Public Safety and Democracy

A dialogue on the evolution and future of policing

By William J. Bratton and Paul Romer — Sunday, January 26th, 2014 'The City Journal' / New York, NY

PAUL ROMER: Across the world, public safety is the most important task facing city governments. In many poor countries, crime holds back the kind of urbanization essential for economic development. Closer to home, Detroit shows us that if they can, people will flee a city that fails to provide basic public safety.

Cities with crime problems should be able to take advantage of what we have learned about the policing strategies that reduce crime. Unfortunately, they hear too often from academics and other opinion shapers who still seem to think that policing strategies can have no effect on crime rates. This perception is totally at odds with the new understanding that has emerged among people like you, who have been in the trenches, experimenting with new approaches, and bringing down crime.

WILLIAM BRATTON: Yes. In a democratic society, the Number One obligation of the government is public safety. And the criminal-justice system is the entity charged with that responsibility. The police, through their behavior, are entrusted to enforce the law. A key challenge is to do it constitutionally. You can't break the law while enforcing it. And in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, police were breaking the law quite a lot. So that's why we ended up with a lot of constitutional guidelines for police activity.

ROMER: What was your experience with the changes that came after the 1960s, when we tried to bring policing in line with the protections of the Constitution? One of the reasons that so many people today seem not to understand the connection between policing and crime is that they do not remember, or perhaps never knew, how crime increased in the United States starting in the 1960s and then came back down in the 1990s.

BRATTON: I joined the Boston Police Department in 1970 and came to New York to take over the Transit Police in 1990. Those 20 years were a time of phenomenal change. We were in the midst of an extraordinarily unpopular war in Vietnam. We were in the midst of the civil rights movement. There was great social turbulence—the Democratic National Convention riots, the Kent State shootings. It was an incredible time in American history. That's the world I came into, all 155 pounds of me. I had my six-shot revolver, my six spare rounds, a set of handcuffs, a pen, and a parking-ticket book. They didn't even give me a radio. Just six weeks of training, and I was on the streets of Boston.

ROMER: Looking back, it is hard to believe that you received so little training. These days, we understand that policing is an extremely difficult, high-skill job. Now we expect that police will be well educated and well trained.

BRATTON: I was very fortunate because as part of a push toward professionalization, the federal government for the first time was paying for police officers to go to college. It was the best thing that ever happened to me because I didn't get wrapped in the "blue cocoon" as I was beginning my career. The kids I ate with at the college cafeteria in the morning would be demonstrating against the war in front of the federal building in the afternoon. And I'd be there, too, on the other side of the lines in my blue suit.

ROMER: It seems to me that prior to the 1960s, police were powerful but were largely unaccountable to the public. They did keep crime in check but sometimes did so in ways that the public increasingly found unacceptable. One impetus for this change came from the civil rights movement, which highlighted the many ways in which local governments and local police mistreated people of color. In response, we brought in controls to limit the abuse of police powers and pushed for better training for members of any police force.

BRATTON: I've spent my life in the police profession, and I'm proud of that. But I am also very cognizant of the profession's limitations, its potential for abuse, and its potential negative impact. Policing has to be done compassionately and consistently. You cannot police differently in Harlem from the way you're policing downtown. The same laws must apply. The same procedures must be employed. Certain areas at certain times may have more significant crime and require more police presence, or more assertiveness, but it has to be balanced. If an African-American or a recent immigrant—or anyone else, for that matter—can't feel secure walking into a police station or up to a police officer to report a crime because of a fear that they're not going to be treated well, then everything else that we promise is on a shaky foundation.

ROMER: When we first tried to limit the potential for abuse and professionalize policing, which were clearly important things for us to do, we may have gone too far and made it impossible for police to do what had historically been their primary job: preventing crime. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that we sent the message that police could get into trouble if they tried to anticipate and prevent crime, and we gave them a justification for simply waiting for crime to happen and then reacting to it. We developed a new theory about what caused crime—the so-called root causes—and a

new view about what the job was for police. Because they could not change the social and economic factors that were thought to be the root causes of crime, the police could not be expected to prevent crime. All they could do, and all we expected them to do, was to clean up after it took place.

BRATTON: After the 1960s, as social movements evolved and America was changing, society felt that the role of the police also needed to change, to become more professional and better educated, in terms of forensics and training.

What changed in the 1990s—and I'm one of the principal advocates of it—was that the role of police became first and foremost about preventing crime. I've always embraced decentralization, empowering a local precinct commander to work with his or her community. In a city the size of New York, you can't expect the police commissioner to be aware of what's going on down, say, on West 3rd Street all the time. But the precinct commander there, through involvement with the community, should be aware of deteriorating conditions in the area and be able to address them. This approach allowed us to identify the problems that were creating fear, disorder, and, ultimately, crime. Given that the police have limited resources, the question then becomes: What do we prioritize? What do we focus our time on?

That was the purpose of the Compstat process that we developed in 1994 to track crime. We needed active intelligence so that we could rapidly respond to what it was telling us. But we also needed an environment where all the police commanders came together to talk about what was working and what wasn't. And in that process, part of the effort was to reduce falsification. Because if you're in there with all your peers, they're going to detect very quickly when something's wrong or doesn't add up. We would do auditing, so if any precinct reported a percentage change in crime that was outside the standard variation for the rest of the department, it would be audited to find out what was really going on.

ROMER: Describe the changes that followed from this return in New York to the traditional view that the job of the police is to protect public safety by preventing crime.

BRATTON: Many New Yorkers are too young to understand what the city looked like when I got here in 1990—the graffiti, the decay, the crime, the social disorder. The police were not expected to do anything about these quality-of-life issues— aggressive begging, encampments in every park. When I came in as police commissioner, almost 300 people were living in the park across the street from the UN. At the time, we didn't focus on that, though. There was a perception that the police really couldn't do anything about that kind of disorder. We thought that we were focused on serious crime. What we really didn't understand until the late 1980s and early 1990s was that the victim of all the abhorrent behavior on the streets was the city itself.

To give you an idea of how things have changed: in 1990, I didn't go anywhere without a gun because, as chief of the transit police, I did not feel secure anywhere, including in the subways. In Los Angeles, when I was chief of police there, I also had to carry a gun everywhere, because of the gang violence. I don't carry a gun now. I haven't for a while. It's locked away. I just don't feel the need for it. And I like it that I can do that.

ROMER: One of the misleading conclusions that outsiders seem to have reached is that police cannot deter a person from committing a crime, so the only thing they can do is find people more likely to commit crimes and incapacitate them, lock them up, and throw away the key. I know that you reject this kind of naive, "get tough" approach to crime. One of the dramatic but rarely noticed successes of the turnaround in policing that you started in New York is that the incarceration rate has fallen. A smaller fraction of the population is locked away, yet far fewer crimes are being committed. This points clearly to the possibility, even the likelihood, that with the right policies, we can prevent crime. We can deter people from committing crimes.

Those same people who look at policing from the outside sometimes describe community policing as the misguided alternative to the "get tough" policies that they support. You have always believed that to prevent or deter crime, police must have a good working relationship with the community—that this is as important in preventing acts of terrorism as it is in preventing street crime.

BRATTON: Seventy-five percent of the terrorist plots that have been disrupted since 9/11 were detected when a community member informed a police officer or when a police officer who had a relationship with the community was able to put the clues together to predict that something was going to happen and take steps to prevent it. So the collaboration that is so essential to successful policing really requires the community to be able to trust that what the police are doing is, in fact, not illegal and not based on racial profiling or targeting the Muslim community. Proactive, assertive policing is effective, but if you don't have the legitimacy and the trust of the community, you're not going to get the information that you need to predict and prevent crimes.

ROMER: This same strategy is as important in the fight against gang crime as it is in the fight against terrorism. When you took over as chief of police in Los Angeles, it was clear to everyone that the police did not have a good working relationship with the community, especially with the minority community. Developing a better working relationship with the

community was crucial to the turnaround that you implemented there, one that may have been even more difficult than the turnaround in New York (see "The LAPD Remade," Winter 2013).

One hallmark of New York's turnaround was a greater reliance on data. In Los Angeles, did you have a way to get frequent updates on how public attitudes toward the police were changing, something that you could use as you used Compstat in New York—as a management tool to see if the officers out on patrol were bringing about the needed changes?

BRATTON: Well, we really had to rely on polling done by entities such as the Los Angeles Times and other institutions.

ROMER: This seems to be an area in which technology should be able to help. Ideally, a police chief should have as much detailed geographical data about the relationship between the police and the community as he has about crimes committed. Do you see other ways that technology and new data sources could change policing?

BRATTON: Through the algorithms being developed by a number of universities, we now have an increasing ability to predict where a crime will occur. It doesn't mean that we can know exactly when it will happen and exactly what it will be, but we can say that, within a certain time frame, within a certain geographic area, if we don't put resources in there— meaning, a police officer—there's going to be a crime committed. So you'll hear this term "predictive policing" a lot more often, going forward. It will require computing power and intelligence-analysis capabilities. This means real-time crime centers outfitted with the latest technology. That costs money, and, as you well know, money is tight these days.

ROMER: What about new ways for police and the community to communicate? How can you let members of the community know what the police are doing and why they are doing it?

BRATTON: The police have historically had to rely on the media. Sometimes you had to go through them to get to the public—and, not only to get to the public, but to get to the cops as well, because cops read papers. They watch television. Their families watch television. So you needed to use the media. The media hated it when we said that we "used" them, but you had to make yourself available to them. Sometimes it was painful to make yourself available, but you had to do it to get certain messages through.

But now we have Twitter. Now we have all these social media sites. Think about what happened with the Boston Marathon bombing. The news media are erroneously reporting information. Someone puts up pictures of people who weren't involved and says, "Here are the bombers." Someone else reports that the bombers have been arrested. It's all wrong. So what do you do? Well, now the Boston P.D. can instantly put out a Tweet saying, "No arrest has been made. The two individuals identified in the newspaper story are not who we're looking for." And that's that. It's irrefutable and reaches thousands or tens of thousands of people and then gets amplified through the traditional media.

ROMER: Let me ask you one last question, which is, in a sense, a management question. How can you effectively manage an organization in which a very few bad apples can make headlines for abusing their power and do enormous harm to the legitimacy of the entire force?

BRATTON: A police official once said to me that the NYPD employs more than 38,000 "career assassins"—the idea being that any one of the police officers in New York can, at any time, through inappropriate or criminal behavior, effectively bring about a catastrophe for the whole department. All you have to do is think of the actions of Justin Volpe—the officer who brutalized Abner Louima—to appreciate how fragile public confidence in the police can be. This is particularly true in minority communities. The way you deal with that problem is to make it clearly known that the department does the best it can to recruit, train, and supervise its officers. You have to send a message that those officers who go astray will be disciplined. You have to be honest and transparent at all times.

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