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The power of anonymity: An exploratory study into the role of Crimestoppers in reporting and investigating crime in England and Wales

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Abstract

The UK charity Crimestoppers supports the police by taking and passing on information about crime. However, its service has been subject to little examination. This paper explores how Crimestoppers acts as an enabler to reporting crime and assists the police in solving crime. A small-scale qualitative study, using semi-structured interviews, was conducted with participants drawn from Crimestoppers' contact centre and two Welsh police forces. Following a thematic analysis, the overarching finding submits that 'anonymity' is the golden thread which preserves Crimestoppers existence. The charity has a strong relationship with the police and exists in a network of plural policing.

Keywords

Crimestoppers, pluralisation, neighbourhood policing, police intelligence

Introduction

Crimestoppers is a global phenomenon but constituted in the UK as an independent charity. Originally established as the Community Action Trust in 1988, it acts as a conduit to allow members of the public to report matters indirectly to the police, either through

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telephone or online, remaining anonymous as they do so. Through appeals for information and awareness campaigns, it takes over half a million reports each year, 'giving people the power to speak up and stop crime – 100% anonymously' (Crimestoppers, 2020a: 1). Working with all 45 territorial UK police forces, the charity responds to the under-reporting of crime, a recognised issue despite the increasing demands on police forces in England and Wales (The Police Foundation, 2020). Furthermore, an acknowledged need for reform means the police service cannot provide the consistently high levels of service the public would hope to receive (HM Inspectorate Constabulary Fire and Rescue Service, 2020). Therefore, it could be argued that the growing role of other providers, such as Crimestoppers, should be explored within policing debates (Loader, 2020). However, as an under-researched organisation, little is known about the workings of the service, which is almost as anonymous as its callers (Shaw, 2019). This exploratory qualitative study, the first of its kind in Wales, seeks to develop new knowledge by attempting to understand how Crimestoppers assists in the reporting and solving of crime.

Considering broadly those in a position to report crime and criminality, a multitude of individual, situational and structural barriers may prevent them going to the police (Hardy, 2019). This feeds into a cost versus benefit decision making process which can be as significant for witnesses as it is for victims, with the former being less likely to report crime (Cambridge Research Group, 2014). Barriers to reporting crime are complex, working together to create 'layers of resistance' (Hardy, 2019: 302) and normalising rules against 'snitching' or 'grassing', which are aligned to perceptions of trust in the police (Yates, 2006; Clayman and Skinns, 2011). Indeed, the wall of silence is so strong in some communities, that Crimestoppers recently put up its biggest ever reward (£200,000) for information (Crimestoppers, 2022a). Such silence can be rooted in theories of police legitimacy based on experiences and beliefs about the police's right to power and influence (Tyler and Jackson, 2013). Negative views of the police and experiences of the criminal justice system are a key barrier to giving information about crime – effecting perceptions held by young people (Beckett and Warrington, 2014), black and minority ethnic groups (Lammy Review, 2017) but also the general population – including issues around confidence and trust. For example, when asked about their experiences of neighbourhood crime, 20% of UK adults chose not to contact the police, with 59% saying they did not think the police would do anything about it (Neighbourhood Watch, 2019).

One strategy to overcome gaps in underreporting is to rely on the wider community coming forward with information about crime, aligned to Peel's key principles that 'the police are the public and the public are the police' (Home Office, 2012). This approach may include deploying a neighbourhood-policing model to build community engagement (Mackenzie and Henry, 2009) or increasing dependence on informants (Sanders and Young, 2008). Estimates have shown that around a third of crimes are solved by the police's use of informants, which includes information provided anonymously to Crimestoppers (Billingsley et al., 2001). The UK-wide charity describes 'record' levels of service, with over 172,000 reports sent to the police (a 5% increase on the previous year), leading to an estimated 10,000 arrests across the UK (Crimestoppers, 2020b). Current estimations around the economic costs and benefits are unclear, however, it has historically been suggested that benefits from Crimestoppers equal or

even exceed its costs, particularly when taking into account savings in police time and the prevention of crime (Gresham et al., 2003).

It is notable that details around Crimestoppers' successes are not shared with the public due to its 'anonymity guarantee'. No personal details are taken, or contacts traced (Crimestoppers, 2020a). Furthermore, there is a paucity of research available about the charity. In 2003, the Home Office sought to evaluate the impact of Crimestoppers, reviewing the organisational structure, processes and performance, including the impact of Crimestoppers on police investigations (Gresham et al., 2003). However, there has been significant organisational change in the 20 years since that research was completed. Limited academic research has explored aspects of its use and there are few international comparisons. Most recently, a content and discourse analysis of an Australian initiative took a media-criminological perspective, raising questions around 'citizen surveil-labour' (Lincoln and Mcgillivray, 2019).

Therefore, a significant gap exists in policing studies around the work of Crimestoppers, which may be explained by assumptions that our understanding around this area can be found within existing data. Loader (2020) recognises that a common way to approach the question of the police mission is by empirically examining patterns of public demand which fails to consider demographic differences within crime reporting. This is compounded by a preoccupation of researching policing in the last few decades (Newburn, 2008). However, policing is not only delivered by the police but through a network of providers – including Crimestoppers. Policing is a complex, multi-layered pluralised network which has moved beyond government control (Bayley and Shearing, 2001; Loader, 2000; Crawford, 2008; Rogers, 2017):

> 'If one thinks seriously about how to prevent crime, or about the sources of order and security, then the police would not be our principal object of attention' (Loader, 2020: 4)

Given this, research into providers such as Crimestoppers can help develop a greater understanding of the way in which the public can engage in the reporting of crime and criminal intelligence. Therefore, the primary research question considered by this study is:

What is the role of Crimestoppers in the reporting of crime and solving police investigations in England and Wales?

Three secondary questions are also considered:

1) What are the barriers and enablers to reporting crime?
2) Within the context of the pluralisation of policing, how can Crimestoppers assist the police in solving crime?
3) How could Crimestoppers evolve to respond to changing demands of service users and new crime trends?

Consequently, the purpose of this study is to explore an under researched area to uncover themes that may act as a catalyst for further research into Crimestoppers.

Methodology

Research design

The study was conducted between July and September 2020, during which 15 semi-structured interviews were carried out, which provided a rich data set. This data were subject to manual analysis which identified five main themes. The research aimed to explore the role of Crimestoppers through the lived experience of those working within the organisation and from the perspective of police officers working in two Welsh police forces. A qualitative research instrument was employed to consider the meanings and interpretations of social processes (between the public, Crimestoppers and the police) and the context in which they occur (Sumner, 2006). The use of semi-structured interviewing gives flexibility for participants to use their 'own voice' and discuss their own experiences without the limits of pre-determined quantitative enquiry or survey (Sofaer, 1999). Given that Crimestoppers is over 30 years old and the last substantive research was 20 years ago (see Gresham et al., 2003), the opportunity to gather a rich source of qualitative data can assist in considering 'complex phenomena' that may have developed over time (Crow and Semmens 2008: 119).

Sampling

The data, using semi-structured interviews, were generated from three organisations, namely a convenience sample of professional adults working in two police forces within Wales and the UK charity Crimestoppers. Given the researcher did not interview people who report anonymously themselves, the sample consisted of a blend of participants and informants. Key informants can bring expert knowledge but may be limited in terms of their interests and representation (Lokot, 2021). Fifteen participants were interviewed in total for this research (six females/nine males); a reasonable sample size for an exploratory study, which rather than seeking conclusive answers, is developing new insights where little is known about an area (Bows, 2018). Five participants engaged from the Crimestoppers Contact-Centre, including call-agents and those with supervisory responsibility, with varying lengths of experience. The Contact-Centre is based within England and the call-agents take calls from across the UK. Ten participants were drawn from two police forces in Wales; half at Police Constable or Detective Constable rank and half at a supervisory rank (the most senior at Superintendent level). Over half of the police participants had a significant length of service. To maintain the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were allocated to interviewees – Crimestoppers (C1 to C5) and Police (P1 to P10).

Data collection and analysis

Due to the constraints of the Covid-19 pandemic, interviews were carried out mainly by telephone and were recorded and transcribed. There is a strong connection between data collection and analysis, including with reference to the literature, to achieve validity and

generalisability (Davies et al., 2011). Whilst a normative position may consider that views of those working within law enforcement are trustworthy, this research aims to support the validity of qualitative analysis by consideration of *credibility, dependability, conformability, transferability*, and *authenticity* which can be improved by a rich data set and advanced skills in analysis (Elo et al., 2014). However, it is accepted that, unlike quantitative data, there are no clear rules or procedures for analysis (Crow and Semmens, 2008). Therefore, an inductive approach was taken to the thematic analysis, using a framework-based method which supports the ordering and synthesising of data (Ritchie et al., 2003). Building on the initial frame of the interview questions, the researcher used a phased approach as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) – manual coding, searching for themes, ordering and refining themes into a detailed analysis, to tell the story of the research.

Ethical considerations

This study adheres to Swansea University's research integrity policy and the British Society of Criminology's Statement of Ethics (BSC, 2015). The formal application and arrangements made with the participating organisations and university ethics committee outlined the processes and mitigating factors to uphold proper ethical principles throughout the study.

Findings

Thematic analysis identified five main themes concerning the role of Crimestoppers in the reporting of crime and solving police investigations in England and Wales. Three related themes were identified: barriers to crime reporting, enablers to contacting Crimestoppers and the role of incentivisation. A fourth theme around 'evolving intelligence' is not shared in detail here but referenced within the discussion about the future of Crimestoppers. A fifth overarching theme – 'anonymity', acts as a common, golden thread, running throughout the findings.

Theme 1: perceptions of fear and procedural injustice impacting on crime-reporting activity

Most participants (13 out of 15) spoke about the fear of repercussions, as a primary barrier for the public in reporting crime (particularly serious crime) to the police and the public worry that officers will be observed outside their house, leading to the risk of being labelled a 'snitch'. Furthermore, eight participants considered the fear of those living in deprived and close-knit communities was amplified:

> *A lot of crime tends to happen on estates and I think the biggest barrier for reporting stuff to us is that they don't want the repercussions. It's usually the same people causing the issues and the crime, so it's a massive issue for people to report things or put pen-to-paper* (P1)

It was noted that 12 out of 15 participants discussed barriers to reporting crime as a result of public perceptions, experiences of police responses and wider criminal justice processes. Participants described a concern that the police will unwantedly 'turn up on the doorstep' and 'they don't want to be seen to be talking to the police' (P8). Moreover, it was suggested the response can be indiscreet, which acts as a driver to Crimestoppers:

> *Crimestoppers give [the public] a lot more safety than the police. I do not think police reassure them that they can help them, without shouting from the rooftops that it was them that reported something* (C3)

All contact-centre participants described a frustration around police capacity to answer 101 or whether they will take any action as a result of their report:

> *You hear people are frustrated. They're trying to report something and they can't, and it feels like no-one's interested* (C3)

Arguably of more concern, is the increase in 'time critical' calls received by Crimestoppers due to the public worry they are being recorded:

> *[The caller says] 'Yeah I've seen the [TV] programmes and they playback the calls. I know they are recording'. They just don't want to be involved at any level. That has probably doubled. At least 10% of our contacts are time critical, threats to life and crime in action. They are coming to us, knowing that we are anonymous* (C4)

A third of participants described how, for some people, speaking to the police is not an option for social and cultural reasons. A neighbourhood officer talked about generations of people in certain communities that are unlikely to go to the police, including his own family:

> *My mother, in her 60s, lives on a council estate, if she sees things, she's highly unlikely to ring police. Same with my grandmother, she's the font of knowledge in the village where she lives, she wouldn't be going to the police as a first port of call* (P4)

This was supported by another police participant:

> *You get people who its historically engrained – anti-police – will never tell you anything regardless whether it's against their principles or not* (P8)

However, seven (police) participants felt that the public are also silenced by wider criminal justice processes and are reluctant to engage in prosecutions. This was clearly described by a neighbourhood policing officer, who stated experiences around giving evidence was a barrier:

> *A lack of confidence [exists] either in the information they give, what are we going to do with it, is it going to be disclosed, or is it going to result in an outcome, is it going to make any*

notable difference and some of it is a lack of confidence in the justice system as well. Most people will happily tell you what's happened. But they won't put pen to paper. Largely because, and we've seen it time and time again, they go to court, they give their evidence, and the outcome at court is not what people expect (P3)

Theme 2: reassurance and trust enables citizen information-sharing

All 15 participants considered Crimestoppers to be an established service for giving information on visible crime, especially drugs and driving offences, anonymously:

The word anonymous is linked to Crimestoppers and most people realise that (C2)

70-80% of the logs we get from Crimestoppers are probably drug related (P10)

Information about drugs was viewed as helpful, as it can support applications for search warrants and leads to further intelligence:

If they're involved in drugs then they will probably be involved in something else. We're good at feeding that sort of information to the police, that builds their intelligence (C5)

Notably, 12 out of 15 participants considered Crimestoppers acts as an enabler to reporting crime by providing reassurance and promoting trust:

[Crimestoppers] protects people and its reassurance for them. They're not going to be in trouble by giving that information (P7)

People trust reporting information into Crimestoppers (P4)

This is arguably reinforced by Crimestoppers' charity status and values:

They don't want to tell the police but they are quite happy to tell a charity such as Crimestoppers. That's not grassing to the police, that's telling a nice pink and fluffy organisation (P8)

Everything is taken at face value, it's not judged (C4)

Furthermore, 12 out of 15 participants referenced Crimestoppers specific role in taking information related to serious violence and organised crime. With six participants referencing its value in taking information about weapons.

We do have some really good specific information…like such-and-such has a firearm in his shed. It's stored behind a blue pot. And stuff linked to organised crime groups, so-and-so is keeping [drug-dealing] phones at this address (P3).

County lines…there's often talk they're carrying weapons…so the risks speak for themselves. So that's why people are more keen to report via Crimestoppers anonymously because they know it's safe (P10)

Notably, participant views suggested that the level of trust Crimestoppers can offer is critical for homicide investigations:

Researcher: *if there is a murder, how do you think giving anonymous information can help?*

P6: *Its key, if it's a tight-knit community, you're not going to say my neighbour did it, are you? Otherwise that's going to cause all sorts of issues for you. Or you can do it anonymously, have trust in Crimestoppers that your name is not going to come back.*

It is suggested that trust and anonymity are vital for people reporting on Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) who have their own intelligence networks:

Serious criminality have incredible capability sometimes, in relation to having their own intelligence system, finding out who's reporting on them (P5)

Therefore, the combination of anonymity, reassurance, and trust acts as a catalyst for important information passed to Crimestoppers that would not be otherwise passed to the police.

I don't think we would get half of things reported to us if people didn't have the comfort of remaining anonymous (P1)

All 15 participants considered that Crimestoppers improves the police intelligence picture, with 11 out of 15 participants using the concept of the 'missing piece of the jigsaw' or 'golden nugget' where the information is a critical source of information. It can help drive the direction of the investigation, or it's an important source of confirmation:

I think it [Crimestoppers information] is really important. It's often a missing piece, an insight into something bigger, or builds on something bigger (P3)

Theme 3: incentivising intelligence through Crimestoppers rewards

Police participants were of the opinion that 'money talks', particularly to those on the peripheries of criminality:

Sometimes, the best placed individuals who can assist investigations are the ones closest to the criminality and the ones who want or demand financial renumeration (P5)

From experience, drug-users, primarily they're unemployed, no income, they want something in return – a reward of some sort. I've dealt with CHIS' and know from experience that they don't want to give information for nothing (P10)

Generally, all police participants were positive about the availability of Crimestoppers monetary rewards, with Crimestoppers staff more sceptical about whether they motivate people. The question of the importance of rewards drew strong and varying responses with a consensus around the value of rewards for serious criminality:

Where people are holding information, especially around organised crime, it's the risk versus reward. I'm not convinced that being able to sleep better at night, knowing you've given that information is a good enough reward for most within that community (P3)

If Crimestoppers information helps to catch and convict a murderer then it's worth every penny (P2)

However, it was questioned whether the several thousand pounds offered by Crimestoppers may be enough for the most serious crimes and criminals:

I'm going to be controversial, but I don't think they play a big part in it. I think on larger crimes, unless you offer a significant amount of money, because the higher the crime, the higher the risk, the more impact you have if you give that information. (P6)

This view was supported by C1:

When a murder has happened, there is only three or four people involved …they are not going to report each other. Even for five grand.

Moreover, all Crimestoppers call-agents considered rewards were *not* a key motivator for giving information:

Generally, the people who give the best information are not interested in a reward (C2)

Rewards can attract two kinds of people. People 'think' they know what's happened…but actually they're just after the money. And it can also attract genuine people who know the details (C3)

There was some participant concern that people would try to seek out information to get a reward:

It wouldn't sit right with me if people put themselves at risk just to make themselves eligible for a reward (P4)

Crimestoppers staff considered the value of rewards is in raising media interest.

Researcher: *What if Crimestoppers stopped rewards?*

C3: *I think we'd still get information. I understand with higher profile, it makes people look, and pay attention. But from experience people give information, not for money but because it's the right thing to do. If the reward wasn't there, I don't think it would matter.*

Intelligence officers found reward appeals were 'a double-edged sword' and as a result, put a greater emphasis on considering motivations when reviewing the Crimestoppers log:

It can double or treble your workload, with false information. On the other hand ...it may give someone that extra incentive to tell the police what they know (P8)

This was supported by 'P5' who explained that criminals feed false information to draw away from the real perpetrator and create a 'smoke screen' which emphasises the importance of parallel sourcing of Crimestoppers information:

I think it makes the police and other law enforcement agencies check the information, generate parallel sourced evidence or intelligence to ensure that the investigation remains transparent and credible

Even where the information is excellent, there was a healthy scepticism from all police intelligence participants:

At the back of my mind, I question the Crimestoppers intelligence when it comes through as really detailed valuable stuff, where has this come from? ... Does that person have an axe to grind? Are they trying to take out a rival? (P8)

Discussion

Potential implications for the growth of Crimestoppers' anonymous online reporting

Reviewing the findings together, it is evident that that anonymity acts as a 'golden thread' strengthening the work of Crimestoppers. For neighbourhood police officers, anonymity allows close-knit communities to share information safely. For police intelligence personnel, anonymity enables them to receive information to support or establish investigations. And for call-agents, promoting anonymity helps to give people reassurance and build trust. Anonymity overcomes the fear of reporting crime dependent on the personal, social and cultural circumstances of the reporter, and the seriousness of the crime. Whilst anonymity was viewed largely positively throughout the interviews, the concept is multi-faceted, and there is a dark-side to it, particularly when used online:

> '*online anonymity can be arguably compared to a weapon: on one hand, it can be used to harm; but on the other hand, it is an instrument for self-defence'* (Sardá et al., 2019: 560)

Indeed, some participants described how criminals use Crimestoppers to harm other criminals and it is unknown how far malicious reports are problematic. Limited examples exist of the service being misused (The Irish News, 2016; BBC News, 2022). A further instance that considers 'vengence' is provided through a US study (Cintron, 2000). Therefore, anonymity can offer security but also deny responsibility, which is amplified in the online arena (Jordan, 2019). However, negative assumptions about anonymity can also be challenged, such as the social media platform Twitter reporting that 99% of its accounts suspended due to online racist abuse were *not* anonymous (Twitter UK, 2021). Moreover, in a digital era, within increased connectivity, Crimestoppers supports crowd sourcing of information within a context of collective intelligence (Estellés-Arolas, 2020) and online campaigns and appeals act as a driver to online Crimestoppers reporting. Indeed, Crimestoppers report a 131% increase in information submitted online during the last 5 years (Crimestoppers, 2020b).

Notably, the College of Policing warn that 'the digital era has ushered in new technologies which both undermine and allow people to sidestep existing actors, institutions and systems' (CoP, 2020: 5). This could act as an opportunity for Crimestoppers to work in a more agile fashion, as an alternative policing provider by exploring innovations, such as using 'chat-bots' and receiving digital images (Crimestoppers, 2020b). It has been argued that trust and anonymity should be integral to the design and effective use of future crime reporting platforms (Cole and Stickings, 2017). Moreover, the integrity of the anonymity promise is critical to Crimestoppers' future success (Griffiths and Murphy, 2001).

Drivers and enablers legitimising citizen participation in crime reporting

The significance of the fear of criminality driving the use of Crimestoppers is not a modern concern. Over thirty years ago, soon after the charity was established in the UK, Pfuhl argued that the fear of crime, together with public pessimism has legitimised the use of Crimestoppers' service (Pfuhl, 1992). In the 2020s little has changed; research supporting the recently published Strategic Review of Policing has found that fear of crime and criminals continues to be a rising concern, whilst positive public ratings of the police have declined, affected by social group (Police Foundation, 2020). The findings support the notion that fear can be intertwined with anxieties around 'place' and social solidarity (Sparks et al., 2001). These interrelated layers of concern at an individual, social and structural level demonstrate the complexities of barriers to reporting crime (Hardy, 2019). The implications of this means for some, reporting crime to the police is simply not possible and 58% of surveyed Crimestoppers users had not contacted the police (Crimestoppers, 2020b).

Public frustrations, as described by participants, can impact on perceptions of legitimacy and motivations to report crime. Indeed, Tyler and Jackson argued that the most important finding from their study on the legitimacy landscape was the notion that

'legitimacy plays a role in motivating law related behaviour' particularly around the desired pro-active citizen engagement to fight crime and criminals (2014, 89). Furthermore, it is the fairness of the treatment by authorities that will shape perceptions of legitimacy, so it follows that negative experiences described by research participants led to people being less likely to give information to the police. Almost half of all witnesses who attended court said they would never do so again, due to poor communication and lengthy delays (Victims' Commissioner, 2020). Whilst applying the concept of procedural justice to policing may oversimplify the debate (see Newburn, 2022), it is argued that Tyler and Jackson's conclusions that legitimacy can motivate engagement and help communities to build themselves socially, can be seen in how the public have responded positively to interactions with the Crimestoppers contact centre. Crimestoppers provides added value through the concept of 'anonymous justice' by providing the public with an opportunity to share information that does not include the 'costs' of becoming involved in the criminal justice system (Marlow and Miller, 2000).

Citizens are more actively engaged in tackling crime than previously considered and their participation, both support and information, sits firmly within contemporary policing (Lincoln and McGillivray, 2019; Lee and McGovern, 2015). Arguably, the Crimestoppers model is a strong example of discreet citizen participation within policing: 'the essential message from Crimestoppers to the community is that they can seize the initiative and take control of their neighbourhoods' (Griffiths and Murphy, 2001: 142). Taking a more critical perspective, the use of 'informants' within Crimestoppers is arguably normalised within a 'subtle social control' of everyday life and through the law-and-order approaches to crime prevention policy (White, 2017). Indeed, Crimestoppers is legitimised through support of key officials, police and the media (Pfuhl, 1992) as well as the importance the public place on its charity status (Crimestoppers, 2020a). It is therefore not surprising that participants described how Crimestoppers acts as an enabler, by building reassurance and trust, particularly in relation to serious violence and organised crime. However, it is debatable whether Crimestoppers is the solution to building confidence in reporting serious crime or whether it is instead, simply a sticking plaster for disengaged communities. For example, whilst information about weapons has grown by 179% in 3 years (Crimestoppers, 2020b), promoting Crimestoppers has been viewed as a short-term alternative to engaging communities around knife crime (Metropolitan Police, 2019). Furthermore, it has been suggested that anonymity is not always the right enabler to reporting crime (Nicksa, 2015) and this is particularly evident around participant concern regarding the growth of time critical information provided to Crimestoppers.

Crimestoppers as a fixture of the plural policing landscape

Crimestoppers exists within a framework of plural policing, by assisting police investigations and supporting intelligence-led policing. Using Loader's typology, the charity delivers 'through government' by means of its funding, 'below government' using 'responsibilised citizens' and 'beyond government' through its lesser-known role in running whistleblowing lines (Loader, 2000: 324; Crimestoppers, 2020a). This multi-faced persona could be considered problematic; promoting confusion for its service users,

a lack of independence from funders and a complex positionality that 'evades a democratic gaze' (Loader, 2000: 340).

Whilst Crimestoppers is the primary UK anonymous crime reporting mechanism, there are confidential alternative reporting and helplines for specific crimes (e.g. domestic violence, see Snowdon et al., 2020). However, Crimestoppers is uniquely able to incentivise the sharing of intelligence through the provision of rewards. Participants' position on rewards mirrors previous research, that whilst officers see a value in retaining rewards, their availability is a motivating factor in only a minority of cases (Gresham et al., 2003). This is supported by research which found that citizens were not aware of rewards, nor it was not a motivator (Metropolitan Police, 2019). Other Crimestoppers schemes have chosen to stop their reward programme and reinvest reward monies into community safety (Toronto Crimestoppers, 2020).

Aside from rewards, Crimestoppers have sought to strengthen their service by introducing a 'keep in contact' process where users can set up an anonymous log-in to clarify information provided (Crimestoppers, 2022b). Notably, London's Metropolitan police service have made use of this tactic in their recent anti-corruption operations (Metropolitan Police, 2022). All participants unanimously considered this a helpful development by Crimestoppers as long as safeguards exist so sources were not 'tasked'. Whilst the scale of this contact method is unknown and would benefit from further exploration, police participants were keen to take immediate steps within their organisations to realise its potential. Using 'research-in-action', albeit in a limited sense here, can arguably enhance policing practices (see Clayman and Skinns, 2011; Stott et al., 2015).

Conclusion

This research was finalised as the U.K. experienced a second wave of Covid-19 and public debate over 'lockdown' rules questioned whether 'snitching' is justifiable or whether it destroys social connections (Plas, 2020). Moreover, witness anxiety has become heightened due to a backlog of Court cases (Morrell, 2020). This arguably creates conditions for Crimestoppers to continue to grow. Indeed, this exploratory study suggests that Crimestoppers is a trusted enabler, with strong public legitimacy, to support communities in overcoming barriers to give information confidently about crime. It's positionality within plural policing gives it a unique role to engage with police forces, as well as the criminal world. Findings have assisted in developing understandings around Crimestoppers but there is an opportunity to extend this further. Future research may wish to consider aspects around its 'Fearless' youth service, public engagement and campaigns, and the role of volunteering. A larger piece of research could consider the comprehensive nature of its impact, including cost, benefits and outcomes.

The continued growth of Crimestoppers sits within a 'changing trust landscape', where public demands for fairness and transparency grow in the context of global and technological transformation (CoP, 2020). This includes a greater spread of digital disinformation and more complex crimes, leading to further challenges to police legitimacy as well as potential opportunities for Crimestoppers – as 'novel and non-traditional policing

approaches might be needed to bridge the gap between effective community relations and public safety' (CoP, 2020: 22). Notably, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the charity responded by sharing information for public health research relating to the rise of unreported violence (Snowdon et al., 2020) and establishing a 'hotline' to prevent fraudulent government loan applications (Cabinet Office, 2020).

Notwithstanding its 35-year-service in the UK, it is unclear from this study how Crimestoppers' anonymity guarantee will continue to transcend digital advances. It is questionable how intelligence capabilities can be maintained in the face of technological change, while respecting principles of proportionality, necessity and privacy (Royal United Services Institute, 2015) and whether anonymous reporting is even possible in the digital age (Cole and Stickings, 2017). Despite this, sanitised case studies, seldom shared, help to understand the important role Crimestoppers plays in solving and preventing serious criminality – from information about an inner-city murder which led to a gang leader being convicted and given a life sentence, to specific information that led the police to seizing a dozen machine guns – and notably, the capture of the 'M25 rapist' (Crimestoppers, 2018 and 2019; BBC News, 2008). When Crimestoppers' anonymous service is so vital in generating these kinds of results, it is difficult to imagine policing without it.

Limitations

It is acknowledged that there are limitations regarding the method of participant selection and sample size within this exploratory research. Any replication of this study in the future may benefit from a widening of the participant pool to diversify the perspectives encountered and deepen the understanding of the issues that emerge. There has been little independent research on the work of Crimestoppers and this restricts comparisons.

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