

TEXTING TIPLINE

For years, many US states and cities have used a [Crime Stoppers](#) program. Typically, they involve tipsters calling a special telephone number and leaving an anonymous tip about suspected criminal activities. However, with the increased popularity of cell phones, text messaging or "texting" crime tips is becoming popular across the US - and it's anonymous, too.

Texts in Action

"Text-a-Tip" programs are taking hold in cities across the US, from [Boston, Massachusetts](#) to [Puget Sound, Washington](#). And it's not just state and local governments who're getting involved. [College campuses](#) and even local [public school](#) systems see the value is text messaging.

Two [well-publicized](#) incidents show why:

- In Boston, a mother reported to police that her child was killed during a home invasion. An anonymous text message, however, led police to discover that the child was accidentally shot while he and his cousin were playing with a loaded handgun
- Colorado police were able to stop a [Columbine-style](#) school shooting based upon an anonymous text message that led police to a cache of weapons in the would-be-attacker's home

Why's It Becoming So Popular?

There are two main reasons. One from the law enforcement side, the other from the tipster's point of view. First, cell phones are everywhere, from the highways to shopping malls to your living room. Practically everyone has one, so tips can be sent almost at the same time as the tipster sees or hears something suspicious. This is a great advantage to the police.

The second and perhaps most important reason is that the police go to great lengths to make sure that tipsters know that their texts are absolutely anonymous. And that makes sense. It seems like law enforcement agencies have been stymied by the public's "no snitching" rules forever.

Witnesses are afraid to come forward with information about crimes out of fear of retaliation by the suspect or his friends and cohorts. If the system wasn't anonymous, people wouldn't use it; it simply wouldn't work.

"Yeah, right," you say? In most cases, tips are sent to a computer service that's completely unrelated to the police department. The tipster's identity is scrambled or stripped away from the text before the tip is forwarded to the police. For example, in [Springfield, Massachusetts](#), the tips are sent to a computer in Canada where the tipster's identity is scrambled before the tip is sent to the police station. The police have no idea of the tipster's identity, and it seems to stay that way.

In Boston - which began its program in 2007 and is [credited](#) with being the first US city to promote a text-a-tip program - the police have never asked the third-party computer service to release a tipster's identity. Nor has it ever asked for a court order or "[subpoena](#)" requiring the company to disclose an identity.

Of course, there may be exceptions. For example, leading police on a goose chase can get you in [trouble](#), whether your anonymous tip is called in or texted. If you intentionally give police a tip that you know is false, don't be surprised if they show up at your door with a few questions for you.

Do the Right Thing

It may sound corny, but crime hurts everyone. The victim, of course, may get injured or killed, or lose some property. Unchecked, the perpetrator most likely will commit another crime. Your neighborhood is less safe, and property values fall. If you see or hear something about a crime, report it. With the new texting programs - and the tried-and-true anonymous phone calls - there's no reason not to.

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