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Field Hearing on Federal Efforts to Address Witness Intimidation at the State and Local  
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**WITNESS INTIMIDATION AND THE SNITCHING PROJECT**

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## Introduction

Mr. Chairmen and Committee Members:

Thank you for the honor of appearing before you today. My name is Richard Frei and I am an associate professor of psychology at Community College of Philadelphia. My area of expertise is applied community research, specializing in using large scale survey research as a teaching tool in my psychology courses. Over the past decade, I have overseen a number of large scale community surveys on topics such as the use of check cashing centers, corporal punishment, attitudes towards guns and gun violence, and, over the past two years, the Stop Snitching phenomenon and its impact on community involvement in the Philadelphia criminal justice system.

Today, we have heard heartbreaking and disturbing testimony from victims and advocates regarding rampant witness intimidation that is prevalent in Philadelphia. My goal today is to frame that testimony in the larger context of the Stop Snitching movement. For example, in the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* recent extensive reporting on the failures of our criminal justice system, the reporters describe the case of Martin Thomas, whose statement to police was turned into a threatening flier that was posted throughout North Philadelphia. While the primary goal of the flier was to physically threaten the witness, it also served a secondary purpose; identifying Thomas as a "rat" who could no longer be trusted in the neighborhood. The idea that cooperating with police could, in fact, tarnish your reputation among family, friends, and neighbors, even if the perpetrator of the crime was a feared or despised person, is at the core of the Stop Snitching phenomenon. Such intimidation techniques can only work if the community "buys into" the Stop Snitching culture. My goal today is to give you a better understanding of people's attitudes towards snitching and cooperating with police, which ultimately facilitate the coercive witness intimidation techniques that we have heard so much about today.

The Stop Snitching phenomenon is widely discussed in the media, and yet poorly understood as a psychological construct. It is regularly decried as a major impediment to law enforcement, and yet scant systematic research has been conducted to identify its possible origins. Even the word *snitch* has been so misused and overused in the media that it is now synonymous with anyone who cooperates with any authority figure, regardless of the situation. For example, when National Football League Commissioner Roger Goodell recently called for players to tell their teams' medical staffs if they suspected a teammate showed symptoms of a concussion, Washington Redskins fullback Mike Sellers' responded: "We ain't no snitches over here!...That is not happening." What was once a code among thieves, and then a code of the streets, is quickly becoming a societal norm.

The Snitching Project is an ongoing student-driven public policy research initiative, in conjunction with Community College of Philadelphia's Center for Law and Society, aimed at developing a better understanding of the snitching phenomenon and facilitating community discussion through education. The project began in 2007 as part of an Applied Psychology course project at the college. Students conducted extensive library research on the topics of snitching and cooperating with police. Based on this research, the students next conducted focus groups throughout the city of Philadelphia to gain a better understanding of snitching, people's attitudes towards the police, and community involvement. From these focus groups, we concluded that: a) there is not one common definition of snitching, and b) both attitudinal and situational factors influence whether (and to what extent) a person would provide evidence to the police. We developed hypotheses regarding the nature of the snitching construct, possible antecedents and correlates of snitching attitudes, and situational factors, such as characteristics of the victim or the perpetrator, that might influence involvement. The students developed a survey to test their hypotheses, which they administered to nearly 1500 Community College students (see Appendix A for survey).

My goal today is to give you a brief summary of that research, along with some recommendations regarding ways to improve community involvement in our criminal justice system.

## **Results from the Snitching Project**

### ***I. Definition of Snitching***

Our first goal was to better understand how people were defining the word snitching. In our original focus groups, we found that it was difficult to draw conclusions about people's attitudes towards snitching because everyone was defining the word differently. We provided respondents with a list of situations and asked them to indicate whether each was an example of snitching or not. Our results confirmed that people differed in how they define snitching. The traditional definition of snitching, that is, ratting on someone else to get out of a crime, was the most accepted example, although the less serious situations (tattling, telling on a classroom cheater) also received high ratings (over 50%), indicating the word has different meanings in different contexts.

Overall, in terms of cooperating with police, there seemed to be a relationship between perceptions of snitching and initiative. The more the situation required the person to take initiative (e.g., it takes more initiative to call the police than it does to answer questions if you are already at the scene of a crime), the more likely it was to be viewed as snitching. Below is the list of situations and the percentage of students who indicated that the situation was an example of snitching:

- Ratting on someone else to get out of a crime: 83%
- Reporting a classmate cheating on an exam: 74%
- Tattling on a brother or sister: 56%
- Helping the police set someone else up: 50%
- Picking a suspect out of a police lineup: 29%
- Witnessing a crime and calling the police to report it: 28%
- Answer questions from police if you are at the scene of the crime: 16%

## ***II. Situational Factors That Influence Cooperation***

Based on our previous research with focus groups, we knew that situational variables may influence whether a person would cooperate with police or not. We looked at four categories of variables: Characteristics of the victim, characteristics of the perpetrator, characteristics of the crime itself, and outcomes for cooperating.

Overall, respondents were more likely to cooperate with police if the victim was a senior citizen, a child, a friend, a relative, a disabled person or the respondents themselves. They were also more likely to cooperate if the perpetrator was a police officer. Respondents were less likely to cooperate with police if the victim was a known drug dealer. Likewise, respondents were less likely to cooperate with police if the perpetrator was a friend or a relative or the crime was nonviolent in nature.

If the perpetrator had a reputation as being dangerous, 42% of respondents said that they would be more likely to cooperate with police, while 22% said it would make them less likely to cooperate with police. Likewise, if the crime involved gang members, 35% of respondents said that they would be more likely to cooperate with police, while 25% said it would make them less likely to cooperate with police.

Most of the outcomes (reward, guaranteeing a criminal gets off the street, resulting in an innocent person or the respondent to go free) would make respondents more likely to cooperate, with one notable exception. Nearly 30% of respondents said they would be less likely to cooperate if it would affect their reputations in the neighborhood, higher than any other situational variable.

### ***III. Life Experiences and Snitching Attitudes***

Our initial research indicated that people's past experience with police and the criminal justice system, as well as their propensity to engage in illegal behavior, would be more likely to view any form of cooperation with police as a form of snitching. Further, we also hypothesized that those who listened to Stop Snitching-themed music would be more likely to view any form of cooperation with police as a form of snitching. Finally, we hypothesized that those respondents who viewed themselves as religious would be less likely to view any form of cooperation with police as a form of snitching and more likely to cooperate with police across different situations.

#### ***A. Past Experience with the Police and the Criminal Justice System***

Nearly half of all respondents reported being victims of crime and two thirds had friends and relatives who had been the victims of crime. 21% of respondents had been in trouble with police before, 17% reported being falsely accused of a crime in the past, and 7% said that they had been snitched on before. Only 2% said that they had ever snitched on anyone else.

While over 60% said that they know a police officer personally, and nearly half reported cooperating with police in the past, half of the sample also said that they did not trust police. Those respondents who knew police officers personally were more likely to trust the police and less likely to view cooperating with police as a form of snitching.

Over one-third of all respondents had participated in the D.A.R.E program before, an anti-drug program that is run by police officers and has been tied to more positive perceptions of police officers. However, those who had participated in the D.A.R.E. program were no less likely to have done illegal drugs in the past 30 days, nor were they more likely to trust police or personally know a police officer than those who had not gone through the D.A.R.E. program. Nearly half of all respondents said that they would be more likely to cooperate in criminal investigations if there was someone else besides the police to which they could report crimes.

#### ***B. Illegal Behavior***

We hypothesized that respondents who were recently engaged in illegal behavior would be: 1) more likely to define snitching as cooperating with police in any situation and 2) less likely to cooperate with police in any situation. To assess illegal behavior, we asked students if they had used an illegal drug in the past 30 days, a direct measure of illegal behavior. 15% of our sample admitted to

using illegal drugs within the last 30 days. We also asked students if they had drunk alcohol in the past seven days. Since we also had students' ages, we were able to identify those respondents who engaged in illegal underage drinking, an indirect measure of illegal behavior. 13% of our sample who reported drinking alcohol in the last seven days was also under the age of 21.

Students who had engaged in these illegal behaviors were more likely to view cooperating with police in any situation as a form of snitching. Drug users in particular had significantly different life experiences than non drug users. They were significantly more likely to have been the victims of crime (62% of drug users as compared to 39% of non drug users), more likely to have friends and relatives who had been the victims of crime, and more than twice as likely to have been in trouble with the police in the past.

### **C. *Music and Snitching***

We hypothesized that respondents who listened to music that explicitly says that snitching is bad would be: 1) more likely to define snitching as cooperating with police in any situation and 2) less likely to cooperate with police in any situation. Not surprisingly, those who listened to music that said that snitching was bad were more likely to define snitching as any cooperation with police and less likely to be influenced by situational factors when deciding whether to cooperate with police or not. Interestingly, while nearly 35% of all respondents admitted that they listened to music that said that snitching is bad, only 5% said that the music they listen to influenced their attitudes towards snitching.

### **D. *Religiosity and Snitching***

We asked respondents "Do you consider yourself religious?" 60% said yes and 40% said no. We hypothesized that respondents who identified themselves as being religious would be: 1) less likely to define snitching as cooperating with police in any situation and 2) more likely to cooperate with police in any situation. There were no differences between religious and nonreligious students regarding how they defined snitching. However, across all situations, religious students were more likely to cooperate with police than nonreligious students EXCEPT when: 1) there was a reward for doing so and 2) if by doing so the respondent would go free. These differences in cooperation may be related to life experiences. Nonreligious students were more likely to have tried drugs in the past month and drunk alcohol in the past seven days, although there was no difference between religious and nonreligious students in terms of past trouble with the police or trust of the police.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The Snitching Project is currently entering Phase II of data collection, focusing more extensively on methods of increasing community involvement in our criminal justice system. However, based on our initial findings, I offer the following recommendations:

- Increasing community confidence in our criminal justice system should increase community involvement. Nearly 63% of respondents said that they would be more likely to cooperate with police if doing so would *guarantee* that a criminal was off the streets.
- Certain situational variables (such as characteristics of the victim) will result in higher levels of cooperation with police. For example, respondents were far more likely to cooperate with the police if the victim was a child or a reward was involved. Perhaps the media could focus on the familial relations of the victim (the victim has children or grandchildren) as a method of increasing cooperation.
- Efforts must be made to improve the relationship between the police and the community. Our survey found that those people who personally knew a police officer were more likely to trust police and less likely to view cooperating with police as a form of snitching. Efforts should be made to recruit police cadets from underrepresented neighborhoods and have local police officers play a bigger role in non-law enforcement neighborhood activities. Financial incentives in the form of housing grants should be given to police officers to choose to live in the communities in which they serve.
- Until we can improve relations between the police and citizens, we need to develop other mechanisms within the community that allow for community involvement without directly going to the police. As previously stated, nearly half of all respondents said that they would be more likely to cooperate in criminal investigations if there was someone else besides the police to which they could report crimes. Anonymous tip lines or Internet-based methods of reporting a crime may improve community involvement.

I'd like to thank Senator Specter and the rest of the committee for allowing me to testify on this critical issue.

## Appendix A: The Snitching Survey

# *THE SNITCHING SURVEY*

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Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in the survey. This survey was developed by the students of Dr. Rick Frei's *Introduction to Applied Psychology* course to measure attitudes about snitching and cooperating with police. The survey is anonymous and your responses will be kept confidential, so please answer honestly.

We will be presenting the overall results of this survey during Law and Society Week next semester. If you have any questions about the survey, the course, or the presentation, please contact Dr. Rick Frei at [rfrei@ccp.edu](mailto:rfrei@ccp.edu).

### Instructions:

- **PARTICIPATION IN THIS SURVEY IS OPTIONAL.** If at any time you decide that you do not want to participate, simply keep the survey and do not return it to the survey administrator.
- The survey is anonymous, so **PLEASE DO NOT PUT YOUR NAME ANYWHERE ON THE SURVEY!**
- **ALL QUESTIONS ARE OPTIONAL!** If you do not feel comfortable answering a question, you may skip it.
- If you have filled out the survey in another class, **PLEASE DO NOT FILL IT OUT AGAIN.**
- When you have completed the survey, place it back in the folder and return it to the survey administrator.



## ***I. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION***

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**Instructions:** We would like to know about you. Please answer the following questions. *If you do not feel comfortable answering a question, you may skip it.*

1. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Sex:                      Male      Female
3. Race:                    A) African American/Black  
                                B) Asian/Pacific Islander  
                                C) Latino/Hispanic  
                                D) Native American  
                                E) White
4. Marital Status:      Married      Single      Live-in Partner
5. Are you a parent?    Yes              No

## ***II. WHAT IS SNITCHING?***

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**Instructions:** We would like to know how you define the word “snitching”. For each situation below, please indicate with an “X” whether you think it is an example of snitching or not. *If you do not feel comfortable answering a question, you may skip it.*

<b>Situation</b>	<b>This is snitching.</b>	<b>This is NOT snitching.</b>
A child tattles on his brother when he does something bad.		
A student witnesses someone cheating on an exam and reports it to the teacher.		
A person witnesses a crime and calls the police to report it.		
A person who is at the scene of the crime answered questions by police.		
A person who is at the scene of a crime picks out the perpetrator in a police line up.		
A person agrees to cooperate with police in helping set someone else up.		
A person rats on someone else to reduce his sentence for a crime that he committed.		

### ***III. LIFE EXPERIENCES***

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**Instructions:** We would like to know about your life experiences. Please answer the following questions by circling Yes or No. *If you do not feel comfortable answering a question, you may skip it.*

- |   |     |    |
|---|-----|----|
| 1. Have you ever been the victim of a crime?  | Yes | No |
| 2. Have any of your relatives ever been the victim of a crime?  | Yes | No |
| 3. Have any of your friends ever been the victim of a crime?  | Yes | No |
| 4. Have you ever been in trouble with the police?   | Yes | No |
| 5. Have you ever cooperated with the police before?   | Yes | No |
| 6. Do you consider yourself religious?  | Yes | No |
| 7. In the past 30 days, have you used an illegal drug?  | Yes | No |
| 8. In the past seven days, have you drunk alcohol?  | Yes | No |
| 9. Do you listen to music that explicitly says that snitching is bad?   | Yes | No |
| 10. Does the music you listen to affect your attitude towards snitching?  | Yes | No |
| 11. Have you ever been falsely accused of a crime?  | Yes | No |
| 12. Has anyone ever snitched on you to the police?  | Yes | No |
| 13. Have you ever gotten out of trouble with police by snitching on someone else?   | Yes | No |
| 14. Do you trust the police?  | Yes | No |
| 15. Do you personally know any police officers?   | Yes | No |
| 16. Would you be more likely to cooperate in criminal investigations if there was someone else (ie., a neighborhood watch group) to report a crime to besides the police? | Yes | No |
| 17. Are you currently working in the law or law enforcement profession?   | Yes | No |
| 18. Do you plan on having a career in law or law enforcement?   | Yes | No |
| 19. Did you participate in the D.A.R.E. drug prevention course in school?   | Yes | No |
| 20. Did your parents/guardians teach you that snitching was bad?  | Yes | No |

## ***IV. WHAT INFLUENCES WHETHER YOU COOPERATE WITH POLICE?***

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**Instructions:** We would like to know what factors might influence whether you would cooperate with police or not. For each hypothetical situation below, please indicate with an "X" whether it would: a) make you less likely to cooperate with police, b) make you more likely to cooperate with police, c) have no effect on whether you cooperate with police or not. *If you do not feel comfortable answering a question, you may skip it.*

### **1) Characteristics of the VICTIM: Would you be more or less likely to cooperate with police if the VICTIM of the crime was...**

<b>Victim</b>	<b>It would make me less likely to cooperate with police</b>	<b>It would make me more likely to cooperate with police</b>	<b>It would have no effect on whether I cooperate with police</b>
a senior citizen?			
a child?			
a relative?			
a friend?			
a disabled person?			
a known drug dealer?			
yourself?			

### **2) Characteristics of the PERPETRATOR (person who committed the crime): Would you be more or less likely to cooperate with police if the PERPETRATOR of the crime was...**

<b>Perpetrator</b>	<b>It would make me less likely to cooperate with police</b>	<b>It would make me more likely to cooperate with police</b>	<b>It would have no effect on whether I cooperate with police</b>
a teenager?			
a relative?			
a friend?			
a police officer?			
someone with a "reputation" of being dangerous?			

**3) Characteristics of the CRIME: Would you be more or less likely to cooperate with police if the CRIME...**

<b>Crime</b>	<b>It would make me less likely to cooperate with police</b>	<b>It would make me more likely to cooperate with police</b>	<b>It would have no effect on whether I cooperate with police</b>
was a violent crime?			
was a non-violent crime?			
involved a gun?			
involved drugs?			
involved members of a gang?			

**4) OUTCOMES of Cooperating with Police: Would you be more or less likely to cooperate with police about a crime if...**

<b>Outcome</b>	<b>It would make me less likely to cooperate with police</b>	<b>It would make me more likely to cooperate with police</b>	<b>It would have no effect on whether I cooperate with police</b>
there was a reward for cooperating?			
doing so would <i>guarantee</i> that a criminal was off the streets?			
it would damage your reputation in the neighborhood?			
doing so would result in an innocent person going free?			
doing so would result in <i>you</i> going free?			

**Thank you very much for your participation in this survey. When you have completed the survey, place it in the folder and wait for the survey administrator.**