

Criminologists detail the personal and professional costs of using confidential informants

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Credit: Georgia State University

Interviews with law enforcement officers who work with confidential drug informants reveal that the practice, while aiding in investigations

and arrests, can also extract huge personal, professional and organizational costs, according to research published in a new book this month.

For "Speaking Truth to Power: Confidential Informants and Police Investigations," criminologists Dean Dabney of Georgia State University and Richard Tewksbury of the University of Louisville interviewed [police](#) officers from more than a dozen local, state and federal agencies—including two large metropolitan police departments—to reveal the complex nature of a police-citizen information exchange central to most criminal investigations.

Given the multilayered reality of narcotics trafficking—a sophisticated, clandestine system that includes people in many roles in multiple locations—law enforcement routinely pressures known offenders to provide inside information in exchange for leniency or remuneration. Estimates suggest that as many as a third of all crimes cleared by police involve the use of informers.

The book places this heavy reliance on confidential informants in the context of the wide-ranging war on drugs. It also cautions against a growing dependence on this shadowy approach to police work.

Dabney and Tewksbury find the outsider status of [police officers](#) pushes them toward relying upon informants for inside information on criminal subcultures. They are also pulled toward using informants by police agencies that increasingly evaluate officers on their success in disrupting criminal activity as measured by the number of warrants and arrests they produce.

The book describes four types of informants: police sources who unknowingly provide intelligence while being questioned by police, civic-minded citizen informers who seek to partner with the police to fight

crime, indentured informants who exchange information for leniency in the wake of their arrest and entrepreneurial informants who trade information for money.

"Confidential informants come in several varieties and can bring huge value to an investigation," said Dabney, an associate professor in the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies. "They provide information that is often impossible to access, or that requires an excessive amount of time or diligence."

However, the negative impacts can also be substantial, he said. Personal costs to investigators include the time and attention required to manage informants and the possibility the relationship or job will "invade" his or her personal life. An investigator's relationship with an informant may become too personal, as exemplified by the relationships of Boston crime boss/informant James "Whitey" Bulger and FBI agents James Connelly and John Morris as portrayed in books and the movie "Black Mass."

Professional costs center on the reliability—or lack thereof—of an informant's information, their lack of dependability, and their inability or incompetence at following through on actions and information-gathering. There is also a high probability of deception by informants who provide information and engage in criminal activities.

For police organizations, the increasing reliance on confidential informants links agency success to inside [information](#) provided by known criminals and potentially jeopardizes already tenuous police-community relations.

"Although they must approach their informants with apprehension, skepticism and their eyes wide open to potential backlash and negative consequences," Dabney said, "they seem to believe this aspect of the job

is commonly perceived as necessary to policing."

"Speaking Truth to Power" was published by the [University of California Press](#).

Provided by Georgia State University

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