



NEWS

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ANTI-SNITCHING CULTURE HUGE HURDLE TO COMBATTING GANG VIOLENCE

Youth Would Report More Crime to Responsive Authorities, New Study Suggests

Boston, MA –The National Center for Victims of Crime, the nation’s leading advocacy group for crime victims, today released a research report showing that criminal justice authorities and communities can do more to prevent and respond to the intimidation of youth witnesses to gang-related crimes.

Snitches Get Stitches: Youth, Gangs, and Witness Intimidation in Massachusetts reports the views of urban Massachusetts youth on the impact of gangs in their communities and schools, their reasons for reporting or withholding information about crimes from the police, and their ideas for making it safer for youth to communicate with authorities about crimes they have witnessed. The study also interviewed criminal justice officials about the law’s response to witness intimidation by gangs.

Prior research on witness intimidation is scant and has focused mainly on the views of police and prosecutors. The last study to interview crime victims about intimidation took place in 1992, and no studies have ever focused specifically on youth witnesses to gang violence.

According to the National Center for Victims of Crime, intimidation in gang cases appears to be widespread, and few jurisdictions have set up a comprehensive response to the problem.

“The criminal justice system can do far more to help youth and their parents feel safer about reporting crime and cooperating with the authorities,” said Mary Lou Leary, executive director of the National Center for Victims of Crime. “We must find better ways to keep witnesses safe and discourage the witness intimidation that permits gangs to terrorize entire neighborhoods.”

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Key study findings include:

- Community norms against “snitching” are strong, but youth are still willing to report crime under certain circumstances;
- Youth are more likely to report crime to police officers or other authority figures whom they have an existing relationship with;
- Youth have hope and practical suggestions for making crime reporting safer; and
- Improved coordination and focus on witness intimidation within the criminal justice system could help keep witnesses safe and invested through the trial and conviction of violent offenders.

Snitches Get Stitches also offers specific recommendations that encourage police, prosecutors, victim/witness coordinators, community groups, parents, and youth to work together to change the “no snitching” culture of many high-crime urban communities. The study places primary responsibility on law enforcement to take steps to keep witnesses safer and to form trusting relationships with the families who witness gang crime every day.

Study findings are based on on-line surveys of 641 Massachusetts youth and in-person interviews with 39 youth, as well as interviews with criminal justice officials. All youth were recruited through the Boys & Girls Clubs of Holyoke, Lowell, Lawrence, Lynn, Roxbury, Springfield, and Worcester, Massachusetts. The study was funded by a grant from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety.

“This report will draw much-needed attention to the very real problem of witness intimidation in gang violence,” said Edward Davis, commissioner of the Boston Police Department. “I applaud the National Center for Victims of Crime for its leadership on this critical issue and for helping the law enforcement and criminal justice communities see how building stronger relationships between youth and the police can contribute to solving this problem.”

The full-text version of *Snitches Get Stitches: Youth, Gangs, and Witness Intimidation in Massachusetts*, is available at www.ncvc.org.

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The National Center for Victims of Crime is dedicated to forging a national commitment to help victims of crime rebuild their lives. The National Center’s National Crime Victim Helpline, 1-800-FYI-CALL, offers victims supportive counseling, practical information about crime and victimization, referrals to local community resources, and skilled advocacy in the criminal justice and social service systems.