



ETHICAL ISSUES

Police Use of Juvenile Informants

In 1998, three suspected drug dealers killed Chad MacDonald, 17 years old, after he agreed to work undercover with the Brea, California, police to buy methamphetamine. Chad's mother agreed to allow her son to act as an informant so that he could avoid prosecution on possession charges, though she later claimed she was coerced into signing a waiver of liability. Police officials claim that MacDonald's role as informant had been terminated before he was kidnapped, tortured, and murdered. The MacDonald case highlights controversial issues that arise when juveniles become involved in police investigations as informants.

MacDonald's first encounter with the police occurred near the beginning of 1998. The taped conversation between police officer Keith Watson and MacDonald indicates Watson had an agenda when he began questioning the youth during what seemingly was a routine traffic stop. During the arrest, Watson discovered 11 grams of methamphetamine in MacDonald's car. This episode launched a sequence of events that labeled a young man, who struggled with his own drug problem, as a "snitch."

MacDonald, who was 3 months shy of his 18th birthday, faced possible short-term detainment in a juvenile facility that may have included some type of treatment program. Law enforcement agents instead offered to dismiss MacDonald's possession charges if he agreed to assist in their investigative efforts. Chad wore a wire and purchased methamphetamine at a suspected drug

house. Police raided the house a few days later, but no drugs were found. The woman who sold the drugs confronted MacDonald and accused him of being a "narc."

On March 1, MacDonald disappeared. He and his 16-year-old girlfriend had been kidnapped, held hostage, and tortured. MacDonald's body was found in an alley in South Los Angeles on March 3. His girlfriend was raped and shot in the face, but she survived. Witnesses report the killers called him a snitch and a narc. Police officials claim MacDonald was no longer acting as an informant at the time of his death.

Think About It

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using juveniles as confidential informants?
2. Are juveniles or their parents able to consent to participating in a drug sting when they face possible charges or incarceration?
3. How should coercion by the police be handled?
4. Should juveniles be used in sting operations to buy alcohol or cigarettes?
5. Should children under the age of 12 be used as informants?

Source: Dodge, M. (2006). Juvenile police informants: Friendship, persuasion, and pretense. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 4, 234–246. Reprinted with permission from Sage.