

Research Shows an Incentive to Snitch Produces False Information

March 24 2009

(PhysOrg.com) -- The secondary confession - also known as snitching - is widely accepted as valid evidence in criminal prosecution. Yet, the first behavioral study to investigate whether people will provide false secondary confessions has raised significant concerns about the use of such evidence when informants are offered incentives, according to University of Arkansas psychology researchers Jessica K. Swanner and Denise R. Beike.

“The results of our study were interesting but discouraging,” Beike said. “With the use of incentives, we should have seen an increase in true [secondary confessions](#). But an incentive actually did the opposite. It brought forward not the reluctant informant, but the opportunistic.”

Swanner and Beike reported the results of their research in the *Journal of Law and Human Behavior* in an article titled “[Snitching](#), Lies and Computer Crashes: An Experimental Investigation of Secondary Confessions.”

“Because secondary confessions are so important to criminal investigations, it is essential that investigators as well as [jurors](#) understand the circumstances that are likely to lead to true secondary confessions, and those that might lead to false secondary confessions,” the researchers wrote.

In the psychology lab, participants engaged in a computer exercise that ended in a simulated crash of the computer and a purported loss of data.

Data was analyzed from 129 participants who were paired with confederates of the researchers. After the crash, confederates either denied or “admitted” that they had caused the crash.

Some participants were given an incentive to tell whether the confederate had admitted to causing the problem. They were told that the faculty adviser would be informed and that the person who had caused the problem would be required to come back for a second session.

Participants were asked to sign a statement affirming a secondary confession of guilt. That is, they stated that the other person - the confederate - had admitted crashing the computer. Not surprisingly, participants were more likely to sign when the confederate had admitted to causing the crash. In these cases, the offer of an incentive did not increase the rate of signing. In fact, with an incentive, the rate of signing increased only when the confederate had denied causing the crash. In other words, an incentive increased the rate of false rather than true secondary confessions.

Not only did incentives increase the rate of false secondary confessions, but also participants were less likely “to see freely admitted misdeeds as unintentional.” That is, some of those who signed statements also amended the statements, excusing the crash as a mistake due to external factors such as the speed of the test. The researchers found that offering an incentive for secondary confessions “eliminated this ‘honest mistake’ pattern.”

In their conclusion, Swanner and Beike discussed the implications of the use of incentives with informants.

“The concern is partly based on confessions being assumed to be the end-all and be-all of trial evidence, when at least in the case of secondary

confessions they should be treated as hearsay,” Swanner said.

She and Beike suggested several safeguards, including video recordings of all interviews and interrogations of informants and suspects as well as pretrial hearings and expert testimony to allow jurors to better assess the validity of secondary confessions entered as evidence.

“It is essential for jurors, prosecutors and judges to be informed about the potentially biasing nature of incentives to confess,” they concluded. “Snitches may indeed lie or come to believe a falsehood about another to be the truth. Jurors must be able to consider this possibility as they make their verdicts.”

Denise R. Beike is an associate professor of psychology in the J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Arkansas. Jessica K. Swanner is a doctoral student in psychology.

Provided by University of Arkansas ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Research Shows an Incentive to Snitch Produces False Information (2009, March 24) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-03-incentive-snitch-false.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.