

# **POLICE REFORM BY THE NUMBERS: WILL IT WORK?**

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“They’re riding us hard and putting us away wet,” quipped a veteran Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) area captain, likening his job to the poor treatment some horses get after a hard race. By all accounts, William J. Bratton, who became chief in 2002, is riding the department hard. As soon as he landed in Los Angeles from New York, Bratton launched an all-out effort to reduce crime using electronic data to map and analyze crime patterns, and deploying police to hot spots. By most measures he is succeeding as violent crime has dropped 40 percent between 2002 and 2006 while it has increased slightly nationally. But, are there costs to such a hard-driving crime suppression strategy? What does it portend for developing bottom-up leadership throughout a large police department and sustaining it? What can be learned from examining the management strategies of past chiefs of police?

## **The Research Agenda**

Before answering the questions let me say a few words about my own research so the reader can understand my viewpoint. I have spent the last 20 years conducting action research modeled on the work of social psychologist Kurt Lewin. While working inside industrial organizations, labor unions, schools, colleges, and the Los Angeles Police Department, I learned what Lewin had discovered a half-century earlier: That the action an organization takes to solve a problem produces new understanding. Lewin once remarked, “If you want truly to understand something, try to change it.”

By working collaboratively with employees in these organizations, my research teams and I learned about problems in their context, gained deep access and insights into the organizations, and became participants in the solutions. We confirmed one of Lewin’s key observations – that a community of individuals who collaborate in identifying problems and their solutions helps an organization develop a heightened consciousness. The knowledge that we produced was not only useful to the organizations, but from it we developed new conceptions of organizational change for the larger research community and for the public.

My research in the LAPD began in 1993, two years after the Rodney King beating and the “Christopher Commission” report, and a year after the riots. My team and I (we were from both UCLA and USC) were interested in documenting how changes recommended by the “Christopher Commission” were being implemented.<sup>1</sup> We also hoped to formalize a research relationship between Los Angeles’ two large universities and the LAPD to provide data that would mirror employees’ perceptions back to the department so it could make adjustments.

My team and I went on hundreds of ride-alongs, conducted multiple interviews with sworn officers and civilians from the top to the bottom, and conducted three department-wide surveys. The findings were fed back to captains, lieutenants and sergeants at the area level, and then presented to the sworn and civilian employees. After each survey we aggregated the data and reported it to the chief of police.

Since the study began in 1993, I have worked with three police chiefs (Willie Williams, Bernard Parks, William Bratton) and two interim chiefs (Bayan Lewis and Martin Pomeroy).<sup>2</sup> I am currently finishing a second round of interviews with a sample of command officers whom I first interviewed in 2003 to see how things have changed in Bratton's first term. But I have not yet analyzed the results or reported them back to Chief Bratton and the department. Nonetheless, much can be learned from examining patterns across these three administrations. We can see how each chief responded to external changes in deciding how to lead the department and the extent to which each was able to develop sustainable leadership at all levels of the organization.

## **Background**

First, let me provide a brief background to the Los Angeles Police Department. The use of control was embedded in the Los Angeles Police Department's culture in 1950, when William Parker became chief. Parker centralized power to establish order and took stringent measures to rid the Department of the corruption for which it had become notorious. He was also a disciplinarian who blocked promotions for officers who displayed conduct "hinting of dishonesty" (Cannon, 1997). Parker also knew that he could never get the number of officers needed to police the entire area of Los Angeles. The City Council had rejected his requests for more officers and instead provided more cars and a helicopter.

Out of the conditions that confronted the LAPD – a huge geographic area to patrol (473 square miles) with a limited number of officers who relied on cars and aircraft, and a powerful chief's demand for professionalism – "efficiency" emerged as a guiding measure of police work. In addition, Parker was firm in his conviction that the LAPD had to be run in a military style. He believed that police were the "living, physical symbol of authority, warriors who battled to save an indifferent world." (Cannon, 1997, p. 72). The use of coercive authority or control had been trained into LAPD officers for years. Control is reinforced daily on-the-job and it pervades the Department. Not surprisingly, top-down management control has been the norm for the organization.

As did other big cities, Los Angeles witnessed a dramatic reduction in crime during the 1990s when it dropped by half. But the 1991 beating of Rodney King ushered in a chaotic period. The acquittal of four involved officers in 1992 led to a riot, and for the next decade the LAPD found itself at the center of a storm of controversy. Shortly after the King beating, then-Mayor Tom Bradley announced the formation of the Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police. It became known as the

Christopher Commission because of the name of its chairman, former Secretary of State Warren Christopher.

The Commission examined the department's failure to control or discipline officers with repeated complaints of excessive force, its culture that fostered negative attitudes among officers toward racial and other minorities, the difficulty citizens had in making complaints against LAPD officers, and the role of the LAPD's leadership and civilian oversight (Independent Commission, 1991, pp. vii-viii). The Commission said:

*...the LAPD insists on aggressive detection of major crimes and a rapid, seven-minute response time for calls for service. Patrol officers are evaluated by statistical measures (for example, the number of calls handled and arrests made) and are rewarded for being "hard-nosed." This style of policing produces results, but it does so at the risk of creating a siege mentality that alienates the officer from the community (Independent Commission, 1991, p. xiv).*

The report concluded that, among other things, the Department should embrace community policing. Weeks later, 10 metropolitan police chiefs lent support to community policing declaring it a superior form of policing to serve diverse communities. The following year, a change to the Los Angeles City Charter limited the Chief of Police to one five-year term with the possibility of one additional term. From 1992 on, the chief would no longer be a Civil Service employee, but would serve at the pleasure of the Los Angeles Police Commission whose members were appointed by the mayor. Chief Daryl Gates, who had led the Department for 14 years, resigned under pressure.

### **Willie L. Williams, Jr. (1992-1996)**

In 1992, Willie Williams, the first outsider to head the Department since the late 1940s, replaced Gates. Williams was brought to Los Angeles from Philadelphia to implement community policing as the Christopher Commission had recommended. He had been credited with leading the development of community policing in Philadelphia, and his outgoing personal style was seen by many as an asset in bringing members of the Los Angeles community closer to the LAPD. Williams began by establishing an office of community policing in the Office of the Chief, establishing community police advisory boards across the city, and developing a strategic plan called Commitment to Action.

But Williams was distracted by tumultuous events that surrounded the department. First was a massive buildup in the police force of 3,000 new officers promised by Richard Riordan who became mayor in 1993. In 1994, the O.J. Simpson murder trial began. Revelations about slipshod handling of evidence, the Department's substandard scientific lab, and self-serving and racist comments by Detective Mark Fuhrman, cast a dark shadow upon the LAPD.

By 1995, most of Williams' command staff told us they felt the Department was drifting. They seemed dispirited and all-but-paralyzed by the changes that were taking place around them – stepped-up public demands for accountability, humiliation of the Department over the riots and the Christopher Commission report, the Department's high and negative profile in the first O.J. Simpson trial, a new chief drawn from outside the LAPD who soon developed his own personal problems, and demands for increased hiring and aggressive affirmative action goals. The fragmented and charged environment, coupled with the lack of support from within, made it impossible for Williams to communicate effectively with those at lower levels in the organization. Initiatives that emanated from his office were often misinterpreted in the news media, making it even more difficult to articulate a coherent vision.

Williams soon lost whatever support he had enjoyed from within his own command staff. Two years into his term, most command officers would roll their eyes when asked about how Williams was doing. He was faulted for a lack of self-discipline and failing to meet deadlines. One deputy chief said of Williams:

*This guy will just keep talking if he's interested. He'll screw up his whole calendar for the day, he's that kind of guy...I don't have to tell you that this Department is slipping backward. We're going into the sewer. If we don't fix it we're going to be in deep trouble. The Chief spews out things that sound good but that he doesn't understand. We need leadership but all he does is memorize phrases. He'll spit out phrase #42 but it has no meaning.*

Another deputy chief described an incident when Williams “ripped” his top staff because a report that he had been given about changes in captains' duties lacked specifics. Williams said, “OK you guys, at the next SOAR [Staff Officers Annual Retreat] all of you will know exactly what I want from each of you. Stand by, stand by.” When the time came, the deputy chief explained, Williams was not prepared and the captains were waiting for orders. He continued:

*I told him [Williams] that he'd lose credibility if he didn't have anything. I mean he'd had a month to think about it and what does he come back with? Nothing! Williams told the captains, “We're going to look to the future. I'm going to have a vision!” There's nothing there. What's he going to do, smoke peyote buttons?*

Next, a widely publicized account revealed that Williams was given free rooms in a Las Vegas casino, a gift that he publicly denied. His denial only confirmed what many LAPD officers already believed – that “east coast” police were inherently corrupt. Williams' command officers began to take a “wait and see” attitude.

Surprisingly, we found that despite higher-ranking command officers' wishes for direction from Williams, lower down in the organization some area captains had taken advantage of the lapse in leadership. Although the Commitment to Action was generally

ignored because most command officers said that it was too ambitious to be useful, and with 37 unranked goals, it lacked focus. But some of the area captains found that developing community policing envisioned by the Christopher Commission could easily be aligned with report's rambling priorities. With the cover of Williams' own office of community policing, many captains had begun to develop their own variations of community policing.

One commander said of Williams, "He was asleep at the switch but it allowed us to get some important things done." He continued, "The first thing we did was to get our officers working with citizens who were bothered about crime. The officers quickly learned that they had a supportive community and the residents saw that the police didn't fit their stereotypes." Commander Garrett Zimmon who headed the office of community policing knew that it had to diffuse or it would die. He told me, "I hand off everything I can because if in a year the Chief is gone, it will be Garrett Zimmon's plan. For the first time, many of the area captains told us they felt that community policing had a chance of succeeding.

Our 1996 survey documented how these captains' newfound authority and their work on community policing translated into high approval ratings from sworn officers, most of whom supported the idea. Morale was at what we would later recognize as an all-time high. Violent crime had also fallen 44 percent during Williams' term.<sup>3</sup> But Williams told us that he would not claim responsibility for the decrease in violent crime. He explained many factors in addition to policing that were at work, and that if he claimed the reduction in violent crime he would have to take responsibility for increases that were sure to come.

But hope for renewal at the LAPD under Willie Williams was short lived. The trust that he developed among citizens began to erode and he lost the legitimacy of his own command staff. Frustrated with the slow pace of change, the Los Angeles Police Commission refused to re-appoint him to a second five-year term.

### **Bernard Parks (1997-2002)**

In mid-1997, when Bernard Parks was appointed as chief, he quickly recentralized whatever authority may have been inadvertently decentralized under Williams ending the captains' experiment with community policing. Parks reorganized the Department, putting patrol under the already overburdened area captains, revamping the complaint system and unleashing a blizzard of new directives down the chain of command. He also introduced FASTRAC (Focus, Accountability, Strategy, Teamwork, Response and Coordination), a method modeled on New York's CompStat to focus attention systematically on patterns of crime.

Most rank-and-file officers viewed Parks with fear and hostility because he was known to be a strict disciplinarian. Much of the criticism about Parks emanated from officers' intense dislike of the complaint process (called the "1.28" because of the

complaint form number) that Parks tightened up. Also, contributing to officers' trepidation was the fact that Parks disciplined more than 800 officers and fired 113 – more than any Chief in the Department's recent history.

Not surprisingly, in one survey 80 percent of the officers said they feared being punished for making an honest mistake and their job satisfaction and morale began to drop precipitously. One patrol officer said the biggest obstacle to doing his job was, "...the chief of police. His unfair complaint policy, his condoning of over-zealous supervisors to indiscriminately persecute officers, and his lack of concern for the officers."

As captains' authority was stripped from them and recentralized, their employee ratings plummeted. By 2000, officer morale had sunk even lower. One officer commented, "Chief Parks and the 1.28 makes officers afraid to do their jobs. We need a pro-officer chief, not one that is only concerned about himself and making it to mayor. Morale could not be lower." Another officer echoed the sentiments of many others when he added, "I don't think the chief even likes police officers! If he did, why would he want to make our jobs so hard for us? We're just honest, hardworking cops trying to make life better for decent people!"

We had numerous meetings with Parks to show him the results of our surveys that revealed eroding confidence in the chief's leadership, and falling employee job satisfaction and morale. For his part, Parks seemed unperturbed. He told us, "We have a new situation here with 2,000 more officers than we've ever had. Crime is down, radio calls are down, so the workload has dropped. Our number one mission over the next few years is to teach people what to do with their available time. The worst thing is for officers to be hanging out with no apparent mission." In another meeting about sinking officer morale, Parks countered the findings saying, "Well what am I supposed to do, go to roll calls and ask them if they are happy and if they like coming to work?"

Despite Parks' public praise for community policing, it was common knowledge within the department that he was not an advocate. His lack of enthusiasm may also have been influenced by the fact that community policing had been the signature initiative of his predecessor. Parks stripped community-policing responsibilities from the senior lead officers and reassigned them to the field.

Removing the senior lead officers was a surprise to many of the department's staunch advocates of community policing, and many residents regarded it as a huge step backward. So did many of his area captains. One told us, "The impact was devastating. It was a real blow to community policing." As the pressure grew to reinstate the senior lead officers, Mayor Riordan ordered Parks to reinstate them announcing, "Community police officers are the bedrock that unites our neighborhoods with the officers who are sworn to protect them," Riordan said. "I am proud to announce today that...community policing is back." (*Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 2001).

Next came the Rampart scandal that drew the department into a bruising public battle over increased civilian oversight. In early 1998, the department's internal control systems had triggered an inquiry into cocaine that was missing from the Property Division in Parker Center. A management audit determined that the cocaine had in fact been stolen. An LAPD task force identified officer Rafael Perez, who was assigned to Rampart Area anti-gang unit, as the suspect and he was arrested. It soon became evident that other suspects were closely associated as friends or working partners. Events surrounding the investigations produced a momentous public debate that once again placed the Los Angeles Police Department under intense scrutiny.

In 2001, after months of negotiation, the city entered into a consent decree with the U.S. Department of Justice. The Department of Justice said that it had discovered evidence of a "pattern or practice" of civil rights violations and required the LAPD to make changes in its systems of management and supervision, including use-of-force investigations, collecting racial data on those who are apprehended, and improving the way in which complaints are taken. It also contains requirements for a system to track problem officers.

At a time that Parks could have used support from the union, he seemed to go out of his way to antagonize it. He publicly branded the union's board as "nine tired old men" who were out of touch with their members. "They're dated and stuck in a time warp," Parks charged (*Los Angeles Times*, August 12, 1998).

The union, in turn, likened Parks in its monthly publication to Saddam Hussein and the Ayatollah Khomeini. In his campaign for mayor, to gain support of the union, James Hahn promised to reinstate a compressed work schedule if elected as mayor, which he did in 2001. Parks objected strenuously, but the union – a significant contributor to Hahn's election – used its influence to focus public attention on the deteriorating working conditions in the LAPD and on the chief's shortcomings that ultimately led to his departure in 2002.

The union charged that, according to a union poll, 93 percent of its officers voted "no confidence" in the Chief of Police (*Los Angeles Times*, January 18, 2002). Parks continued to come under fire from the union, and later from the federal monitor who was overseeing the consent decree, for dragging his feet on steps to reform the Department. In its May 15, 2002 report, the federal monitor charged that the LAPD had failed to make the agree-upon changes and worse, that efforts were being made within the Department to undermine its authority (*Los Angeles Times*, May 15, 2002).

In a surprise move Hahn announced his opposition to Parks' reappointment for a second five-year term. The Mayor said that Parks had not done enough to fight crime, reform the LAPD, boost officer morale, or implement community policing. In April 2002, the Los Angeles Police Commission voted against rehiring Parks and opened a national search for a new Chief of Police, appointing former New York Police Commissioner William J. Bratton.

**William J. Bratton (2002-present)**

When Bratton took over the leadership of the LAPD he spent the first year surrounded by 11 consultants brought from New York and Boston trying to learn the department as quickly as possible. He had read our earlier research reports and discussed them with me. And he knew the obstacles both Williams and Parks had faced. Very quickly, Bratton reached out to the union and included its leadership in his staff meetings, something that no chief in recent memory had ever done. He spent time with the rank and file officers and assured them that his goal was making Los Angeles “the safest city in America.”

In his first year Bratton seemed unstoppable, visiting churches in Los Angeles’s African-American neighborhoods and appearing at fancy gatherings in Beverly Hills. The press loved it and gave Chief Bratton and the LAPD more positive attention than it had received in years past. At the end of his first year Bratton’s consultants surveyed the rank-and-file officers and included seven questions that we had used in our earlier surveys so as to make comparisons possible. Though the survey had only a 25 percent response rate it contained hopeful information as shown in Table 1 below.

<u>LAPD Survey Comparisons</u>			
<u>Item</u>	<u>1996</u>	<u>1999</u>	<u>2003</u>
I am confident that the Chief of Police is leading us in the right direction	n/a	18%	85%
My assignment permits me enough control over how to do my job	74%	59%	75%
My Area/Division captains are good leaders	83%	58%	72%
Overall, compared to a year ago, the Department receives more positive support from top management	33%	16%	79%
I would leave the Department if I had the opportunity	42%	57%	35%
I am afraid that I will be punished for making an honest mistake	60%	79%	77%
I am more satisfied with my job than I was a year ago	65%	47%	74%

Within a year, the confidence of rank-and-file officers had been restored, with 85 percent agreeing that Bratton was leading in the right direction compared with 18 percent under Parks. All of the other numbers shown in Table 1 point in a positive direction – increased job control, captains as good leaders, more support from top management, and more job satisfaction – reversing the declines suffered under Parks in the previous years.

Since his first year, Bratton has pressed a publicly visible campaign to reduce crime, a priority that rank-and-file officers fully support. One of the means of reducing crime is CompStat (Computer Statistics), an analytic process mentioned earlier, that Bratton developed in New York to reveal patterns of crime so that officers can be quickly and accurately deployed. Under Parks, officers had become so afraid of being punished that many became conflict averse.

It was a common joke among officers that policing under Parks had become “driving and waving.” CompStat and its public meetings, in which captains are aggressively questioned about crime in their areas, added transparency and accountability that had been lacking. Indeed violent crime in Los Angeles has been reduced year after year although nationally it began to rise slightly in 2004-2005.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Willie Williams, however, who demurred from claiming policing as the cause of falling crime rates, Bratton has taken credit for it.

The point is not whether any chief should be praised or punished for changes in crime rates as they are the result of many factors. A more important question is what can be learned about the impact of these chiefs’ management styles on developing sustainable leadership throughout the department – leadership that draws its legitimacy from the communities that it serves? Oddly enough, the evidence suggests that the vacuum in leadership under Williams created conditions in which enterprising and motivated captains could build leadership within their commands and bridges to the communities they served by implementing community policing.

On the other hand, Parks’ draconian management style quashed the nascent movement toward community policing and destroyed whatever leadership and bridges to the community that had been started. With Chief Bratton, it is too early at this writing to tell. Certainly, some captains, such as the one who quipped to me that “they’re riding us hard and putting us away wet,” hints that a “scoreboard” mindset for controlling crime – a mindset that began 50 years ago but one that Bratton has taken to new heights – may carry some significant downsides.

## **Conclusion**

If police agencies are to develop the kind of leadership that serves citizens, the inevitable updraft of power must be balanced by citizen power. But cities have become hollowed out leaving many of the poorest neighborhoods without voice. A compelling account is found in Robert Putnam’s book, *Bowling Alone*. When the book was published in 2000, it was an instant hit because Putnam put his finger on something that many already sensed – the glue that had held society together for two centuries was losing its grip. Wealth was becoming concentrated in fewer hands. In the 1980s, greed

and self-interest had become defining values, eclipsing interest in civic life. Rates of voting and other forms of civic participation plummeted to historic lows. During this period the media's power to mold public opinion grew immensely. Estimates are that television watching alone has reduced voter turnout up to 50 percent.

The Christopher Commission's recommendations for community policing to open the Los Angeles Police Department to citizens to participate in making the city safer was prescient. And data from the Willie Williams era when captains used the leadership vacuum to experiment with the concept shows how it translated into high morale as crime rates fell. This serendipitous finding suggests that police chiefs can focus on important short-term goals to reduce crime. But they must also develop long-term strategies to sustain successes by developing leadership throughout their departments and activating community participation.

## **References**

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**Endnotes:**

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<sup>1</sup> More background on the Christopher Commission is provided below.

<sup>2</sup> The research was supported by the John Randolph and Dora Haynes Foundation and by the National Institute of Justice for whom I wrote reports in 1999, 2000, and 2002. I am writing a book on organizational change based on my experience with the LAPD that is scheduled for completion in 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Los Angeles Police Department, *Crime and Arrest Weekly Statistics*, Information Technology Division, November 2005.

<sup>4</sup> *Crime in the United States 2005*, U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, September 2006.