



Transcript: Perspectives in Law Enforcement— The Evolution of Policing: An Interview With Chief William Bratton

The Bureau of Justice Assistance Justice Podcast Series is designed to provide the latest information in justice innovations, practices, and perspectives from the field of criminal justice. In this edition, James H. Burch II, Acting Director of the Bureau of Justice Assistance, is joined by Kristina Rose, Acting Director for the National Institute of Justice, to talk with William Bratton, former Chief of Police of the Los Angeles Police Department and former Police Commissioner of the New York City and Boston Police Departments, about his thoughts and hopes for the field of policing. This interview was conducted at the First Predictive Policing Symposium, held in Los Angeles, California on November 18–20, 2009. For more information on the symposium, please visit the National Institute of Justice’s web site.

Jim Burch: Hello friends and colleagues, I’m Jim Burch for the Bureau of Justice Assistance, and welcome to another edition of BJA’s Justice Podcast Series. We invite you to join in our conversation with former Chief and Police Commissioner Bill Bratton about his thoughts on the future of policing in America. In this edition, I’m joined by Kris Rose, Acting Director for the National Institute of Justice.

Chief, thank you for taking the time to talk with us today about your thoughts on the future of policing. Kris, why don’t you go ahead and start things off?

Kris Rose: Chief Bratton, during your keynote address today you were talking about your 40 years in law enforcement and the different places you had served as chief and commissioner in Boston, and New York, and LA, and I’d like to know how policing has changed since you first became an officer and where you think the field is heading right now.

Chief Bill Bratton: Forty years has changed quite a lot. When I went into the business in 1970, I was on the streets of Boston after about 6 weeks of training, with my 6-shot revolver, my 6 spare rounds in loops on my belt, my 12-inch club, my ticket book, my set of handcuffs, and my pen. And that is what I went forth to do policing with. Today, the average police officer in America goes out armed with probably a 40 millimeter firearm with two or three spare clips on their belt, two sets of handcuffs, a bulletproof vest, a Taser, a walky-talky—which no officer would go out into the field without—and still has the ticket book, but oftentimes that

ticket book is now computerized. So policing has changed phenomenally in the two generations or four decades I’ve been associated with it. The good news is it’s changed in every way for the better. Better educated police, better equipped police, more successful and responsive police, police who I think are really seen as working for and with communities instead of oppressing communities. One of the things that’s really not noticed enough is that in multicultural, multiethnic societies such as we have in America, policing is probably much more representative of that very diverse population than just about any other profession that you can think of, and has embraced, rather than resisted, particularly within the last 20 years, the need for that cultural and ethnic representation among its ranks, and that was not the case when I joined the Boston Police Department with 2800 officers—we were all male—that, no females, and only 55 officers of color in a city that was 25 percent African American and 15 percent Puerto Rican at that time. Great changes and very positive changes.

Kris Rose: Well that kind of leads me into my next question. There has been a lot of discussion lately around legitimacy in policing, as you know from the discussions that you’ve taken part in with the Harvard Executive Sessions at the Kennedy School of Government. There’s been a lot of discussion around this trust, communities’ trust in the police, and especially in police working in minority neighborhoods, and I was wondering, from your perspective, how do you enhance the community’s perception of the police, and how long does it take to see positive results in that way?

Chief Bill Bratton: Well the good news is that American policing is increasingly trusted by the communities we’re attempting to serve. In a democratic society, the one guarantee in our Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, is that the public safety is to be provided by government, and we the police are empowered to be the guardians of that promise. And, over the 40 years that I’ve been in the business, I’ve really seen the levels of trust in the police increase because we have become so much more transparent than we were 40 years ago, the willingness to share information, to partner with communities, to identify what their priorities are. Because with our scarce resources, we can’t be everywhere doing everything almost at the same time.

As we have become very ethnically and culturally diverse, we have been able to be much more responsive to the diverse

communities that we serve, so that the trust that was lacking for generations, if not centuries, particularly among minority citizens, particularly African Americans, and maybe now, more increasingly with the growing Latino population, that I think we are turning a corner in that the abuses of the past are not condoned by or not dictated by or not authorized by policing in itself. In my city that I just left as Chief of Police in Los Angeles, recent polls indicate that 83 percent of the public think that the department is doing a good to very good job, in a city where it was almost open warfare for many years between the African American community and the Los Angeles Police Department, and outright hatred was very palpable. That same poll indicated that at this particular time, 66 percent, or two-thirds of African Americans have a perspective that the department is doing a good to very good job. So, trust can be gained, legitimacy can be a watchword rather than just a goal, it can be the reality.

Jim Burch: Chief, you talked a few moments ago about the tremendous change that you've seen in the profession of policing over the last several decades, but in your view, what's the single, most important change that needs to take place in policing over the next 5 to 10 years?

Chief Bill Bratton: Appreciation of just how important the police are. I use a constant mantra that I believe deeply in, I am very proud of the profession that I spent 40 years of my life in, and that mantra is that "Cops count. Police matter." And, in these tough economic times, policing needs to be seen as an investment, an investment in that if we can keep communities safe, even in tough economic times, as the economy begins to turn around, those safer communities will attract businesses that will create jobs, that will pay taxes, that will allow for many good things to be done to improve schools

and infrastructure, and indeed hire more police to make the community even safer.

There has been a tendency to think of, to lump police in with some of the other city services, as something that can be thought of as a cost or a burden to the taxpayers. In New York City and Los Angeles, my two most recent policing experiences, I can quite clearly point to the economic benefit, that the investment of tax dollars by both of those cities paid phenomenal dividends. New York City's crime rate is down 75 to 80 percent from what it was in the 90s when it began to expand its police force. The city of Los Angeles over the last 7 years grew its department by a thousand officers and its mayor, Mayor Villaraigosa, is still fighting some other political leadership in the city to maintain that growth, recognizing that it is an investment and that with scarce tax dollars, it's one of the best investments that you can make.

Jim Burch: We want to thank you; you've had such an amazing career in public service and have inspired so many to be in public service themselves, and we want to thank you for your leadership today and for your leadership always.

Chief Bill Bratton: Thank you, I appreciate it.

Closing: Thank you for taking the time to join us for this conversation. If you found this discussion interesting, we encourage you to visit both the BJA and the NIJ web sites for more innovative ideas and best practices. For BJA's web site, visit www.ojp.gov/BJA. For NIJ's web site, go to www.ojp.gov/nij. Please note, NIJ is in all lowercase.

From all of us here at BJA, and from our friends at NIJ, thank you for tuning in to today's podcast. We hope you will join us again for another edition of BJA's Justice Podcast Series.

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