



“Snitching”: A Culture of Not Cooperating with Law Enforcement

Findings from the Boston Youth Survey 2006

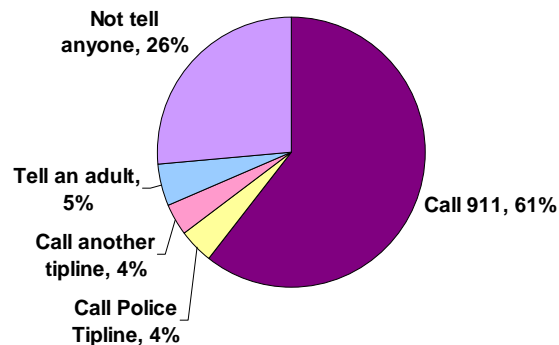
Introduction

Following a violent crime, law enforcement agents attempt to identify perpetrators by talking to witnesses or bystanders. However, in some places there seems to be a culture of non-cooperation with police investigations. The common term for providing information to police about perpetrators is called “snitching”. To learn more about this phenomenon, we asked students in Boston Public Schools what they would do if they saw a crime. Sixty-five percent of the students (803 out of 1,244) completed the question. Seventy-two percent (579 out of 803) said they would disclose having seen a crime; most said they would “Call 911”. However, 26% said they would “not tell anyone” (See below).

93. If you were to witness a crime, what would you do?

- Call 911
- Call police tipline
- Call another anonymous tipline
- Tell a teacher, counselor, or other adult
- Not tell any authorities

IF you answered that you would not call a tipline or tell any authorities, why wouldn't you?



What reasons did students give for not telling anyone?

We asked students who said they would not tell anyone about witnessing a crime to list their reasoning. Their responses can be classified into three categories: (1) “Don’t want to be a ‘snitch’”, (2) Fear of getting hurt, and (3) Belief that it’s not his or her concern. Even though we never used the term ‘snitch’ in the survey, many students used it when describing why they would not tell anyone about a crime they saw. Students said things like “*Because I wouldn’t want to be labeled a snitch*” and “*I’m not a snitch*”. These responses make it clear that snitching is an important concept among youth, and that some students have unfavorable attitudes about talking to law enforcement about witnessed crimes.

Responses also showed students’ fear of retaliation if they reported a crime. In describing why he would not tell anyone about a crime, one student wrote: “*Because I know the consequences of snitching – DEATH!!!*”. Others wrote statements like: “*Snitches get stitches*”. Finally, comments such as “*It’s not my business*” and “*I mind my own business*” indicated students’ beliefs that they should not get involved.

Which Students are Likely to Disclose Having Witnessed a Crime?

There were clear patterns that differentiated who would and would not disclose having witnessed a crime. Compared to 72% for the whole sample, 80% of girls and 92% of Asian students said they would tell someone. Those who have strong family ties and who are active in school and their community were also more likely to say they would disclose having seen a crime. On the other hand, students who are Black/African-American, who have been involved with the juvenile justice system, who report feeling

disrespected by the police, and who have had personal experiences with violence are less likely to disclose having witnessed a crime.

Student Characteristics	Percent Who Would Disclose Having Witnessed a crime
<i>Family Ties</i>	
Frequently talk with parents about personal problems	85%
Sits down to family dinners on most days	84%
Lives with both parents	77%
<i>Active in School & Community</i>	
Spends after-school time doing things like: sports, clubs, activities, volunteer work, etc.	80%
Knows about neighborhood-based mentoring programs, (e.g., Big Brothers & Big Sisters)	76%
<i>Involvement with Justice System</i>	
Involvement with Dept. of Youth Services in the past year	56%
Feels he/she has been disrespected by police	50%
<i>Has had personal experiences with violence</i>	
Had a close friend or family member murdered	64%
Has been shot or shot at in the past year	54%
<i>Race & Ethnicity</i>	
White	73%
Black	67%
Multi-Racial	76%
Asian	92%
Hispanic	75%
<i>Sex</i>	
Boys	61%
Girls	80%
<i>All Respondents</i>	72%

What is the Bottom Line for Boston?

These results are positive in that they show that most students will disclose having witnessed a crime, especially those with strong family ties and a connection to their school and community. For the minority of students who would not disclose, it will be important to change youths’ perceptions about cooperating with the police when they investigate crimes. Rather than viewed as a negative, cooperation should be viewed as a public responsibility. Boston communities will have to drive this changing of social norms. Finally, the fact that students are fearful of being assaulted if they report a crime indicates that Boston leaders need to ensure their protection.

The Boston Data Project

The Boston Data Project, a collaborative effort of the City of Boston's Boston Public Health Commission and the Harvard Youth Violence Prevention Center, provides comprehensive data on youth well-being to the City of Boston. Our most recent projects include the Boston Youth Survey 2006 (BYS) and the Boston Neighborhood Survey 2006 (BNS).

The BYS is a biennial survey administered to a representative sample of high school students in Boston Public Schools. It covers topics including education, mental health, service use, exposure to violence, and nutrition and physical activity. There were 1,244 students in the 2006 BYS; 56% were girls, 53% were Black/African-American, 13% were White, and 30% were Hispanic/Latino.

The BNS is a biennial telephone survey of a random sample of Boston adults designed to provide rich information about life in Boston's neighborhoods, as well as respondents' participation in civic affairs and community activities. There were 1,707 adults in the 2006 BNS sample; 55% were female, 64% were White, 21% were Black/African-American, and 8% were Hispanic/Latino. More than one-fourth had children living with them (28%).

For more information on The Boston Data Project, visit our Web site <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/hyvpc/>, or call Mary Vrinotis at 617.432.0085.