

AIM IS TO GET SENTENCES SHAVED

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an appearance in U.S. District Court last Wednesday, Cotton waived his right to a bond hearing. He remains in jail.

This is Cotton's third case in federal court in three years. After his first arrest in 2008 on robbery, carjacking and firearms charges, he was sentenced to 32 years in prison. He agreed to become an informant and testify against fellow Bloods with the hope of getting time shaved off, a common practice in federal courts.

Using informants, or snitches as they are commonly known, is an important tool in the fight against violent crimes and gangs. Without one "flipping" on another, federal agents and local police never would have been able to break up a large local faction of the Bloods/Nine Tech Gangsters, officials said.

"It's a necessary evil," said Portsmouth Commonwealth's Attorney Earle C. Mobley.

While declining to discuss

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Earle C. Mobley, Portsmouth Commonwealth's attorney

this particular case, Mobley said prosecutors and law enforcement face a continuing struggle to determine whether a witness is reliable. If they become uncomfortable with a witness, they won't use him, he said. "There is a whole lot of motive for people to come forward," he said. "It is a balancing act."

Portsmouth had its own problem several years ago with a snitch named Jamaal Skeeter, whose self-proclaimed knowledge of crimes grew increasingly unbelievable. Portsmouth prosecutors stopped using him.

State and federal authorities in recent years have arrested dozens of Bloods linked to murders, home invasions, armed robberies and drug dealing in Portsmouth, Chesapeake and Suffolk neighborhoods.

Cotton was charged in the latest indictment against the Bloods with assault, robbery and use of a firearm. He is accused of participating in the May 7, 2007, armed robbery of a Portsmouth Getty Mart.

By the time of this indictment, Cotton was already serving 32 years in federal prison for other robbery and firearms charges. In his plea agreement in that 2008 case, he agreed with prosecutors to become an informant.

Cotton was debriefed by authorities and, on Oct. 9, 2009, taken from a local jail to testify before a federal grand jury.

He admitted his participation in the Getty Mart robbery but added White's name to the list of gang members who joined him, according to the indictment. He also testified that gang leader James Mack and Eric Drandell Ward, a leader of the Suffolk Bloods faction, joined him in the attempted robbery of a drug dealer in Churchland, which turned into a shootout, the indictment says.

The indictment alleges Cotton lied and that Mack, Ward and White were not involved in those crimes. It's unclear how the authorities determined this.

The U.S. Attorney's Office



Roderick A. Cotton Jr. was indicted on a federal count of lying to a grand jury.

declined to comment specifically on this case.

"The grand jury process is a vital protection in our federal court system, and the U.S. Attorney's Office aggressively pursues allegations of perjury to ensure those testifying before the grand jury live up to their oath to tell the truth," Peter Carr, a spokesman for the office, said in a statement.

Defense attorneys have long complained about the use of snitches in the federal system, where sentence reductions are routinely handed out after someone becomes an informant.

"I can't tell you the number of people I have who are so afraid of people 'jumping' on

their cases," said Norfolk attorney Andrew Protogyron, who has several criminal cases pending in federal court but is not directly involved in the current Bloods matter.

He said it is not uncommon for jailhouse snitches to gather their information by reading fellow inmates' court papers or by their family members feeding them information from the newspapers.

"They're all in it for the sentence cut," he said.

Cotton's current attorney, Greg Klein, declined to comment because he said he did not yet have enough information.

White's attorney, Benjamin Hamlet, declined comment for the same reason.

It's unclear whether the case against Cotton, if true, will have any effect on the outcomes of the criminal cases against White, Mack and Ward. Each readily admitted involvement in other gang activity.

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