Comments from JABA Readers

A PROMPTING SYSTEM FOR CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT IN FIGHTING ILLEGAL DRUG ACTIVITY

The use of prompting systems to activate chains of behaviors in other individuals has appeared in the applied behavior analysis literature. Copeland, Brown, Axelrod, and Hall (1972), for example, had a school principal prompt the parents of truant children to send their children to school on a regular basis. This strategy, combined with complimenting the parents for their children's attendance, proved effective. More recently, Geller (1989) had airline attendants read a note encouraging passengers to use their safety belts when entering their cars. On about 34% of the 359 attempts, the attendants read the note to the passengers.

A prompting strategy is also being used by the *Clinton (Iowa) Herald* to encourage citizens to report suspected illegal drug activity. As indicated in Figure 1, the *Herald* included a cutout coupon in two editorials (September 25 and October 11, 1989) imploring citizens' involvement in the drug war. The coupon has spaces to identify the name, address, and license plate of the suspect, as well as the location of the drug activity. Optional items include citizen identification and the opportunity to request a meeting with a police officer.

When I spoke to the editor, William Baker, on October 17, 1989, he indicated that readers had sent in 55 to 60 reports of suspicious activity. When I later spoke to Mr. Baker on January 31, 1990, he estimated that he had received 80 coupons. (Thus, some readers saved the coupons for several months.) This estimate was confirmed by Gene Beinke, Chief of Police of Clinton. Chief Beinke indicated that about 20% of the reports were pranks. (He was named on one coupon.) Many of the remaining reports confirmed police suspicions, but in 10 instances the police department put together cases they would otherwise not have been able to

ENOUGH! I've had enough of drugs in my neighborhood!

I've reason to believe that _____
(Name(s) if known) / (Address if known)
is using/dealing drugs.

I'm suspicious of activities at _____
(Address)

I've noticed the following license plates on cars in the vicinity of suspected drug activity. _____

OPTIONAL

My Name: _____ My Address: _____ My Phone: _____

I'd like to talk to an officer _____
(YES) (NO)

Mail to: "Letters to the Editor" Clinton Herald, P.O. Box 31,
Clinton, Iowa 52723.

Your confidentiality will be guarded —

If you can detail specific information, dates, times or additional information please use a separate sheet of paper.

Figure 1. Coupon used by *Clinton Herald* newspaper to encourage readers to report suspected cases of illegal drug use.

make. This has led to four arrests so far. In the other six cases the issuance of search warrants or arrests is expected shortly.

An issue raised by the present procedure is whether it violates a person's right to be free from unreasonable search and seizure. Chief Beinke indicated that law enforcement officers were following all required regulations to protect civil liberties, including acquiring a warrant based upon probable cause before conducting a search or an arrest. The officers are also required to convince the court, through under-oath testimony, that informant information is correct. In cases in which there is no substance to the tip, the officers destroy all records. It should be noted that the coupon procedure does not raise any new civil liberties issues, because law enforcement officers already depend on citizen information. Rather, the procedure facilitates community involvement.

Chief Beinke indicated that the coupon procedure has received national attention in the form of inquiries from various police departments and re-

ports of the procedure in *Newsweek* (October 16, 1989) and on *Cable Network News*.

Geller, E. S. (1989). The airline lifesaver: In pursuit of small wins. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, **22**, 333-335.

SAUL AXELROD
TEMPLE UNIVERSITY

REFERENCES

Copeland, R. E., Brown, R. E., Axelrod, S., & Hall, R. V. (1972). Effect of a school principal reinforcing parents for student attendance. *Educational Technology*, **12**, 56-59.

Received December 1, 1989
Initial editorial decision January 22, 1990
Revision received February 20, 1990
Final acceptance February 21, 1990
Action Editor, E. Scott Geller