

Text Message Tips Silently Solve Crimes in Boston

The Boston Police Department's Text-a-Tip program has successfully increased the number of anonymous tips sent in to its Crime Stoppers program.

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Picture this: You're a law enforcement officer investigating a violent crime. You suspect that there are individuals—other than the perpetrators—who may have witnessed the crime in progress and could help in your investigation. But you can't get anyone to say anything. Maybe they don't trust the police. Maybe they don't want to be outed as a "snitch." Maybe they just don't want to get involved. How can you make them feel safe enough to share what they know with you?

That's where anonymous-tip programs like Crime Stoppers come in. The Crime Stoppers program was started in 1976, in Albuquerque, NM, based on the idea that someone other than the criminal has information that can solve a crime. [Crime Stoppers USA](#) lists 466,166 arrests that have been made using the Crime Stoppers program, clearing 768,225 cases and recovering a total of \$4,010,752,102 in stolen property and goods.

Until recently, tipsters had to call their information in by using an anonymous toll-free telephone line. But now police departments all over the country are using new technologies, like text messaging, which offer some quantum improvements over telephone tips.

The Boston Police Department's (BPD) Crime Stoppers program was one of the first to allow tipsters to send information via text message or SMS (short message service) instead of phoning them in. BPD started its Text-a-Tip program in June 2007. Using a text message-enabled phone, tipsters text in the word "tip" to the tipline number. Messages sent to the tipline are scrambled by a third party before the information is sent on to police investigators. To maintain complete anonymity, tipsters receive a six-digit code and use that code during all discussions with investigators. Investigators can then text the tipster if they choose, using a random code that connects to the tipster's phone, enabling interactive communication.

"It started with police officers at a crime scene," says Commander Mike Charbonnier of the BPD's Crime Stoppers Unit. "Officers noticed that all the bystanders were standing around the scene texting away."

Texting messages to the tipline is free, although standard messaging rates may apply. More importantly, Text-a-Tip is *silent*. Tipsters can send information anonymously at any hour of the day or night from the privacy of their own homes and, unlike the phone-in tipline, can do so without anyone around them hearing what they have to say.

The text messages are neither recorded nor traced. This encourages tipsters to make those calls, even in light of the “stop snitching” culture that is becoming prevalent in many parts of the country.

The “stop snitching” movement discourages people from getting involved with law enforcement through a flurry of t-shirts, songs, websites, and DVDs. Supporters of the street code of silence promise to punish “snitches” who work with law enforcement to solve crimes.

Charbonnier hopes the Text-a-Tip program could encourage community members to end the stop snitching culture. “If it’s not dead,” he told the *Boston Herald*, “I hope that it’s in intensive care.”

Since the program’s inception a year ago, the Boston Text-a-Tip program has received 694 tips via text message. The first tip the new program received came from New Hampshire and led to an arrest in a local homicide case. Boston Crime Stoppers received an average of 326 phone-in tips in the year before the Text-a-Tip program was established.

“We haven’t had any negative experiences with the program,” says Charbonnier. “Adding Text-a-Tip has given the Crime Stoppers Unit new life.”

Boston isn’t the only city that has jumped on the text-a-tip bandwagon. Seattle, WA; Fresno, CA; San Diego, CA; Tampa, FL; and Kansas City, MO, are some of the cities already offering this service, with more cities planning on adding the service over the summer.

Text-a-Tip Crime Stoppers line has been so successful for the BPD that the Wireless Foundation is awarding them a [VITA Wireless Samaritan Award](#), which is presented to those who have used wireless technology to save lives, stop crimes, and help in emergency situations.