trial.

Important to note is that program participants do not get paid, so there is no reason to question their motives for cooperating with the police. They are simply concerned citizens trying to make their communities safer.

Detective Lieutenant Wright has also worked with Peaceoholics<sup>14</sup> on a broader community goal: redefining the term “snitch.” In his view, “If you tell on the guy who is raping women in your community, you are not a snitch, you are a hero.”

<sup>14</sup>Peaceoholics Vision Statement from web site: [www.peaceoholics.org](http://www.peaceoholics.org). Peaceoholics has touched the lives of more than 10,000 youths and families in Washington, D.C., and surrounding areas. The Peaceoholics organization was founded following requests from area schools, politicians, community activists, youth, families, and clergy members for volunteer efforts to address crisis situations in local communities. Through the volunteer assignments, the need for a local nonprofit organization that has the ability to reach the most difficult youths became apparent. The organization was founded to serve as an advocacy organization for youths and families, to respond to and address escalating youth violence in Washington, D.C.

## Preventive Efforts

### Frederick, Maryland

At the PERF Executive Session, Connie Castanaro of Frederick, Maryland, described a youth program she helped to create that is designed to strengthen the younger generation's ties and commitment to the community. The goal of the "Gal Pals Mentorship Program" is to instill a sense of self-confidence and to encourage respect for others—tools that help immunize youths against the effects of the stop snitching message.

The mentorship program, which began in October 2007 and ran through June 2008, consisted of mentoring sessions with a dozen girls committed to meeting once a week at the Hillcrest Elementary School in Frederick. The meetings were held from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m., and each session was led by a facilitator, a co-facilitator, a female police officer, and an assistant who served as an interpreter for those who were not quite proficient in English. The coordinators divided the course into three 10-week modules, named "You!," "You Plus Others!," and "You Plus Others Plus Community!" The schedule took into account academic events and holidays to avoid potential scheduling conflicts.

Female leaders in Frederick County were asked to volunteer as mentors and to attend and lead one session during the program, for a total of 30 volunteers. The girls, ages 10 to 15, learned from these role models, received affirmations of their own successes, and engaged in fun exercises and individual journaling to develop the following life skills:

- » Coping
- » Handling new situations and transitions in life
- » Managing anger, fear, and frustration
- » Expressing emotions in productive ways
- » Sharing life's challenges and triumphs
- » Encouraging teamwork and social cohesion
- » Making good choices

- » Taking responsibility for physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being
- » Interacting and communicating successfully in multicultural settings
- » Helping others
- » Getting along with people from diverse backgrounds
- » Resisting discrimination and intolerance
- » Defending the rights of others
- » Knowing the benefits of belonging to a caring community
- » Becoming connected to others in Frederick County's neighborhoods
- » Learning the value of community service
- » Learning what it takes to be a leader.

In summary, Ms. Castanaro said that the program was designed to "awaken students to the 'can do' power of being unique and exceptional human beings as well as start them on their way to conscious adulthood."

Frederick Police Chief Kim Dine said, "We believe that the basic premise of prevention programs is twofold: they are designed to reduce youth victimization and to reduce juvenile crime. We also believe that effective and enlightened policing comprises multifaceted efforts that include enforcement, community policing, education, prevention, and outreach. We know it is often argued that prevention is difficult to measure, but we know one thing: when young folks are participating in these kinds of programs, they are off the street and in a safe and productive environment, and they are not being victimized, nor are they committing crimes. Programs like this literally can change the lives of young people."

## Recommendations for Addressing Stop Snitching

A number of strategies can be utilized to counter the code of silence that exists in many high-crime neighborhoods and cities with gang problems. The police and community leaders who have been most active in responding to the stop snitching phenomenon indicate that countermeasures are designed to accomplish several interrelated goals.

### Get the Entire Community Involved

“Stop snitching” is based in part on the real fear in high-crime neighborhoods that the criminal justice system cannot protect those who cooperate with police. Dealing with that kind of pervasive fear requires more than a limited program or two involving a few officers and community leaders. It requires getting the entire community involved in sending a message that violence and intimidation are not acceptable, said participants in the PERF Executive Session. Ultimately, local communities, working with the police, must change the culture of a neighborhood, and develop a strong, widely held feeling that “This is our neighborhood and we are taking it back.”

Police cannot accomplish this on their own, many participants said; however, police can get the ball rolling and encourage neighborhood groups to launch anti-stop snitching initiatives. To a large extent, this involves basic principles of community policing.

- » **Meet with neighborhood associations**, youth groups, school-related organizations, religious groups, crime victim organizations, and so on—any group that can help spread the word that a community is working to take its streets back from criminal elements. Some groups report successes in putting pressure on local business to stop selling stop snitching t-shirts or other paraphernalia. Others have launched counter-campaigns with their own slogans, such as “You Bet I Told” in Rochester, New York, and have spread that message on billboards and through other devices, or in Minneapolis, where

MAD DADS have distributed t-shirts with a positive message about protecting communities. Police, through their community policing efforts, meet with many different groups and can help spread the word about any organization that is launching an anti-stop snitching initiative.

- » **Recruit community activists**, especially those who have faced their own challenges growing up in tough neighborhoods and may even have endorsed the stop snitching message in the past. A number of participants in PERF's Executive Session noted that people who have turned a corner in their lives, rejecting gangs and crime, and taking on a constructive philosophy, have valuable "street cred" in reaching out to young people facing similar challenges.
- » **Work with clergy members and community leaders** who encourage residents to take action against those who propagate the stop snitching message.
- » **Increase the police presence in high-crime neighborhoods where stop snitching is a problem** to help reassure law-abiding residents that they have not been forgotten and that the police are interested in their problems. Crime victims and witnesses may be more likely to contact the police if they already know and respect officers from community meetings or other contacts.

## **Acknowledge and Deal with the Fear of Retaliation**

Police officials and community leaders at the PERF Executive Session agreed that the stop snitching message often takes hold because residents of a community do not believe that the justice system can protect them if they report crimes or otherwise cooperate with police, or even if they are perceived to have cooperated with the police. In some cases, fear of retaliation by criminals has a strong basis in reality, officials acknowledged.

Participants at the Executive Session said that police should do what they can to protect crime victims and witnesses who report crime, cooperate with police, and testify in court, and should make the

community aware of their efforts in this regard. This may include such measures as the following:

- » **Facilitate anonymous tips** through text messaging systems, telephone tip lines, Crime Stoppers programs, or other ways of allowing witnesses to report information to the police anonymously. The ultimate goal is to let the community know that police will be flexible about working with witnesses who are afraid to come forward openly. Some detectives report that they get better results by discreetly handing out their business cards to witnesses at crime scenes rather than trying to interview witnesses at the scene with dozens of other people present.
- » **Witness protection** may involve working with the court system and the district attorney's office to limit the exposure of witnesses. If federal prosecution is an option, federal court rules may provide greater protection of the identity of witnesses than state courts do, and federal sentences for convicted offenders may be more severe.
- » **While some participants at the Executive Session said they have witness relocation programs**, there was agreement that this is a limited option—not only because of the high financial costs, but also because many witnesses have family members or other ties to a community that preclude their relocation, or because they would fear that family members left behind might be targeted by criminals for retaliation. Police can work with community groups or religious organizations that may be able to help provide resources to relocate a witness.
- » **Make the community aware of arrests and successful prosecutions of gang members or others known to have propagated the stop snitching message.** A single victory may have a wider impact if people know about it. Perhaps the best example of this strategy is the Baltimore Police Department's production of its own video, called *Keep Talking*, to counteract the *Stop Snitchin'* videos. *Keep Talking* highlights the fact that "three of the people featured in the [*Stop Snitchin'*] video have already been arrested, and they won't be coming home for a while."

## Understand and Address the Underlying Lack of Trust in the Police and the Entire Criminal Justice System

Many experts at the Executive Session said that fear of retaliation is only part of the “lack of trust” problem that feeds the stop snitching movement. In addition, many residents of high-crime neighborhoods have general feelings of mistrust or resentment toward the police and the criminal justice system. They mention several factors that contribute to this mistrust:

- » **A feeling that some police have their own version of stop snitching—a blue wall of silence** in which police do not report abuses by their fellow police officers. Participants at the Executive Session said that policing in high-crime areas can involve a very delicate balance: As police increase their presence in an effort to help a community take back its own neighborhood, they should try to avoid creating the feeling that they are an occupying force. This can be difficult to achieve. For example, when law-abiding residents are stopped and questioned by police, they may not realize that the goal of the police action is to identify and put pressure on criminal offenders, not to harass the innocent. Well-intended police activities may be perceived as abuse of power, and other officers’ knowledge of the activities is perceived as covering up the abuse with a blue wall of silence.
- » **A feeling that the criminal justice system discriminates against minority group members and the poor**—in such ways as crack cocaine sentencing laws that are far stricter than the penalties for powder cocaine.
- » **A feeling that the justice system, and society in general, do not care** about residents of high-crime, high-poverty, and minority neighborhoods as much as people who live in other areas. A homicide or other crime in a wealthy neighborhood often receives front-page coverage in the news media, while similar crimes in high-crime neighborhoods routinely receive little or no mention. And

when a gang member, drug dealer, or violent criminal is murdered, there is often a general feeling that “he had it coming,” rather than any sense of sorrow over the tragedy of the entire situation.

Participants at the PERF Executive Session said that police need to take a hard look at these factors and do whatever they can to restore a community’s trust in the police and in the entire justice system.

- » **Try to win the respect—not fear—of law-abiding residents in high-crime neighborhoods.** This means taking community policing to a higher level in which officers work with residents not only to reduce crime, but also to help residents improve the lives of people in troubled communities. Police in Oakland, California, for example, are closely involved in an outreach program run by the city’s Human Services Department, which aims to exert a positive influence on youths and offenders returning to the community from penal institutions. The program even has been able to recruit employers who provide job opportunities to people who might otherwise drift into a life of street crime.
- » **Even simple gestures** like organizing a community day for painting over graffiti can carry an important double message: the community knows that someone still cares, and the criminals know that someone is watching. Advertising a department’s concern and presence can inspire others to take action.
- » **Demonstrate by actions that all crimes are equally worthy of investigation and prosecution,** regardless of what neighborhood they were committed in, and regardless of whether the victim has been a model citizen. As one district attorney said, “Even a drug dealer is someone’s baby.”



## Conclusion

The idea of a code of silence among various groups of people is not new. What is new is the way the stop snitching message has morphed. Originally, the message referred to criminals who “ratted out” fellow criminals in order to receive a lighter prison sentence. Now, it is commonly understood to mean that any cooperation with police is considered snitching.

The major target audience for the stop snitching message is youths and young adults who tend to be impressionable and are influenced by the news media, the rap music industry, and the availability of clothing and other products that promote this phenomenon. To reach this segment of the community and convince them to cooperate with law enforcement, police agencies must partner with other criminal justice agencies, with community organizations, and with other leaders to spread a positive message and reduce fear.

In addition, police agencies must implement programs within their departments to protect the identity of witnesses. People will be more willing to cooperate if they feel safe, which will help solve crimes, put criminals behind bars, and reduce the intimidation factor.

What we learned from the law enforcement executives, detectives, community leaders, and other criminal justice representatives who participated in the PERF Executive Session is that a successful response will be twofold. Police can offer assistance to witnesses and assurances of safety to the community in general. Crime stoppers programs offer cash rewards, and witness protection and relocation services can help those who fear for their lives if they come forward and testify. These are immediate measures that can be implemented, although they require a commitment of resources that too often falls short of what is needed.

In addition, the root causes of why the stop snitching message takes hold in some neighborhoods must be addressed, as well. The relationship between the police and neighborhood residents, the crime that takes place seemingly with impunity in some neighborhoods, the slowness of the judicial system, court rules that allow witnesses' names to be revealed before the court case or hearing takes place—these considerations factor into an individual's decision about whether to come forward after having witnessed a crime. Police and other criminal justice agencies will have greater success countering the stop snitching message if they keep in mind the root causes of that message.

The fundamental success of a police department's stop snitching program will be based not on any particular short-term initiatives, but rather on its fundamental efforts to build trust in the neighborhoods, create partnerships with other criminal justice and social service agencies, and establish strong relationships with community groups and leaders. Such efforts produce the confidence that a crime victim or witness needs to come forward.

## Appendix

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### **Stop Snitching: Policing in a New Era**

March 6, 2008

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*The Stop Snitching Phenomenon: Breaking the Code of Silence*  
Police Executive Research Forum (PERF)

This purpose of this document is to ascertain just how pervasive the stop snitching phenomena is and how it is affecting vitally important issues such as witness cooperation, clearance rates, and police departments' overall ability to bring criminals to justice. PERF surveyed 300 law enforcement agencies and gathered together more than 100 criminal justice officials and community leaders at an Executive Session where attendees confronted the issue head-on. The goal of the project was to discover what is driving the stop snitching movement and to use that knowledge to develop programs and partnerships to address the issue. Based on the survey results and the frank conversations at the Executive Session, this publication addresses the factors that have led to the stop snitching movement, what makes the message "stick," and what can be done to take back the communities affected by it.



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