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As Prices Rise, Crime Tipsters Work Overtime



Daron Dean for The New York Times

Karen Keen, tips coordinator for First Coast Crime Stoppers in Jacksonville, Fla., and Wylie Hodges, its executive director.

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To gas prices, foreclosure rates and the cost of rice, add this rising economic indicator: the number of tips to the police from people hoping to collect reward money.

Calls to the Southwest Florida Crime Stoppers hot line in the first quarter of this year were up 30 percent over last year. San Antonio had a 44 percent increase. Cities and towns from Detroit to Omaha to Beaufort County, N.C., all report increases of 25 percent or more in the first quarter, with tipsters telling operators they need the money for rent, light bills or baby formula.

"For this year, everyone that's called has pretty much been just looking for money," said Sgt. Lawrence Beller, who answers Crime Stoppers calls at the Sussex County, N.J., sheriff's office. "That's as opposed to the last couple of years, where some people were just sick of the crime and wanting to do something about it."

As a result, many programs report a substantial increase in Crime Stopper-related arrests and recovered property, as callers turn in neighbors, grandchildren or former boyfriends in exchange for a little cash.

On Friday, a woman called the Regional Crime Stoppers line in Macon, Ga., to find out when she could pick up her reward money for a recent tip. She was irritated to learn that she would have to wait until Monday.

"I'm in a bind, I'm really in a bind," she told the hot-line operator. "There's a lot of stuff I know, but I didn't open my mouth. If I weren't in a bind, I wouldn't open my mouth."

When she learned the money was not available, she said she would call back with the whereabouts of another suspect whom she had just seen "going down the road."

Elaine Cloyd, the president of Crime Stoppers U.S.A., a national organization of local tip programs, said that not all of the 323 programs in the country had reported an increase in calls, and that some, like those in Lafayette, La., and Broward County, Fla., attributed most of their spike to increased publicity or technological improvements like accepting tips by text message. But there was no doubt, Ms. Cloyd said, that the faltering economy was a significant factor.

"When the economy gets rough, people have to be creative," she said. "They might give a tip where they wouldn't have in the past."

For tips that bring results, programs in most places pay \$50 to \$1,000, with some jurisdictions giving bonuses for help solving the most serious crimes, or an extra "gun bounty" if a weapon is recovered. In Sussex County, the average payment for a tip that results in an arrest is \$400, Sergeant Beller said.

"Usually you deliver the money in an unmarked car and meet them somewhere," he said. "But these people come right to the office and walk right through the front door."

Some Crime Stoppers coordinators say their program appeals to community spirit and emphasize that not everyone who calls is after money. But their advertising makes no bones about the benefits of a good tip.

"Crime doesn't pay but we do," say the mobile billboards cruising Jacksonville, Fla. A poster in Jackson, Tenn., draws a neat equation: "Ring Ring + Bling Bling = Cha-Ching." The bling, in this case, is a pair of handcuffs.

Some coordinators suggest that rising crime rates might be driving up the number of tips. But in Jackson, Tenn., Sgt. Mike Johnson said his call volume had gone from two or three a day to eight or nine. He theorized that rising crime there was not a factor because the program

advertises steadily regardless of trends. "People just need money," Sergeant Johnson said.

Sergeant Johnson has been a Crime Stoppers coordinator for 15 years, watching crime rates and tips fluctuate. But, he said, "I've never seen an increase like it is now."

Crime Stoppers programs strictly protect the anonymity of callers. Each tip is assigned a number, and if the tip results in an arrest, the caller can collect a cash reward, usually by going to a designated bank. Some programs pay tipsters within hours of an arrest; others have monthly meetings to approve reward amounts.

Not only have the number of tips increased, several program coordinators said, but people are also more diligent about calling back to find out if and when they can collect.

Jim Cogan, director of the Silicon Valley Crime Stoppers program in California, said most of the rewards offered by his program used to go unclaimed. But with large numbers of foreclosures and heavy job losses, Mr. Cogan said, "now we're seeing rewards get picked up right away and our tipsters being frustrated when tips aren't available as quickly as they need the money."

Karen Keen, the tips coordinator for First Coast Crime Stoppers in Jacksonville, said she had, on occasion, been given approval to pay tipsters early, if they persuaded her that they needed the money to pay a light bill or some other necessity.

Some people have made a cottage industry of calling in tips. Although repeat callers do not give their names, operators recognize their voices.

"We have people out there that, realistically, this could be their job," said Sgt. Zachary Self, who answers Crime Stoppers calls for the Macon Police Department.

"Two or three arrests per week, you could make \$700, \$750 per week," Sergeant Self said. "You could make better than a minimum-wage job."

He said that his program typically averaged 215 arrests per year, but that this year it had already hit 100, and he projected it would make more than 300, a record, by year's end.

In some cases, the quality of the tips is lagging as people grasp for any shred of information that might result in an arrest. A woman in

Macon, for example, recently called to report that a family member - who was wanted for burglary and whose name and address were already known to the police - was at home. His home.

Such a tip might seem worthless on its face, said Jean Davis, who took the call. But many police departments do not have the personnel to watch a suspect's comings and going. In that case, the young man was arrested.

Typically, the greatest number of calls comes in response to news coverage of a specific crime or a weekly list of wanted suspects. At other times, people call to report a crime the police might not even be aware of. Or, they might just call to report the whereabouts of someone with an old warrant. Warrant tips for minor crimes generate the lowest rewards, but that has not stopped people from turning in suspects.

"We're getting a lot more calls related to wanted persons," said Sgt. Tommi Bridgeman, who coordinates the Beaufort County Crime Stoppers program. "People who know that these people have warrants out for their arrest are calling to turn them in."

Sergeant Bridgeman said her calls were up 25 percent even though the program's one advertisement, a patrol car emblazoned with the hot-line number, was out of commission.

"Folks around here need the money," she said. "There's not a lot of jobs here. We try to pay out every two weeks because we know they need the money."

Places with quick payments and particularly bleak economic conditions tended to report increases in call volume. Lee County, Fla., had the highest rate for home foreclosures in the United States in February and March, and its once-plentiful construction jobs have dried up.

Last week, the Crime Stoppers coordinator there, Trish Route, got a call from a man reporting drug activity, a tip that paid him \$450. It was his second call in a week, said Ms. Route, who recognized the caller's voice.

"He told me he really didn't want to call but he just had a new grandbaby and he needed the money," Ms. Route said.

Economic problems for families, Ms. Route acknowledged, were good business for Crime Stoppers. "We're kind of banking on that, really,"

she said. "If it helps put dinner on the table for somebody, that's wonderful."