
NARCOTICS INVESTIGATION TECHNIQUES

PAUL T. MAHONEY

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Paul Mahoney has been a member of the Denver Police Department for over twenty years. He has been assigned to the Vice/Drug Control Bureau for the past nine years. Since 1987 he has served as a supervisor on the Denver/Aurora Crack Task Force. In addition to his experience in vice and narcotics investigations, Sgt. Mahoney was in patrol for nine years. He has also served as an instructor at the Denver Police Academy and in the department's internal affairs unit. Sgt. Mahoney received a B.S. degree in Criminology and Law Enforcement from Metropolitan State College in Denver and has a M.A. degree in American Studies from the University of Notre Dame. He has been married for twenty-five years and he and his wife, Carol, have four children.

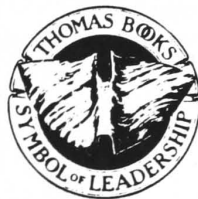
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By

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CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER

Springfield • Illinois • U.S.A.

Published and Distributed Throughout the World by

CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER
2600 South First Street
Springfield, Illinois 62794-9265

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ISBN 0-398-05803-2

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 91-40073

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*Printed in the United States of America
SC-R-3*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mahoney, Paul T.

Narcotics investigation techniques by Paul T. Mahoney.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-398-05803-2 (cloth)

1. Drug traffic—Investigation. 2. Drug traffic—United States—
Investigation. I. Title.

HV8079.N3M34 1992

363.2'5977—dc20

91 40073

CIP

This book is dedicated to all police officers who, never losing their respect for the system, go about their duties daily, trusting that they can make a difference. Through their collective “blocking and tackling,” they do make a difference. It is also dedicated to their families and, of course, to my family.

A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

This book has been written for the local police narcotics investigator and those supervising narcotics investigations and operations. It is written from a practical standpoint, describing investigative and operational techniques which have street-proven effectiveness. It is hoped that the experienced narcotics investigator will find it valuable and further, that the newly assigned investigator will be able to supplement his training through this book.

The book includes some very basic material in the area of case initiation and development and then building on and often emphasizing the basics, discusses six general areas of techniques and operations; Informants, Search Warrants, Raid Planning and Execution, Special Street Operations and Investigative Situations, Undercover Operations, and Enhanced Investigations. The book concludes with a very brief discussion of attitude and professional responsibility.

I have written the book from my perspective having spent over twenty years as a policeman and nine as a narcotics investigator and supervisor. A great many of the finest policemen I have ever worked with or observed have been narcotics investigators.

Among them I have seen dedication and a collective sense of professionalism and craftsmanship to a degree that the general public does not realize exists. Similar to other professions, the specific operations and techniques used by narcotics investigators have developed gradually and unsystematically over a number of years. The craft of a narcotics investigator is passed on informally. It is hoped that through a systematic discussion of these techniques in this book, the skill and professionalism and ultimately the ability of each narcotics investigator to survive, personally and professionally, will be enhanced.

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NARCOTICS INVESTIGATION TECHNIQUES

CASE INITIATION

INTRODUCTION

The single most important distinction between narcotics cases and most other types of police investigations is that most narcotics investigations begin before a crime is officially reported. There are, of course, those cases where an officer, generally a patrol officer, has made an arrest, has made an offense report, and has a suspect in jail for possession or distribution. Although these types of cases are important and result in a significant amount of work, they are not the bread and butter of a narcotics officer. The success of a narcotics investigator will generally be directly proportional to his or her initiative. Being a self-starter is important to the success of any investigator, but it is imperative for a narcotics investigator.

To obtain the maximum benefit of individual initiative, it is essential that intelligence information be handled properly when it is received. This chapter discusses many of the factors involved in case initiation, sources of information, prioritizing information, interagency cooperation, and case development within the context of community responsiveness.

Much of what follows, particularly in the early part of this chapter, centers on very basic issues and concepts. Some of these are not normally given much consideration as being within the responsibilities of the individual narcotics investigator or supervisor. However, each investigator and supervisor should have some role in ensuring that they receive

information which is so critical to their success and that the information is initially evaluated and distributed effectively.

There is, no doubt, a great deal of worthwhile information which is lost because the people and the systems relied upon to handle the information are inefficient to some degree.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Telephone Complaints

Complaints received by telephone from anonymous as well as named complainants represent a vast resource for narcotics investigators. The paranoia of drug dealers is well founded. Sooner or later somebody is going to turn them in; the motives for doing so vary. Telephone complaints can be an annoyance during a hectic day, but just when it seems that there will be nothing more than an endless number of irate citizens reporting neighborhood nuisance complaints, a call will come in from a shunned ex-lover of a dealer, a former business associate, a concerned relative, or a disgruntled customer which has the potential to become an outstanding case.

If complaints are taken by a civilian clerk, the civilian should be trained to ask the right questions to elicit information that is not volunteered. This is particularly true when the complainant is an anonymous caller who may never call again. Information must be solicited through a series of careful questions.

The civilians working in this area of a police department should be carefully screened for the obvious reasons of ensuring the integrity of intelligence and criminal files. Much of the specific training which they will need must be provided by the narcotics investigators and supervisors who rely on the information. Phone complaints, taken by civilians and officers alike, must be reported systematically if the information is to be of consistent value. Standardized report forms should be routinely used as they contribute to the efficient flow of information. Figure 1-1 is a sample checklist which can be used to ensure that several important questions are asked. This is particularly critical in the case of an informant who is willing to participate in the investigation.

This type of checklist should be used in conjunction with a standard intelligence information or complaint sheet (Figure 1-2). It is necessary

NARCOTICS INVESTIGATION UNIT
ADDITIONAL COMPLAINT QUESTIONNAIRE

This form should be used to supplement the Intelligence Information Sheet. After the intelligence sheet is complete, this checklist should be used to make certain that all information which may help a potential investigation has been taken.

DATE: _____ COMPLAINT # _____ CALL TAKEN BY _____

ASCERTAIN THE FOLLOWING FROM THE CALLER:

- 1) Is your knowledge of the drug dealing first hand? Have you seen him/her deal? Seen him/her in possession? When?
- 2) Have you personally bought drugs from him/her? When?
- 3) Would you be willing to assist in this investigation? Can you buy from him/her currently? Do you know anyone else who can buy from him/her?
- 4) Would you be willing to testify if a criminal case is developed?
- 5) Will you call back if more information becomes available?

EVALUATION

Was the caller intoxicated? _____

Did the caller indicate what his/her motive for making this report is? _____

(The information from this form can be incorporated into the information on the intelligence sheet. Too often, the person debriefed is not asked pertinent questions such as those listed above. Asking these questions will generally elicit other valuable information.)

FIGURE 1-1

to get more than the standard report details (who, what, when, etc.). The caller should be asked pertinent questions such as, Have you seen him deal? Have you bought from him in the past? When was the last time you were in his apartment? and so on. The appropriate follow-up questions to these should also be asked. The complainant should be asked if he or

she will be willing to leave a name and number where an investigator can call back. The caller must be assured that someone is interested in making the most of out of the information which he is providing. Asking the proper questions will make it easier to determine whether the information should be assigned for investigation or whether it should be filed as intelligence without specific assignment.

Some calls will require the immediate attention of an investigator. For example, all calls reporting a drug deal in progress should be referred to an investigator. While many of these will be complaints of street deals which are daily occurrences about which little can be done, some calls will demand some quick, direct response. Some street dealing locations, particularly in cities with crack problems, will generate an inordinate number of complaints. It isn't possible to respond to each and every one of these complaints as a rule, nor is it necessary. But it is important that the information be properly directed so that the investigator can make the appropriate decision. If an investigator is working on a certain location or subject, he should inform the complaint clerk or secretary that any information which is received be directed toward him.

Criteria should be established for assigning information sheets after the calls have been taken by the clerk. If the clerk has asked all the right questions and gotten all the information available, the supervisor can then make the determination whether or not to assign the information for investigation. Not all information should be assigned to an investigator. Information which is not assigned should be made available in the captain's folder, electronic mail, or other similar temporary reservoir of information. That way, investigators have a place to look for new or current information about a subject which they are investigating. The information in the captain's folder or electronic mail should be rotated on a regular basis and transferred to a permanent intelligence file. The following are some commonsense factors used in determining the disposition of incoming intelligence information:

- ☐ Is the information current?
- ☐ Does the information pertain to known drug dealers or locations or subjects currently under investigation?
- ☐ Can the complainant contribute further?
- ☐ Is the informant or complainant willing to participate in the

is done as much in the interest of clearing any person who might be the target of a malicious, completely false complaint. It is inappropriate and irresponsible to put sensitive information in an intelligence file without determining its validity. If a complaint is received naming a councilman as a drug dealer, for example, that information should not be put into an intelligence file without some investigation. If the complaint is unfounded, the completed investigation should be filed for future reference. The first step in these investigations is to interrogate the complainant thoroughly and get as much specific detail as possible. If the complaint has no basis in fact, that will usually be determined after a thorough interrogation of the complainant. This applies not only to public officials and celebrities but to others who have a position of public trust such as teachers, school bus drivers, nurses, attorneys, etc. To whom this information is assigned for investigation is also an important decision.

- ☐ Does the alleged activity have an impact on a significant number of people? Drug dealing in parks, near schools, or in other public places are examples.
- ☐ Finally, does the complaint fall within the purview of the investigative mission? Many times, complaints will be received which do not rightly belong to a narcotics investigation unit. Complaints of people congregating in a park, thought to be involved in drugs, for example, probably should be referred to the patrol division for initial response and investigation. Officers in uniform are better suited to handle such things than are plainclothes investigators. There are places in every large city where people will gather to sell and use marijuana. An example would be a large city park where marijuana dealing and use is an ongoing thing. Occasional users of the park see what's going on there, become incensed, and call for immediate action. The truth is, with the manpower demands on most investigative units, and the low priority given these cases in the court system, it is not cost effective for narcotics investigators to spend much time on these things. However, these situations will provide the opportunity for low-level undercover experience, hence training, and can be used for that purpose when time allows.

There are other factors which will determine whether a complaint is assigned for investigation or not. Availability of manpower will certainly

be a factor. The best of all possible situations would be that sufficient manpower were available to investigate each and every intelligence lead. This is not often the case. Also, the danger exists that as investigators spend more and more time checking out complaints, they have less time for using their initiative and putting their own deals together. So it is important that undue emphasis is not put on the investigation of minor complaints having very little substance.

Another factor, always considered, is the size of the deal. Narcotics investigators will always respond to a report of large amounts of drugs. And while it is a valid indicator of the importance of a case, it is not the only factor to be considered. It is common knowledge among informants, people in the drug business, and the public at large that police respond differently to a complaint from which large seizures may result. Because of this, in an effort to get attention, exaggeration of the size and scope of a deal is not uncommon. Streetwise investigators will consider the size of the deal within the context of other factors and are usually quick to recognize misinformation and exaggeration.

Whenever doubt exists as to whether or not to assign a complaint, that doubt should be resolved in favor of assigning the information. A preliminary investigation may make it clear whether further action is possible or feasible. This preliminary investigation often consists of nothing more than discussing the information with other people in the office.

Drug Hotline Complaints

A designated telephone line and number for taking drug complaints can be a very important dimension of the any community's antidrug effort and a great source of information for drug investigators. There are some key elements of any successful drug hotline program.

- ☐ Number must be well advertised and circulated in the community.
- ☐ It must be made clear that the number is for reporting drug dealers, it is not an addiction help number.
- ☐ Community support and response have to be solicited. The community has to develop a sense of responsibility for ridding itself of drug dealers.
- ☐ Complaints have to be followed by action.

Most departments will not have the necessary manpower to assign someone around the clock to handling a drug hotline. It would be ideal

if that were the case. If volunteers are available—senior citizens help programs, Explorer Scout programs, or something of that nature—they could make an important contribution by handling a drug hotline. If the hotline is manned, then guidelines similar to those just outlined for answering telephone complaints should be followed. It might be necessary to make a custom checklist depending on the purpose and objectives of the hotline.

It is most probable that there will not be sufficient manpower and that the hotline must be connected to a telephone recorder or message center. A line handled by a recorder does have some advantages, the most obvious being that some people feel a greater sense of anonymity when leaving a message on an answering machine than when talking to an investigator. For some reason people who may have some guilt feelings related to being a “snitch” will feel better talking to a recorder than a live person. They can rationalize their behavior and overcome their reluctance to get involved.

The message on a drug hotline should be succinct. It should be clear to the caller that there is interest in what they have to report and that something will be done if possible; make it clear to the caller what information they should leave in the message. Also make it clear that anonymity is okay, but if they wish to be contacted by an investigator, they should leave a number where they can be contacted. If the message is carefully worded, further cooperation can be requested, and a name and callback number can be politely solicited. A bilingual message should also be considered. English/Spanish is the most obvious combination, but others might be necessary depending on the makeup of the community. For example, if the hotline serves a public housing unit, maybe the hotline message should be in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese. If the message is multilingual, it should be especially short.

The most serious drawback to a recorded drug hotline system is that for every call received, time must be spent listening to and transcribing the call. If, however, there is a systematic approach to dealing with the recorded calls, the hotline can be a tremendous source of information. Figure 1-3 is a sample of a drug hotline transcript.

The essential details—date and time of call, location, or subject of complaint—and a synopsis of the call are all that is needed. Rather than just a typed list of the calls, it is far preferable to enter the information into a computer data base. A whole range of standard data base products can be purchased inexpensively and readily adapted to specific needs.

CRACK HOTLINE, 09-07-90			
DATE	TIME	ADDRESS	INFORMATION
09-06-90	1444	5300 E. 35th	Corner of Glencoe and 35th, lots of guys in and out of there, appear to be gang members dealing crack.
09-06-90	1800	715 E. 26th	Black male named Big John dealing drugs to people in the 715 Club.
09-06-90	2130		Party named Rob dealing cocaine from pager. Pager number is 890-1113.
09-07-90	0005	1000 W. 14th	Heavy traffic late in the afternoon and early evening.
09-07-90	0230	1200 Block Penn	Drug dealing day and night. Please do something about it. You can't even walk down the street without being bothered.
09-07-90	0900	1451/59 Detroit	The whole building has been taken over by crack dealers. Janice is dealing in #201. James Wilson lives in #204 and he deals too.

FIGURE 1-3

Since drug hotlines are usually part of a coordinated community antidrug effort, there will be a need to study the data at a later date. Total numbers of calls, numbers of calls on a particular location, or subject, and similar data will be requested at some point. Also, officers working on a certain location or subject will need to know the frequency and

substance of calls on a particular location. Developing information for a historical type search warrant is the most obvious situation where this information will be valuable. Researching such information is much easier if the drug hotline files are computerized.

The data base should have the potential for query by any of a number of fields, separate files for each call, and custom report capability. Having these capabilities makes it possible to create coherent and comprehensive files. When a call is being transcribed, the location or part thereof should be entered on the mask. If the location has been previously reported, it will then be possible to add the new information to the existing file. If it is a new report, a new file will be created. See Figure 1-4 for a sample drug hotline file.

Since drug hotlines generally involve street-level activity, it is probable that some locations or subjects will be the subject of repeated complaints. Therefore, the files should be designed large enough to accommodate several calls. The files should also have a response field for reporting action taken. This may not be required in all cases, but in nuisance cases where a number of calls are generated, provisions should be made for the investigator assigned to document his or her actions. Doing this makes them part of the permanent file and will be useful for public nuisance actions as well as for meetings with citizens' groups who may feel that nothing is being done about their complaints.

The printouts of daily hotline calls should be put in a central location, such as a hotline book. In addition, copies of the printouts should be disseminated regularly within the department. It has been necessary to shed some time-honored traditions in implementing these programs. Traditional philosophy would prohibit the dissemination of valued intelligence on a broad scale. Information and intelligence has always been carefully guarded, to the point sometimes that investigators would not even share it with each other, let alone anyone else in the department. In many jurisdictions today, however, the volume of drug dealing activity has increased to the point that a team effort is required to deal with it effectively. This team approach has also meant that more and more units within the department are working drug investigations peripherally if not as their specific mission. With this there has been a commensurate need for increased cooperation and coordination. The advantages of information sharing on a systematic basis far outweigh the disadvantages. Other units within the police department should and will be expected to play an important role in any drug enforcement strategy, it only follows

CRACK HOTLINE COMPLAINT FILE	
COMPLAINT NUMBER: _____	
1)	DATE: _____ TIME: _____ LOCATION _____ INFORMATION: _____ _____ COMPLAINANT: ANONYMOUS (Y or N) _____ NAME _____ CALL BACK NUMBER _____ ACTION TAKEN _____
2)	DATE: _____ TIME: _____ LOCATION _____ INFORMATION: _____ _____ COMPLAINANT: ANONYMOUS (Y or N) _____ NAME _____ CALL BACK NUMBER _____ ACTION TAKEN _____
<p>Each complaint has a separate file except in the case of subsequent complaints on one particular location. Those complaints are entered in the same file as the initial call. Each file has space for five complaints.</p> <p>Following the third complaint on a given location, the complaint is forwarded to the appropriate sergeant for assignment.</p> <p>A computerized file such as this can be queried by any of the data fields.</p>	
FIGURE 1-4	

that they should have access to intelligence information pertaining to street-level dealing. In most cases, effective communication will prevent the separate units from duplicating each other's efforts. If investigators are working on a street level place and there are aggressive patrol officers working in the area, their cooperation should be solicited.

It may not be necessary to assign investigators to handle complaints from the drug hotline. If the officers working the problem area served by the hotline are doing their job aggressively, they will check the hotline printout first thing when they come to work. In fact, a system which allows for officers to assign themselves complaints out of the book will generally take care of all the calls with substance. What may be necessary from time to time is to assign nuisance complaints to officers for follow-up action. This is particularly true in the case of a nuisance problem which has gotten out of hand. Many times, the cause of the nuisance complaints is not only the drug dealing, but all the attendant problems such as rising crime, loitering, heavy foot and vehicular traffic, and the general decline of the neighborhood. These types of complaints will require the help of the patrol officers in the area if any effective solution is to be reached.

Crimestoppers-Type Reports

Most police departments have crimestoppers programs. Due to the public relations nature of these programs, they are quite often attached to the community services or community relations section of the department. Crimestoppers programs have been an excellent source of information during their relatively short existence. They have also been valuable in as much as they have solicited community involvement and generated a greater sense of community responsibility for effective law enforcement. There are a few inherent problems which, however, are not insurmountable.

The objectives of these programs usually involve gaining information about major crimes. Homicides, rapes, assaults on the elderly, robberies, and certain other crimes that gain notoriety are generally the crimes about which information is solicited through the television and radio media. That and the fact that the calls are handled by clerks attached to the community relations or other such office makes it difficult to utilize this research for narcotics investigations.

People calling the crimestoppers are motivated, at least in part, by the offer of a monetary reward. The systems for control and payment are built into the program, and this generally prohibits the narcotics investigators from dealing with the complainant firsthand. Instead, they are given a report which has been filled out by the crimestoppers clerk. The

informant is identified by an internal control number only. Getting additional information regarding past reliability of the caller is sometimes difficult because of the guidelines of the program which quite naturally have the confidentiality of the caller as a main priority.

As a rule, the crimestoppers information is very good. The problem is that it may be incomplete in the form in which it is received. The investigators are called on to investigate the complaint and report their findings without the benefit of debriefing the informant. If it is possible to provide a little informal training to the civilians or officers handling these calls initially, the value of this resource can be enhanced. The complaint clerks should be instructed on the right questions to ask and to ascertain if the callers are willing to participate in the investigation by making a controlled buy or doing an introduction. The best solution would be to have crimestoppers refer all drug tips to a certain contact person in the drug investigations bureau. Then, those who wished to work as active informants could be developed, and the other tips could be investigated as they are now. Unfortunately, there are usually guidelines that have been set up to facilitate the crimestoppers program and that do not allow direct referral.

In spite of the shortcomings, crimestoppers programs are an excellent information source. When investigating a case and exhausting all information sources in the process, crimestoppers reports should be checked for possible information on the subject. Crimestoppers reports which come to the attention of the drug investigations unit should be assigned for investigation. Again, part of that investigation should include an effort to make firsthand contact with the caller.

Complaints from Official Channels

Complaints from the mayor's office, the chief's office, and the offices of members of city council, through the chain of command, will require immediate attention. Generally the substance of these complaints will be nuisance-type locations, and in these cases the real source of the complaints will quite often be a neighborhood action group. There have been a number of citizens groups which have taken shape in an effort to assist the antidrug efforts of a community. These groups can be an excellent source of information; members of the community will report to each other more readily than they will contact the police. This is