



HELPING WITH ENQUIRIES?

Informers: A lesson to be learned

Recent years have seen Police Forces placing increasing emphasis upon wider and more proactive use of intelligence resources and surveillance techniques for offender targeting and the investigation of crime. Such proactive policing strategies, if they are to be effective, require an environment where good intelligence systems are in place and one of the main tools of an intelligence system is the informant.

Such is the received opinion of the authors of the Audit Commission Report, 'Helping with Enquiries' (1993) who argue that informants 'offer a very cost-effective source of detection'. This view is echoed by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and by many senior police officers. As a representative of the Police Superintendents' Association told me, 'When the police service is strapped financially, we see the sensible use of informants, perhaps with enhanced fees, as being the way forward.

Police Forces and Regional Crime Squads are now measuring the usefulness of professional informants in terms of cost-benefits. For example, No 3 Regional Crime Squad reports that in the six months ended 30 September 1992, an outlay of £26,500 to informers had yielded 186 arrests, property to the value of £937,380 recovered and drugs seized with a street value of £1,962,260.

Hidden costs

However, such figures do not reflect the hidden costs: the time spent in cultivating an informer or the expenditure involved in mounting unsuccessful operations set in motion after receiving supposedly good intelligence from an informer. It has been estimated, for example, that a surveillance operation carried out by Regional Crime Squad officers costs in excess of £2,000 per day. Additionally, such figures fail to reveal the many non-financial costs which are incurred in police/informer dealings.

The use of informers is not a novel method of crime detection, since they have played a role in the British legal system for far longer than organised police forces have existed. However, the current move towards proactive policing strategies, with the concomitant emphasis on the use of informers, is producing negative consequences for individual police officers, police forces and the criminal justice system.

In one Police Force, which I visited

whilst researching the use of informers, such views were reflected in administrative procedures. One of the personal performance indicators used to assess a detective was the number of applications for payments to informers that she/he had made in the preceding twelve months. In another Force, the suitability of uniformed officers for transfer to CID duties was, at least in part, determined by the number of informers they had recruited during a short attachment to the department.

With such an emphasis on the importance of informers, detectives, both actual and aspiring, felt the need to recruit informers. As one detective constable told me, 'There's this general pressure in the CID. You want to be seen as a good detective and because of the attitude of some senior detectives, some officers feel that they will be seen as such if they are running informers.'

Hidden dangers

However, those officers were frequently the young and inexperienced who were trying to make their mark as detectives and their naivety often led to situations developing where they were manipulated by the experienced criminal they were attempting to recruit.

Informers invariably work in the anticipation of some reward from their police handler and exchange and bargaining strategies between the parties are commonplace. However, whilst the experienced detective usually ensured that the informer did not receive undue advantage because of his or her informing activities, agreements being struck by the novice officer, or the detective attempting to enhance his or her reputation with superiors, frequently amounted to the tail wagging the dog.

In accordance with the Home Office Circular 97/1969, the topic of informants features on the curriculum of detective training centres. However, many officers do not attend these courses until they have completed many months service in the CID and even then few appear to value the instruction given. Of 125 detective officers polled about the training they had received in informer handling, only one-third of those running registered informers stated that they had received any training at all and over half of those thought that it had not been very useful.

The training given at detective training centres concentrates on the law and the procedures to be followed in respect of informers who are taking part in a criminal enterprise. It does not deal with

recruitment or cultivation techniques and yet it is during those very processes that detectives expose themselves to situations which can potentially have an adverse effect on themselves, the police as an organisation and the criminal justice system.

Learning the job

Policing is an occupation in which skills and knowledge are often learned from street experience and over one half of all the detectives polled stated that they had learned to run informers by talking informally to other officers who ran informers. A further one third stated that they were self taught. However, such learning techniques are fraught with danger. As one Detective Chief Inspector commented, 'You learn from other officers and you can end up picking up all their bad habits'.

A number of officers told me that they had 'learned through their mistakes' about how to recruit and handle informers. The problem is that, because of the secrecy surrounding the running of informers, those learning experiences are not shared with other officers. On a number of occasions I came across the same mistakes in informer handling being made by officers often working in the same office.

Contemporary policing methods make the recruitment and cultivation of informers a skill as important as interviewing methods and yet while there is now a national interview skills training package for police officers, little appears to be being done to address the issue of training officers in how to deal with informers.

Informers can undoubtedly be a useful asset to the police, especially when dealing with crimes which consist in the main of a consensual transaction or exchange, such as drug dealing. However, in untrained hands they can be dangerous. As one detective sergeant told me, 'It's only luck that I haven't fallen in the crap with informers'.

References:

1. Audit Commission (1993) *Helping with Enquiries: Tackling Crime Effectively* (London: HMSO)
2. Home Office Circular 97/1969 'Informants who take part in crime'.

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