

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Terror Tipsters

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At the National Sheriffs' Association Conference in Washington last week, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano [noted that](#) riders on the D.C. Metro system can hear her voice repeatedly promoting her department's "If You See Something, Say Something" terrorism-hotline campaign. "That's a scary thought," she suggested.

Even scarier to me is the campaign itself.

It began in New York City, where it generated 8,999 calls in 2006 and more than 13,473 in 2007. Although the usual approach of the media is to report about such measures uncritically, one *New York Times* reporter at the time did [have the temerity to ask](#) how many of these tips had actually led to a terrorism arrest. The answer, it turned out, was zero.

That continues to be the case, it appears: none of the much-publicized terrorism arrests in New York since that time has been impelled by a "If You See Something, Say Something" tip.

This experience could be taken to suggest that the tipster campaign has been something of a failure. Or perhaps it suggests there isn't all that much out there to be found. Undeterred by such dark possibilities, however, the campaign continues, and the [number of calls](#) in New York skyrocketed to 27,127 in 2008 before settling down a bit to a mere 16,191 in 2009.

For its part, the FBI [celebrated](#) the receipt of its 2 millionth tip from the public, up to a third of them concerning terrorism, in August 2008. There seems to be no public information on whether the terrorism tips proved more useful than those supplied to the New York City police. However, an [examination](#) of all known terrorism cases since 9/11 that have targeted the United States suggests that the “If You See Something, Say Something” campaign has never been relevant.

It turns out that New York has received a trademark on its snappy slogan, something Napolitano’s DHS dutifully acknowledges on its [relevant website](#) when it refers to its public awareness campaign as: “If You See Something, Say Something™.” (Nowhere on the website does the department bother to tally either the number of calls it receives or the number of terrorism arrests the hotline has led to.)

New York has been willing to grant permission for the slogan to be used by organizations like DHS, but sometimes it has refused permission because, [according to a spokesman](#), “The intent of the slogan is to focus on terrorism activity, not crime, and we felt that use in other spheres would water down its effectiveness.” Since it appears that the slogan has been completely ineffective at dealing with its supposed focus—terrorism—any watering down would appear, not to put too fine a point on it, to be impossible.

Meanwhile, in New York alone \$2 million to \$3 million each year (much of it coming from grants from the federal government) [continues to be paid out](#) to promote and publicize the hotline.

But that’s hardly the full price of the program. As Mark Stewart and I have [noted](#) in our *Terror, Security, and Money*, processing the tips can be costly because, as the FBI’s special counsel [puts it](#), “Any terrorism lead has to be followed up. That means, on a practical level, that things that ten years ago might just have been ignored now have to be followed up.” [Says](#) the assistant section chief for the FBI’s National Threat Center portentously, “It’s the one that you don’t take seriously that becomes the 9/11.”

It might seem obvious that any value of the “If You See Something, Say Something™” campaign needs to be weighted against the rather significant attendant costs of sorting through the haystack of tips it generates. Of course, the campaign might fail a cost-benefit analysis because it is expensive and seems to have generated no benefit (except perhaps for bolstering support for homeland-security spending by continually reminding an edgy public that terrorism might still be out there).

This grim possibility may be why, as far as I can see, no one has ever carried out such a study and why the prospect of doing one has probably never crossed the minds of sloganeer Napolitano or of the rapt sheriffs in her audience.

Now *that’s* a scary thought.