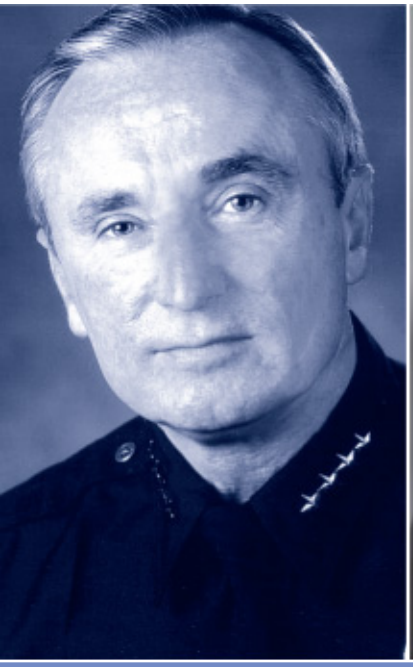

LAPD Chief Bratton Speaks Out: What's Wrong With Criminal Justice Research—and How to Make It Right

edited by Nancy Ritter

Editor's Note: *Bill Bratton has never been one to mince words. He has managed six police agencies in the United States, including three of the Nation's largest. Chief Bratton currently runs the Los Angeles Police Department. Before that, he was commissioner of the Boston Police Department, and from 1994–1996, commissioner of the New York City Police Department. The National Institute of Justice invited Chief Bratton to speak at its annual conference last year. He discussed the sometimes rocky relationship between criminal justice practitioners and criminal justice researchers. Here are excerpts from those remarks.*

For most of the last half of the 20th century, the relationship between police practitioners and researchers was, at best, one of agreeing to disagree on the causes of crime and the best ways to respond to and prevent crime. At worst, we talked past each other and didn't connect at all.

I'm a proponent of more intimate partnerships and collaboration between practitioners and academics. I'm convinced that these partnerships are particularly important as we enter the new paradigm of the 21st century, where intelligence-led policing and the uncertainties of under-researched issues like terrorism and cybercrime begin to confront us.

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I understand research for research sake and believe that it has its place; but in order to be useful to the practitioner, researchers need to understand practitioners' needs and should consider the potential impact of their study on the audience. Otherwise, we might just end up having academics writing to impress each other with no long-term lasting effect on what is actually happening in the field. Practitioners and researchers often think in different time frames. The police

executive has to deliver results in a much more immediate time span and is constantly in need of even more timely and accurate information upon which to make allocation decisions. Researchers oftentimes cannot meet these needs. The sometimes enormous lag between research being conducted and its eventual application is frustrating to those charged with delivering fairly immediate results where lives are quite literally at stake. Knowing what happened 2 years ago—let alone 5 or 10—is often of no value and is not included in the decisionmaking processes of practitioners.

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I can remember during my time in New York City that once we had a plan, we did everything everywhere all at once because with 38,000 cops—for the first time in my career—I could do that. According to the experts, this type of approach did not allow for valid experiments or a perfect research setting. Well, I'm sorry, but I'm sure that the thousands of people whose lives were saved are grateful that we didn't wait to experiment here and there. This difference in mindset contributes to what I believe is part of the divide between some researchers and some practitioners.

Bratton on Crime

For most of the time between the 1960's and the 1990's, many of our most influential politicians, researchers, the media, and even some well-intentioned police leaders sought to limit the role of the police to 'first responders' rather than that of 'first preventers.' We were also told that the causes of crime were economic and social and that we could have no impact on these so-called causes. Rather, we were encouraged to focus on response to crime and to measure our success by arrest numbers, clearance rates, and response time . . . Focusing on the response tended to hold police officers less accountable. Fortunately, there were some researchers and police leaders, like me, who—because of our experience in the neighborhoods of our cities—embraced a different approach. We understood quite simply that the so-called causes were, in most environments, strong influences and not causes.

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I believe strongly that the single most important cause of crime is human behavior, not social, economic, demographic, or ethnographic factors. All of those factors may act as influences on crime, in some instances significant influences, but the real cause is behavior. The one thing I have learned—and now strongly advocate—is that the police, properly resourced and directed, can control behavior to such a degree that we can change behavior. My experiences in Boston and in New York and now in Los Angeles has borne this out. I have seen nothing in the way of hard evidence to dissuade me from this simple truth.

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Many social scientists are wedded to what I believe to be the failed and never proven idea that crime is caused by the structural features of a capitalist-based democratic society—especially demographics, economic imbalance, racism, and poverty. They assume that true crime reduction can come only as the result of economic reform, redistribution of wealth, and elimination of poverty and racism—all worthwhile goals. Indeed, they speak of crime as a sort of disease that criminals are at risk of catching, through no culpability of their own, and for which the police have no responsibility or ability to prevent. I hold that these proponents are very much removed from the reality of the practitioners' experiences and cannot possibly see what we see, up close

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and personal, every day. We, the police, helped create a huge and positive impact in the 1990's. We began to achieve historic crime reduction and improved quality of life. Our new focus remains primarily on measures of effectiveness, not just activity and response.

Bratton on the Role of Police

Quite simply, cops count. We are one of the most essential initiators and catalysts in the criminal justice equation. Crime may go up or down to some degree when influenced by many of the old so-called causes—which I prefer to describe as influences—but the quickest way to impact crime is with a well-led, managed, and appropriately resourced police force that embraces risk taking and not risk adversity, and a policing structure that includes accountability-focused COMPSTAT management principles, "broken windows" quality-of-life initiatives, and problem-oriented community policing that is transparent and accessible to the public, the profession, the media, and the research community.

A Challenge to Researchers

I challenge criminal justice researchers to aggressively respond to increasingly conflicting theories and arguments—and to an almost mean-spiritedness of some criminologists, academics, and sociologists who diminish, or dismiss outright, the contributions and effectiveness of our police officers and practitioners. Some seek to assert—with what to me and my fellow practitioners sometimes appear to be specious data, faulty assumptions, or ivy tower perspectives—that the police play little or no role in the prevention of crime. I'm sorry. We do.

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We need more ideas and more research into what works, especially on how the police can make a difference—our role, our impact. So much of what has been done seems intent on disproving that we count. I also want to encourage researchers to be introspective and to think about their audience. Much of the social science research that I encounter appears to be written by academics for academics. It does not appear to be grounded in and validated by solid field experience. So, as a result, it is not viewed as credible by many police leaders. Some of it appears to me and to other cops as coming from a decidedly anti-police biased perspective . . . Absent clear-cut results or at least research that is intelligible and useful to the field and to practitioners like me, researchers risk being shut out, cut off, and ultimately reduced to the point of irrelevance.

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I'm asking that more researchers begin to work with us and among us in the real-world laboratories of our departments and cities to help us prove or disprove the beliefs and practices that I, as a practitioner, and most of my colleagues deeply believe, espouse, and practice. Researchers don't need to look at us and analyze us like a far-away galaxy through a telescope. We are right here and more researchers need to work among us rather than just observing and commenting about us in language that is seen as disparaging or dismissive. We don't need theories that appeal to—and are understood fully by—a limited few among them. We need theories that are understood and embraced by law enforcement leaders like me, who can take the thoughts and theories of criminal justice researchers and validate or refine them in the petri dish of our departments and cities.

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