

Source: <http://www.policemag.com/blog/gangs/story/2007/06/developing-gang-informants.aspx>



Developing Gang Informants

Reliable informants can provide invaluable inside information.

June 28, 2007 | by Richard Valdemar

Not everyone is graced with the skills necessary to identify and develop gang informants. It's like the ability to strike up a conversation with a stranger of the opposite sex when dating; some people just have that flirtatious flair, and some don't. But regardless of your skill, since you can't be everywhere all the time, you will have to rely on informants to work gangs. And there are some tricks you can use.

By the Book

Every department has policies and procedures in place for handling gang informants, so first thing, go check your department's manual. Then go find a Narcotics or Vice officer who has actually had to work under your department's procedures to find out in the real world how it works.

Many of these policies seem to me to have been written by people who never worked informants. They are very clinical, unreasonably restrictive, and often mimic the informant procedures of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This is laughable because the FBI has a less than stellar history in gang informant management. This is why their procedures are so restrictive.

One of the incidents I remember in Los Angeles involved a "cooperative witness" who was brought by the FBI from the East Coast to testify against some of his good fellow organized crime gang members. The witness (informant) was being housed between court appearances at a local motel. The agents became fairly friendly with the former wise guy and allowed him to invite a lady friend over for a private party. The agents took turns in an adjacent motel room watching the witness' room. Suddenly, the agents' room began to pitch and sway violently in one of Los Angeles' larger earthquakes. The electric power and telephone systems went down, and the agents rushed home to check on the welfare of their own families. By the time the agents returned, the local police had responded to a drunken domestic disturbance call at the informant's motel room and arrested him for the battery of his girlfriend.

The Informant

He is a "Rat," "Snitch," or "Snizzle" in the gang world. A "Friendly," "Protected Witness," "Confidential Witness" (CW), "Confidential Informant" (CI), "Source," or "Undercover" (UC) to law enforcement. Some agencies consider any jail house informant as unreliable, some dislike paid informants, and many treat any informant with disdain. Yet the success of any gang unit can be attributed largely to its ability to develop and maintain numerous credible informants.

In my 20 years working the L.A. Sheriff's Department Major Crimes Bureau, I built a stable of long-time credible informants. Under the new policies (like the FBI's), instituted a few years before my retirement in 2004, the whole team's informants were closed out and the team's effectiveness became virtually zero.

The very nature of the criminal subculture indoctrinates each neophyte gang member not to cooperate with the cops. "Thou Shalt Not Snitch" is the first commandment of the gang culture. The drug traffickers and gang members have actually established Websites like "Who's a Snitch" and "Stop Snitching" to publicly identify informants and it is an unwritten gang rule to kill informants. So, why do they become informers?

Cultivating Relationships

Every person you meet is a potential informant. Most citizens can tell you about some kind of criminal activity they are aware of in a general way. They might mention in passing that they have been noticing drug or gang activity at a local park or neighborhood. Children and juveniles are often very aware of gang activity in schools and playgrounds because they need this information to avoid becoming victimized. The girlfriends and family members of gang members are sometimes motivated to give information in an attempt to protect their loved one.

You should establish a rapport with as many of these informal citizen informants as you can. Give them your business card; tell them to ask for you. Carry cards with anonymous "WE TIP" and "Secret Witness" numbers, but don't do this where their cooperation can be seen by gang members.

Identify and Assess

Criminal informants have many different motivations for turning against the gang. Burglars may tell you about the armed robber because the burglar says he only steals to support his drug habit and rarely hurts anyone, but the robber carries a gun and is violent. The robber will tell you about a murderer, and almost everyone will give information about a child molester. This criminal moral justification, which pardons oneself but points out other gang members as morally worse, can be utilized to identify potential inside sources.

Most of the long-term credible informants I developed came from hardcore gang members, who after years of believing in the myth of gang brotherhood and idealistic causes, were treated unfairly by their homeboys. The gang is made up of liars, cheats, thieves, and bullies. They often victimize weaker gang members, and vengeance is sweet.

After you have identified possible informants, their potential must be assessed. Avoid juvenile informants, promiscuous young women (if you are male), mental patients, and want-to-be undercover cops without the benefit of completing the police academy. Narcotics detectives often utilize the "little fish working off his case to catch a bigger fish" method.

Recruiting

Now comes the hard part: actually recruiting the informant. Some gang members should be approached with cold facts in a business like manner. There are informant contracts that can be written and signed by the informant and the handler. Some must be convinced and sweet talked into cooperation. But be careful of your words.

Never promise what you cannot deliver. Never threaten something you are not able to enforce. Once you say something, keep your word. This self imposed rule sometimes required me to go into my own pockets or to come in on my day off to fulfill my commitment. Remember, trusting a cop is just as difficult for the informant as you trusting a criminal gang informant.

Training

The next step is training the informant. Insist on safety procedures. Everything must be approved by you before any operation. No unofficial informant-initiated operations allowed. When you finally dispatch the informant on a mission, make sure you are very clear on what you are asking him to do. Whenever possible, video or at least audio tape the informant. Start slow; confirm small things to build his reliability before taking down the big case.

Providing Protection

Don't burn your informants. California Evidence Code 1040 & 1042 can be invoked to protect the identity of informants, observation points, surveillance locations, and hidden locations for cameras and audio recording devices. Most states have similar statutes. In some gang cases I have had cases dropped in order to protect the identity of informants.

Remember, if the informant is identified by testifying, or is identified in the media -- as the informant in the Biggie Smalls murder case was in the Los Angeles Times -- you must continue to act for his safety. If he goes to jail he must be placed in protective custody. On the outside he can be placed in the Witness Protection program or moved out of the area.

Cover Your Bases

Use the information a gang informant gives you only as a start. Corroborate the information with your own investigation. Try to have more than one source and continually cross-check every informant's information. Don't tell one informant about the other. Don't tell other cops, who don't need to know, about the informant. Normally that means just your partner and supervisor should know the informant's true identity.

The gang informant provides valuable information. Information is intelligence, and intelligence allows you to work more effectively. Use that charm.