

Anti-snitch campaign riles police, prosecutors

By Rick Hampson, USA TODAY

PITTSBURGH — It was not the first time prosecutor Lisa Pellegrini had been enraged by the sight of the T-shirt with the traffic-sign message: STOP SNITCHING. But this guy was about to wear one into court, with matching baseball cap.



Rayco Saunders, an ex-drug dealer turned pro boxer, wears a STOP SNITCHING shirt to protest paid police informants.

By Jason A. Cohn for USA TODAY

Worse, he was a witness — her witness — and the intended victim in an attempted murder case that had brought him, her and the defendants to court that day last fall.

This was Rayco "War" Saunders — ex-con, pro boxer and walking billboard for a street movement that has sparked a coast-to-coast beef involving everyone from professors to rappers.

Pellegrini, thinking "witness intimidation," told Saunders to lose the hat and reverse the shirt. Saunders, crying "First Amendment," refused. He left the courthouse, shirt in place. Case dismissed. "In almost every one of my homicides, this happens: 'I don't know nothin' about nothin', " the prosecutor says. "There is that attitude, 'Don't be a snitch.' And it's condoned by the community."

Omerta, the Mafia's blood oath of silence, has been broken by turncoat after turncoat. But the call to stop snitching — on other folks in the 'hood — is getting louder.

Is it an attempt by drug dealers and gangsters to intimidate witnesses?

Is it a legitimate protest against law enforcers' over-reliance on self-serving criminal informers?

Or is it bigger than that?

Take the case of Busta Rhymes.

The hip-hop star has refused to cooperate with police investigating the slaying of his bodyguard Feb. 5 outside a Brooklyn studio where Rhymes was recording a video with performers such as Missy Elliott and Mary J. Blige. Police say that although Rhymes and as many as 50 others may have seen the shooting, no one came forward — an echo of the silence that followed the unsolved murders of rappers Tupac Shakur, the Notorious B.I.G. and Run-DMC's Jam Master Jay.

It's the code of the street: To be a credible rapper, you have to know when to shut up.

"Under pressure, I lie for ya, die for ya," Lil' Kim once rapped. Now she's in a federal jail in Philadelphia for failing to tell a grand jury what she knew about some friends involved in a shooting.

Rhymes' silence in the death of Israel Ramirez seemed to puzzle New York's seen-it-all police commissioner, Ray Kelly, an ex-Marine, career NYPD cop and U.S. Customs chief. "Your employee is murdered in front of you," he told reporters, so "you'd think he might want to talk to the police."



By Eric Jamison, AP

Busta Rhymes arrives for a club opening in Las Vegas in April 2005. Less than a year later, his bodyguard was shot.

Not necessarily, says David Kennedy, director of the Center for Crime Prevention and Control at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. "There's such animosity toward the police in some urban communities that even people who aren't afraid, and who hate crime, still feel cooperating is something good people don't do," Kennedy says. "That's the Busta Rhymes story. He has nothing to fear. He just doesn't want to talk. His reputation would take a dive if he did."

The code of silence, he says, "is breaking out in a way we've never seen before."

Saunders agrees: "It's a movement, that's what it is — a stop snitching movement."

From street code to slogan

The stigma against snitching is an old one, but the Mafia never took out newspaper ads to promote omerta. So why is an unwritten rule printed on thousands of T-shirts?

Start with the war on drugs. Over the past two decades, law enforcers have made more drug arrests and turned more defendants into informers than ever before. According to the U.S. Sentencing Commission, the agency that establishes federal court sentencing practices, about one-third of drug trafficking prosecutions involve informers' "substantial assistance." That makes them eligible for reduced sentences under otherwise inflexible federal sentencing guidelines.

Informers are a necessary evil, says Cmdr. Maurita Bryant, a 29-year veteran of the Pittsburgh Police Department. "We have to deal with who we have to deal with. ... If a dealer needs to make a deal, he'll tell on his mother. It may not be right, but it's all we have."

Some criminal informers who are allowed to remain free commit more crimes; some return to crime after a shortened prison sentence; some frame others, or tell prosecutors what they want to hear. Boston defense lawyer Harvey Silverglate says the system encourages defendants "not only to sing, but to compose."

According to a study by the Northwestern University Law School's Center on Wrongful Convictions, 51 of the 111 wrongful death penalty convictions since the 1970s were based in whole or in part on the testimony of witnesses who had an incentive to lie.

Alexandra Natapoff, a professor at Loyola Law School in Los Angeles, says that, based on federal statistics, one of every four black men from 20 to 29 is behind bars, on probation or on parole, and under pressure to snitch. She estimates one in 12 of all black men in the highest-crime neighborhoods are snitching.

She says informers strain the social fabric of poor minority neighborhoods, where as many as half the young men have been arrested. "Every family gathering, every party, every backyard barbecue probably has someone who's secretly working as an informer."

This is the world Rayco Saunders inhabits. It's filled, as he puts it, with "guys doin' all this crime and not doin' no time, because they're telling on the next man."

Hence a backlash — "stop snitching." The slogan appeared in Baltimore about two years ago as the title of an underground DVD featuring threatening, gun-wielding drug dealers and a brief appearance by NBA star and Baltimore native Carmelo Anthony. Anthony, who later said he didn't know the video's theme, told ESPN The Magazine that the dealer-turned-informer excoriated in the DVD "ran our neighborhood. Now he's working with the state and the feds. You can't do that. He turned his back on the 'hood."

The black community is divided. Rapper Chuck D of Public Enemy has blasted the Stop Snitching campaign on the hip-hop group's website: "The term 'snitch' was best applied to those that ratted revolutionaries like Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, Che Guevara. ... Let's not let stupid cats use hip-hop to again twist this meaning for the sake of some 'innerganghood' violent drug thug crime dogs, who've sacrificed the black community's women and children."

Movement prompts legal backlash

Whatever its intent, the Stop Snitching movement has galvanized officials already apoplectic about witness reluctance and witness intimidation.

States and localities spend a fraction of what the federal government devotes to witness protection, although this month Pennsylvania restored \$1 million for that purpose. The move came as more than a half-dozen witnesses recanted earlier testimony in the trial of men accused in the Philadelphia street shooting death of a third-grade boy.



By Don Heupel, AP
Investigative Services Chief Anthony Barba, of the Buffalo Police Department, holds one of the silk-screened shirts with the logo.

"If the word 'snitch' comes out of someone's mouth, I go insane," says Pellegrini, the Pittsburgh prosecutor. "When young men and women see rappers refuse (to cooperate), they think it's cool. How do we tell them, 'we'll support you,' when they see that?"

Especially, she says, when the slogan is blatantly used to intimidate witnesses. Last year, supporters of an accused drug dealer on trial in Pittsburgh federal court wore T-shirts around town bearing witnesses' photos and the inscription "Stop Snitching." U.S. Attorney Mary Beth Buchanan says one, Garry Smith, had a \$100,000 price on his head.

"Everybody in law enforcement is beside themselves," says Kennedy of John Jay College. "They can't investigate cases. They can't prosecute cases. The clearance rate for some serious crimes is tanking."

Stop Snitching T-shirts have been banned from a number of courthouses. Boston Mayor Thomas Menino, whose city recorded the most homicides in a decade last year, threatened to send police into stores to pull them off the shelves.

Following the furor over the Stop Snitchin' DVD, Maryland raised witness intimidation from a misdemeanor to a felony, and Baltimore police made a tape of their own, Keep Talking. "People have to snitch," says Peter Moskos, a former Baltimore street cop. "That's how criminals get caught."

Saunders' life may have been saved by a snitch.

Pellegrini says an informer told police that an ex-con had hired another man to kill Saunders because the boxer was having an affair with his girlfriend. The man and his accomplices were arrested before the hit could be carried out. They were scheduled for a court hearing the day last fall that Saunders showed up in his Stop Snitching T-shirt.

Saunders and Pellegrini agree he was there to warn the men not to testify in other pending cases. But they disagree on why: Pellegrini says Saunders, whom she calls a "thug," is in cahoots with other criminals who feared the men's testimony. Saunders says he thought the defendants would try to save themselves by selling out others.

Saunders says he hates snitching so much that he not only wears the T-shirts himself but has given them as gifts to friends and relatives. "They love the T-shirts," he says. "It's way overdue for somebody to step up and speak about these things that's going on with these informants and these guys walking around here with immunity to do whatever they want to do."

At 31, Saunders has had a hard life. He says he never knew his father; his mother died of a drug overdose when he was 11. He was stabbed in the back at 15, shot in the chest at 21. He says he shot at people himself and dealt drugs. He was arrested six times from 1994 to 1997 and served four years in prison after a shootout with a police officer. He says he was framed.

Since leaving prison, he has pursued a career as a pro boxer, compiling a record of 15-7-2. In 2004 he won the North American Boxing Council cruiserweight championship. In an interview at the gym where he trains, he outlines a stop-snitching creed:

- Don't snitch on others just to save yourself. "Stop snitching is for those guys out there ... selling more drugs than Noriega, and their only out is to tell on somebody. ... If a (criminal) wants to be a Good Samaritan, OK. But send (him) to jail. Don't give him immunity to do what he wants on the street."

- Stop Snitching doesn't mean stop talking to police. "It's always misconstrued by the public, or the powers that be, that we're trying to intimidate the regular people or the law-abiding citizens. That's not what it's about. ... If that is your only outlet, to call the police, that's what you do."
- But witnesses have no obligation to help police. "Do your job — you're the police. ... I've been wronged by the system. Do you think I would help the system? ... Do cops snitch on other cops?"
- The authorities can't protect witnesses. "What's happening to the innocent witness? They get dead or ... terrorized for life."
- Sometimes you must right wrongs yourself. "I'm a man, and I can handle my own situations like a man. ... I've done dirt. I'll admit that. So I can't run to the police."

Later, he's out on the street, wearing one of the T-shirts. Standing nearby is a woman dressed as the Statue of Liberty to advertise the services of her employer, Liberty Income Tax.

"The people who are snitching, a lot of them end up dead, a lot of them end up hurt," says Lady Liberty — Ernestine Whitaker of Wilksburg, whose nephew was threatened after he witnessed a crime. "So the snitching doesn't do anything for the person who's snitching."

She looks at Saunders, whose muscular chest bulges beneath the T. "I'd wear one of those," she says.

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