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Broken Windows

by Joe Ferullo

NCR Today

Los Angeles is in a bit of a shock these days, so if you visit here ? forgive us if we seem distracted. It?s not because some major movie star has just walked by, or because the Dodgers are still own first place in August. The reason is William Bratton: the best chief in this city?s history has just told everyone he?s stepping down.

Bratton came to Los Angeles seven years ago, where he found a city and police department on the verge of a nervous breakdown: corruption scandals, brutality charges and inner-city riots had made the sharp-and-sure LAPD of ?Dragnet? lore a distant memory.

Bratton changed all that by employing a lot of tools ? perhaps chief among them what is now called the ?broken windows? theory of crime fighting, a theory that in the end respects the poor and underprivileged, and protects the places where they live and work.

Criminologist James Q. Wilson helped develop the theory decades ago, when most academics thought there was nothing police could do to combat crime; only by tackling broad ?social causes? could society hope to see results. But **as he writes** in Thursday?s Los Angeles Times, Wilson argued that police could make a difference by fighting back against the small trespasses that made urban life too difficult.

If a vandal broke a window, police should track him down; if graffiti artists covered the side of a building, police should arrest them. These actions signaled to the people living in a neighborhood that someone cared, that the small civilities mattered. This would, in turn, encourage people to use their streets and parks ? and that critical mass would help keep crime down.

Bratton understood this in his gut, and acted accordingly. As a result, crime plummeted everywhere he worked ? violent crime in Los Angeles has fallen forty-nine percent since he took over as chief in 2002.

Part of what Bratton understood was this: not only are criminals mostly poor, so are their victims. Those people deserved the same sense of safety and order that families in L.A.'s tonier sections could purchase with rented guards and iron gates.

Though some of his tactics were controversial, Bratton received hefty doses of praise from social activists in Los Angeles. Fr. Greg Boyle, S.J, head of a successful gang rehabilitation center called Homeboy Industries, **labeled Bratton** "the best police chief the city has ever known."

Bratton was, in fact, a big supporter of Homeboy Industries. Every Tuesday morning, he and other officials would start their day with coffee and breakfast at Fr. Boyle's Homegirl Café, a place that gave female gang members real-world job training and a fresh start.

Bratton will stay on through October, while the city searches for a replacement. That won't be easy.

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