

### 3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript

Lynn Thoman

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#### Ep 58: Former NYC and LA Police Commissioner Bill Bratton on Community, Race and the Arc of Policing in America

**INTRO** male voice: Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short, memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers, and now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

**Lynn Thoman:** Hi everyone, it's Lynn Thoman, and welcome to another episode. Today, I'm excited to be with Bill Bratton. He has led the Boston, Los Angeles and New York City Police departments. He is the only person ever to lead the police departments of America's two largest cities. He is chair of the President's Homeland Security Advisory Council, and also author of the book *The Profession*. I'm looking forward to finding out what he thinks good policing looks like, why he thinks crime is up in many major cities and what reforms he believes are needed in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. Welcome Bill, and thanks so much for our conversation today, and thank you also for your service as a policeman and as Police Commissioner.

**Bill Bratton:** Thank you, pleasure to be with you and your audience.

**LT:** Throughout your career, Bill, you've rejected the idea that crime rates are driven up or down by larger societal and economic forces. Police, you have said, are the deciding factor. And after years of declines, violent crime is rising again in New York, Los Angeles and elsewhere. Why do you think that is?

**BB:** That's the subject of great debate among politicians on the left and on the right, among police leaders, among the academics, community leaders, many representatives from the many movements in the country. My own perspective is that some of it is coronavirus-related, the court system effectively shut down throughout the country for a year. Our criminal justice system, which had been fraying in the year before that, in terms of a significant number of progressive district attorneys coming into office who were seemingly at times working against the police instead of with them, legislators in many states and communities that were passing a lot of criminal justice reform laws, some of which were intended to reform the behavior of police, some of which were intended to reform bail reform systems that needed to be reformed. Those were factors.

**BB:** We also have the history of this country, and its love of guns. 400 million guns which are getting easier to acquire rather than more difficult to acquire. We just cannot seem to get our act together on how to control the gun problem in the United States. And in this past year, those guns have oftentimes been in the hands, no matter how they've been acquired, in the hands of gang members. So much of the violence you're seeing in the United States at the moment is primarily in minority communities, which unfortunately have so many of the major gang problems in our country.

**BB:** Most of the victims are minorities also. So, in addition to so many other problems that minority

communities, particularly our African-American and Latin communities are dealing with, poverty, racism, bias issues, systemic racism, they're also dealing with growing crime problems, particularly around the issue of shootings and murders. And nobody has come up with an answer yet as we're about one year into this new virus that was building during the coronavirus, but as the coronavirus is coming under control, this virus suddenly exploded on the American scene.

**LT:** What does good policing look like?

**BB:** Good policing is something that I know in my 50 years in the profession, I've always been striving for. To me, good policing is the idea that the communities we police, that we work with and for, trust us. By that I mean, they will work with us to help prevent crime, as police alone cannot prevent it. They will work with us as witnesses, they will work with us politically to support appropriate funding of police, appropriate oversight. So, good policing is something that as policing has been evolving over the last several hundred years, and as I write about in my book, how it's evolved over the last 50 years is the idea that it lives up to... From my perspective, the Nine Principles of Policing, first written by Sir Robert Peel, who created the metropolitan police in London in 1829. Those nine principles are more appropriately stated than they were back then.

**BB:** First of those principles is that the basic mission for which the police exists is to prevent crime and disorder. So, good policing is the idea that we are successful in preventing most crime and disorder, and some of his other principles speak to, if we do that correctly, we will be judged not so much by this ability in reducing crime, but in the absence of this ability in reducing crime, because we're doing it correctly, we're not doing it with too much use of force, too much intrusion upon the lives of the average citizen. So, Robert Peel's nine principles for me are the Bible of what good policing should look like.

**LT:** What is the broken windows theory of policing and what do you think of it?

**BB:** The term broken windows was first used by George Kelly and Jim Wilson in the 1982 Atlantic Monthly article, and it resonated with me because I'd been living that experience in the 1970s. Broken windows refers to the idea that quality of life type of crime, or so-called minor crime, the victimless type crime that we always experience, whether it's prostitution, graffiti, the gang on the corner, the public drunk, anything that disturbs the order of a neighborhood is a broken window. And police only recently began to, once again, return to the Sir Robert Peel edict of preventing crime and disorder. In the '70s and '80s, we really moved away from it because we were focusing on how to respond better to more serious crime, and we failed miserably in the '70s and '80s responding to crime because it went through the roof.

**BB:** So that by 1990, the worst crime year in American history. We now embrace a new revolutionary concept of policing called community policing. And community policing is all of our partnership with the community, working together to identify what problems do they want us to focus on. And the community clearly wanted us to focus not only on serious crime, but on those so-called Broken Windows. Quality of life crime that they saw significantly deteriorating their neighborhoods in which the police, were left to their own prioritization, had not been dealing with in the '80s.

**BB:** And the third element of community policing is the idea of prevention. Once again, returning to Sir Robert Peel, to prevent crime and disorder. We had focused on responding to crime and

measuring our success in the '70s and '80s on our response to it. We started to move toward the community policing, the idea of measuring our success on how much crime we were preventing. And we got very successful with it in the 1990s. And in New York City, overall, crime went down by 2018, 25 straight years by 80%, homicides down by 90%. So, broken windows is an essential element of what police have to deal with, because it's the majority what people dial 911 and dial 311 to have police address.

**LT:** When you first became head of the Transit Police for the New York City Transit System, crime was really high in the subways, how did you reduce crime?

**BB:** Interestingly enough, crime was high and it was about 70 incidents a day. By 70 incidents, I'm talking about serious crime, muggings, occasional unfortunate rape, 20 some odd murders in 1990 in the subway. This is in a city of New York where there were 2,243 murders and 5,000 people shot in the streets. But the subways were used every day by four, five million people. So, what happened in the subway was basically impactful on all of those people versus what was going on in the streets, so oftentimes is only impactful in certain neighborhoods. So, the subways were the lifeline of New York City, they always have been, and anything that goes on there is magnified. As Chief of the Transit Police in 1990, I was brought in to deal with a problem that had been growing in the '70s and '80s, and making the subways seemingly less safe, and in reality, not safe. So, ridership was declining dramatically. We turned it around by focusing not only on the relatively small amount of serious crime that was happening, and chances of being the victim of a crime, a serious crime in the subways were about 1 in 100,000, on the streets it was probably much closer to 1 in 1,000 or 1 in 10,000.

**BB:** But we focused on not only crime, but on disorder, fear, evasion, the aggressive beggars, the homeless, 5,000 homeless living in the subway, getting them moved out of the subway into shelters on the streets, and it worked. It was the beginning of the so-called New York crime reduction miracle. It was so significant in the sense of its impact, that Rudi Giuliani noticed it as he was campaigning for Mayor [of New York City]. And it led to my being appointed as his first Police Commissioner with George Kelly and others coming in as advisors to the Giuliani administration on how to deal with crime and disorder at the same time. And that had been the biggest mistake in American policing, we'd been dealing with only crime and not paying any attention to disorder. When we focused on both, we began to see dramatic declines in both.

**LT:** You created CompStat which showed a geographic map of crime. How did so-called rapid response policing work and was that successful?

**BB:** CompStat was a system that I had first developed, but not under that name, in Boston in the 1970s. I began mapping crime in the precinct I was working in, I put up big maps in my office and the guide where the offices could see them. They were covered with plastic acetate and each night my clerk would put on that map little dots, different colored dots indicating different color crimes. And very quickly you could see hot spots developing, clusters, three, four, five times in an area. So, the officers knew when they were assigned areas, they were starting to see these patterns and trends developing. When I came to New York in 1994, working with the late great Jack Maple, who I had first met as a lieutenant in the Transit Police, when I chiefted the Transit. I appointed him as my Deputy Commissioner of crime patrol strategies. He, working with my Chief of Patrol and ultimately Chief of Department Hughie Nermal, created what was called the CompStat system, which was modeled in many effects after what I had been doing in 1970s in Boston.

**BB:** It had four elements, timely accurate intelligence, gather up all your crime statistics as fast as you can, rapidly respond to those emerging patterns and trends that you can see because you are mapping them. Thirdly, what effective tactics could you use to stop them, to prevent them from expanding? And lastly, relentless follow up, the idea just because the problem seemed to go away, you wanted to keep going back, keep mapping to see if in fact it was beginning to emerge again. It was also a great accountability system, because it forced Precinct Commanders to appear before the headquarters command staff each week and discuss what was going on in their precinct. What were they doing to prevent it? Did they need assistance from other outside resources to deal with it? And it was a great tool for me to identify big talent in the department and others who had less talent. And so it allowed me to put round pegs in round holes, square pegs in square holes, good crime fighters in the precincts with administrative people where they could do the most good.

**BB:** Think of it from a medical perspective and in my book, *The Profession*, I do a lot of medical comparisons, and so the comparison to CompStat, what a doctor does, think of it. You notice something on your skin that's troubling, you think it might be cancer, you go to the doctor, timely accurate intelligence. He does an exam. And what does he tell you? Well, you have a basal cell that he wants to treat. Timely accurate intelligence, rapid response, he either freezes it or he might have to basically cut it out. Thirdly, if it is advanced to a stage which is more significant, he might have to use radiation, might have to use Chemo, might have to even use more expensive surgery. And then lastly, after he has effectively dealt with the cancer, he wants you back every six months to make sure it's not coming back. So CompStat in many respects parallels good medicine. It's good policing and it's good medicine. In both instances, it takes very good care of people.

**LT:** Let's talk about racism. You have said that the killing of George Floyd was murder. How do you see the police, the killings of young black men and systematic racism? What changes do you think are needed?

**BB:** In a time in America, there was systemic racism in American policing, you only have to go back to Jim Crow South in the various laws that were enforced for 100 years after slavery supposedly ended. Many Northern cities, de-facto segregation was re-enforced by police activity. But systemic racism has really not existed for a number of years in the American police profession. Does it still exist in some departments? Possibly. Does it exist with certain officers? Certainly. But it is not widespread. That's my belief in the profession or in departments. The leadership of American policing has come a long way, as has the behavior of police.

**BB:** The death of young black men at the hands of police. Police every year take several thousand lives during the course of their duties in the course of making 10 million arrests a year. Those deaths usually occur when people are resisting arrest for whatever reason, about a thousand of those deaths involved, usually gunfire, about 18 African-American men, unarmed men, are killed every year in the United States by police, out of 10 million arrests, about half of those arrests are of African-Americans. So, the number of deaths, considering the number of arrests and the resistance to arrest and the number of police in the United States, almost 700,000 police. Statistically, the number is small. But in our society today, with the advent of social media, and with the advent of cameras everywhere, an event that a number years ago would have passed unnoticed, except in the community or the state where it occurred is now seen nationally and internationally in an instant after it occurs.

**BB:** So that the video lives forever and the video is repeated over and over again. So, something that happened in Ferguson, Missouri, the death of Michael Brown effectively ended up impacting the whole United States and accelerating the whole issue of racial reform, racial justice, criminal Justice reform, police reform. So, when I talk about the issue, I recognize that it is a significant issue, but that in many respects, statistically, numerically, it is significantly misrepresented and not fully understood.

**LT:** How do you reduce the killings of young black men and others?

**BB:** One through good leadership, good supervision, much better training, we've been doing a much better job of training officers. The use of force has been going down really dramatically in the United States, the level of incarceration has been going down fairly dramatically in United States. By way, of a specific example, let me point to New York City. New York City, in the mid-90s had on average 22,000 people in its jails. Today that population is down about 6,000/7,000, it's not that high. Why? Because the crime went down dramatically over 25 years. State prison population, where the most violent people go, and the vast majority of people in state prison are there for violent crime, that's down to about 40%. Arrests by the New York City Police are down by the hundreds of thousands, uses of force are down dramatically in terms of... On average over the last several years, New York City police officers have engaged in gun battles, there's 36,000 New York officers, in gun battles, less than 2,000 times a year, use their firearms less than 50 times a year. And on average, have been taking fewer than 10 lives a year compared to the 1970s when there were almost 900 shooting incidents a year with an average of 50 people a year being killed.

**BB:** So, this is once again where the statistics, misrepresented, not fully understood, are presented in ways in which they... With this expression, statistics, more statistics and damn lies. You can, oftentimes, make statistics make the case for the case that you want to make, but in the case of deaths at the hands of police, shooting incidents, we do a much better job of accounting for those. Out of what's hoped for in the George Floyd bills working its way ultimately hopefully of the US Congress, will be the creation of national standards for the tracking of deaths by American police. Ironically, the most accurate tracking is being done by the Washington Post. So, some of the statistics I was just giving to you were in fact from the Washington Post as they've gathered them over the last five years.

**LT:** How do you increase community trust, especially trust by the black community, in the police?

**BB:** This is what we're all trying to figure out right now. It's really... I would use the expression, Common Ground. Favorite book of mine, was by Anthony Lucas, Common Ground, talking about the racial disturbances in my own city of Boston that I lived in in the 1970s, as we desegregated our schools and public housing. I write about it in my second book, *Collaborative or Perish*, in today's network world. The idea that a leader, in this case, many leaders from the various communities, political entities and police entities, need to find a way that we have a common platform that we can see together as many people as possible on to with the idea of what are the goals that we're trying to accomplish. In this case, how do we improve community trust in the police, police effectiveness, police standards and practices? And nobody is going to get everything they're looking for, often times everything they're looking for is flawed in any event.

**BB:** But by trying to get us all together to see each other, to see why we have the positions we have, to see why we're making recommendations we have. And effectively do what Congress was

basically in our Constitution intended to do, which it has been failing to do miserably for the last several years, it's supposed to be a debating entity where they find common ground and come to consensus on legislation. We need to find some way to come to consensus on what is the best way to deal with racism in this country, particularly racism and the belief of its impact on so many things in this country that we basically hold up as the strengths of our democracy. Nobody has come up with those solutions yet. There's many great ideas, but it's like a Rubik's Cube. So the idea is taking all these ideas and blending it until we finally put the puzzle together. And unfortunately, we've been trying to do that for decades, I talk a lot about that in the book and many issues we face in the profession. But we have a long way to go until we basically finally put that Rubik's Cube together where it makes sense.

**LT:** How do you know if you're successful from a community perspective?

**BB:** We have several ways. One of the best is polling in the sense of... And we do a lot of that. Second is getting out there, meeting with the community, and I've been doing it 50 years, you can usually tell if they're happy with you, or if they're not happy with you. So, you effectively have to be there, polls help, but nothing is better than actually being in the community to see it, touch it and feel it.

**LT:** What is it that people don't know or would find surprising about the police?

**BB:** There's a tremendous amount, there is so much on television about the police: Drama, movies, film, series, reality shows. Most American people, because they never really interact with a police officer, really don't know much about how police work. One of the things that is entirely confusing to people, they think of us in this monolithic sense. There's 18,000 police departments in 50 states, 3,600 counties, and thousands upon thousands of towns and villages, and they all operate differently under different policies, procedures, state laws, and the public doesn't fully understand or appreciate that. And it makes it very difficult trying to explain why police do what they do when they do it. Particularly when there's a crisis.

**LT:** Before I ask for the three takeaways that you'd like to leave the audience with today, is there anything else you'd like to mention that you haven't already discussed?

**BB:** No, I think I very much appreciate this interview, which touched upon many of the issues that I raise in the book, and I appreciate that. Because in the book, I intended it to be a memoir, certainly, to introduce a lot of very interesting people with a lot of interesting ideas, but I also wanted it to be a tutorial on many of the issues of the day, start questioning for instance qualified immunity, implicit bias, systemic racism. And you've raised some of those questions in this dialogue, and I very much appreciate that so. One of the takeaway certainly is that everybody should always be learning. Remember the Glengarry Glen Ross play about the salesman, and they will always be selling ABS? Well, the American public, I would hope they would always be learning. And in this time of stress between police and the public, always be trying to learn more about the police, and so we can all see each other better that we have done in the past.

**LT:** And what are your other two takeaways?

**BB:** One is the idea of optimism. I'm an optimist. I'm in a profession that's known for its cynicism, but I'm an optimist. And I'm an optimist because I've seen great success for many of the ideas that

I've been able to bring into the profession and the ideas that so many others I've worked with, that have brought in. And we were having great success up into 2018 and 2019. We needed to take a close look at what went wrong and how do we fix it going forward. And I'm an optimist that we in fact can fix it. 1990, nobody thought we could really do much about crime in America. And we did something about it. For our whole history, nobody's thought we could do much about race issues, and we are so much farther along than we were. And still a long way to go. But I'm an optimist that those two issues, police improvement and dealing with the issue of race, they're joined and you can't solve one without the other. And fortunately, a lot of people are very interested this time in doing something about both.

**LT:** And your last takeaway?

**BB:** Last takeaway is that I'm excited about the 21st century. There's so much right now in terms of tensions, political issues around race, problems around the world. But we are so much better informed than we were, although the problem is now that the creation of the incident on social media... People are much more biased in many respects. The United States is so significantly divided, maybe more so than any time in our history since before the Civil War. But if we use the mediums correctly then I'm able to convey information. My takeaway is that we can use something like right now is causing us so many problems, and that's the ability to communicate with each other so easily and so instantly, that we can figure out how to deal with the many frustrations and tensions and issues that we have been dealing with. That's the optimist in me.

**LT:** Thank you, Bill, for our conversation today. Thank you also for your service as Police Commissioner, and I very much enjoyed your book, *The Profession*.

**BB:** Thank you very much. It's great being with you and with your audience.

**OUTRO male voice:** If you enjoyed today's episode and would like to receive the show notes or get new fresh weekly episodes, be sure to sign up for our newsletter at [www.3takeaways.com](http://www.3takeaways.com) or follow us on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. Note that [3takeaways.com](http://3takeaways.com) is with the number 3. 3 is not spelled out. See you soon at [3takeaways.com](http://3takeaways.com).

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