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Bratton's Love-Hate Relationship with Security

by [Scott Goldfine](#) [e-mail author]

The only person ever to serve as chief executive of both the New York and Los Angeles police departments, William Bratton has established an international reputation for reengineering law enforcement and fighting crime. A Vietnam veteran who also served as the New York City Transit Police's chief and Boston's police commissioner, Bratton achieved the largest crime reductions in New York City's history as police commissioner in the mid-1990s.



He has found similar success since being sworn in as LAPD chief in October 2002. Recently, Bratton appeared at a news conference announcing the city's violent crime had declined almost 27 percent during 2005 compared to 2004 and its property crime fell off nearly 10 percent. "You'd have to go back to 1956 to find a comparable crime rate for Los Angeles," he told those gathered.

Despite those numbers, Bratton's stance on how patrol officers should respond (or more accurately not respond) to burglar alarms has not endeared him to security dealers. Believing as much as 15 percent of officers' time was being wasted responding to false alarms, the chief had proposed an end to all burglar alarm calls not verified by video surveillance.

He then spent nearly three years embroiled in the most hotly contested and highest profile conflict ever documented regarding how law enforcement should deal with false alarms. When the dust finally settled in late 2004, a compromise was approved in which anything beyond two false alarms at an address within a year must be verified by a person at the scene prior to police dispatch.

While Bratton remains outspoken on the false alarm issue and a proponent of verified response, he has paradoxically been among the nation's most progressive chiefs when it comes to police using other types of electronic security systems,

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particularly video surveillance.

So then, is Bratton friend or foe to the electronic security industry? On one hand, burglar alarms are the bane of his existence. Yet on the other, CCTV systems provided by the same manufacturers and installation companies responsible for offending intrusion systems are helping LAPD achieve new heights of success in crime reduction.

To reconcile this conundrum, *Security Sales & Integration* recently visited the chief at his Parker Center office in downtown L.A. to find out firsthand what his beliefs really are about the security industry, the false alarm problem and technology. Bratton pulls no punches and while his opinions may ruffle the feathers of some, they offer invaluable insight into the mind of one of the law enforcement community's most revered figures.

False Alarms Blamed for Wasting Valuable Police Resources

How are patrol officers currently handling burglar alarm calls?

Bratton: We have decided to get out of the alarm business. The city council opted to settle for half of what we were seeking. But we were able to raise the fines — the fee structure, if you will — the registration requirements and also the education and training that is necessary if you have a false alarm. So the issue of the alarms is one in which we still share the belief and concern that the vast majority of them are false. Even with the improved technology that's out there, 95 percent of them are false.

Have you ever personally interacted with anyone from the alarm community and shared your concerns?

Bratton: Sure. We had very significant debates in front of the police commissioner and the city council during this process. I'm also cognizant through my involvement with major city police chiefs, policing organizations and police executive research. Policing, in general, is not fond of the [burglar] alarm industry. We consider it an unnecessary burden and it's an industry that we don't feel is particularly willing to work with us to make the alarms more reliable and less of a negative economic and resource impact on police.

What kind of feedback have you gotten to the alarm response policy?

Bratton: The Los Angeles Police Department reports to the civilian Los Angeles Police Commission and the police commission is actually the entity that regulates alarms. There's a separate unit down there that does the fines, training, education and licensing, and it seems to have settled down significantly from when it was a very high-profile, hot-button issue about a year-and-a-half ago. That was when we were making a conscious effort to get out of the alarm business.

How does the situation in Los Angeles differ from what you faced back in Boston and New York, in regard to alarms?

Bratton: There's no difference; it's the same problem everywhere you go. You've got an alarm industry that is oftentimes unwilling to work with us in a way that we want to work with them, so I don't see any difference. Boston, New York, when I was there, I had the same issues that I have here, and my colleagues and many other cities I interact with all have the same problems. I think we're pretty uniform in our belief that alarms, if properly maintained, if they have sufficient sophistication, if

supported by human response or technology, are a good thing.

Technology Seen as Salvation to Taking Burglar Alarms Seriously

Do you believe we're going to see more situations like Dallas, where they went to verified response for commercial alarms?

Bratton: I think you'll see a move in that direction. The good news, however, is the technology continues to improve and what has in years past been just a straight minimal electronic intrusion alarm can be much more than that today. Thanks to the widespread availability and economic viability of camera systems, for example, a business owner sitting at home when his alarm goes off has the ability to go to his computer and punch it up to take a look at what the cameras are viewing. He can then determine if there is anything actually going on in the store. The idea is that when you're away from home and the alarm goes off, increased use of technology can help verify precisely what is transpiring.

Do you think it makes the most sense to fine the alarm owner as opposed to the alarm company?

Bratton: The alarm owner is usually responsible for an accidental alarm. They forget to shut it off, they didn't properly enter the key number, and so on. Occasionally, you might have a weather emergency where the power goes out, along that line, so it's a shared responsibility. But the bulk of it, however, falls on the alarm owner.

The person who installs the alarm has the obligation to ensure that the product being put in is reliable. That's where the idea of going with more established companies rather than Dick & Jane's Mobile Alarm Notification Systems, in which the operator is sitting someplace in Denver handling alarm calls from here in California!

Confusing, Complicated Systems Cause Owners to Stop Usage

What would you say to those from the alarm industry who proclaim: "It doesn't matter if only one out of 100,000 calls are real; it's a public safety issue"?

Bratton: It's not a public safety issue because people more traditionally contact us through dialing 911. I agree that, in a perfect world, we could answer every alarm call in the goal of preventing that one out of 100,000 that's legitimate. That'd be wonderful, but we just don't have those types of resources. So when you look at that 95 percent in wasted resources spent chasing false alarm calls, it could be used much more to prevent other more likely forms of crime, patrolling high-crime neighborhoods and things along that line.

At the same time, we're appreciative of our officers responding to an alarm call in that when the officer is traveling to the alarm call he can encounter something else and then deal with that. Also the alarm can help an officer so he's not traveling with blinders on to a location. But it is very time-consuming for him to get there, do a search of the premises and the property and then wait for the owner to show up to shut the alarm off because it's driving the rest of the neighborhood crazy.

Every department has different practices in handling alarm calls. I can go back to my days as a young officer when we were required to standby so the owner could be located to come down to shut the alarm off. If there was a door the owner forgot to lock and the wind blew it open and set off the alarm, an officer had to stand by the open door.

Do you have an alarm system yourself?

Bratton: I do. But one of the issues, and one we faced during a

recent spate of burglaries in the wealthy Bel Air/Beverly Hills/Brentwood areas, is the number of people who have alarm systems, often incredibly sophisticated alarm systems, and don't use them. Often, what they end up doing is buying a system that is so sophisticated they never really get to learn how to use it.

This is especially true of the systems that have zoned alarms where if you're sleeping in your bedroom and the rest of the house is alarmed, the first time you get up in the middle of the night and go walk down to the kitchen to get a glass of water and forget to shut the thing off, the cops come banging on your door and you never use it again. Also there are people who go out in the middle of the night or go out to dinner and don't bother to set the alarm.

So then, you still believe a properly installed alarm system designed to meet a specific need and lifestyle offers value to the user?

Bratton: There's no denying there's a benefit to alarms. One of the first times I visited California, back in 1980, I was absolutely amazed at all of the alarm company yard signs. Some houses had two or three different ones on their lawns. What the public wants by those signs is the feeling that if I have it and the next-door neighbor doesn't, the burglar is going to go the there instead. There's a psychological comfort for the owner and there's potential prevention because the burglar is going to look for a softer target.

LAPD Embraces CCTV Systems, Seeks to Emulate Chicago, London

It seems LAPD has become enamored with video surveillance systems. What is the appeal?

Bratton: We are going to be putting cameras around one of our more troubled public housing developments, modeled after what Chicago has done quite successfully.

Camera systems are becoming more and more sophisticated; some of them are sound activated so they can actually detect when there's a gunshot. Not only can they tell you when there's a gunshot, they can also determine the caliber and the camera can be programmed to automatically focus on the direction the shot came from. If there's a police car within a certain radius, it can actually monitor that camera. So the level of sophistication is growing dramatically.

There seems to be a bit of a paradox in that the companies partnering with and providing CCTV systems for LAPD are often the same ones responsible for burglar alarm systems. How do you reconcile that?

Bratton: What's happening is you have competing companies trying to work with us to develop camera systems so they can field test them and promote the fact they are being used by the Los Angeles Police Department. We don't have a problem with that. It's not that we're marketing it that way.

One of the things we want is force-multiplier capability. If I've got an officer who's watching a bank of monitors with 10 or 12 cameras from 10 or 12 different locations, that gives me the force multiplier of 10 or 12 officers. If those cameras become increasingly sophisticated, so they're providing motion alarms and other indicators that help the officer pick and choose which screens he should look at, that works even more to our benefit. The same thing is relevant for alarm systems. If the alarm company wants to try out prototypes and work with us on those types of things, we're more than happy to take a look at it and see if it's to our advantage. Is it a force multiplier for us? Does it reduce false alarms or reduce time? Does it reduce the workload on us?

Is it true that you recently backed a plan to spend \$27 million to equip LAPD 's patrol fleet with mobile digital recording systems?

Bratton: Yes, but that price is going down because, as we' re sitting here, they' re developing new, more cost-effective technology. The big problem for us is the servers needed to store all the images because, by law, we have to save them for five years. We expect to get the go-ahead to reduce that to two years, which would phenomenally reduce our costs because the servers won' t need to be as big.

Department Intends to Tap Into Traffic Control Camera Network

Beyond some of these special interest groups, are funding sources becoming available so more cameras can be deployed?

Bratton: Not in the short term. The city is very limited with its funds. The prioritization is for cameras in the cars for officer safety, cameras based on citizen relationships and cameras for liability reduction. We are partnering with the traffic bureau so we are able to piggyback as they put in cameras for traffic control. We are also partnering with the private sector so we' re aware of who has cameras around their facilities that we can tap into.

The Staples Center, for example, and other facilities have extensive camera systems that could be beneficial to us from a prevention standpoint, as people know they are being watched. Now, if there is a crime committed, one of the first things we do is check to see if a camera is present and if it recorded anything useful. These systems can be extraordinarily helpful.

Do you see value in other electronic security technologies, such as access control and biometrics?

Bratton: Oh yeah. Take the building we are in, Parker Center, for example. We' re in the process of installing a \$5 million fire alarm system. We' re also doing key-entry systems and hand reader systems. This building is not particularly secure and it' s very labor-intensive to secure police officers. So even in our own facility, it' s moving toward biometrics. All of that is coming into play.

That is one of the great things about where we are at this day and age. The limitation is strictly one of money. Reducing False Alarms Makes Good Business Sense for Industry

If you ran an alarm company yourself, what do you think you would do to foster a better relationship and better cooperation?

Bratton: Reduce the number of false alarms! There' s many ways it can be done.

First, in this area of the country, we' ve got a number of larger companies like Valley Patrol and ADT that not only sell you an alarm but also sell the response that goes with it. So instead of the police going to the alarm, they send an agent. This is a great way to deal with nonresponse.

There' s also, as I' ve already indicated, the idea of new technology that allows the alarm operator to basically have camera systems that allow them to take a look at the point of entry, if there is in fact an open door, and then that becomes a verified alarm, as opposed to one resulting from maybe the wind blowing the door open. Thirdly, there is the area of public education. In this instance, you establish a defined structure such that people work very hard not to have an accidental alarm. From a business standpoint it' s to the advantage of alarm companies, particularly those that offer guard patrol response, to improve the ability to determine if an alarm is false or not.

For the complete version of this story, see the March issue of Security Sales & Integration magazine.



Scott joined the staff of Security Sales & Integration in October 1998. His one-time occupation as a cable-TV technician and lifelong love of electronics made his move into the security industry a natural progression. In addition, Scott has spent more than 20 years in print and electronic media. Since graduating in 1986 with honors from California State University, Northridge with an undergraduate arts degree in Radio-Television-Film, his work has encompassed magazines, radio, television, film, records, teletext, books, the Internet and more. In 2005, Scott captured the Maggie Award for Best Interview/Profile Trade for "9/11 Hero Tells Tale of Losses, Lessons," his October 2004 interview with former FDNY Commander Richard Picciotto, the last man to escape the Ground Zero destruction alive. For more than 50 years, the Western Publisher Association's Maggie Awards has recognized the finest in magazines.

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