

U.S. NEWS

Top Cop in Los Angeles Says Cutting Crime Pays

By GABRIEL KAHN

LOS ANGELES—Shrinking budgets are forcing such cities as Phoenix, Portland, Ore., and San Diego to make deep cuts, including to police. But Los Angeles Police Chief William Bratton has grown his department with a persuasive argument about the financial costs of crime.

The city is adding 1,000 police officers, pushing its force levels in the Los Angeles Police Department to above 10,000 for the first time. Even as the city faces a more than \$400 million shortfall for this fiscal year and next, the police budget—the city's most costly department—is emerging largely unscathed.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa made public safety one of his campaign planks and pushed through a tripling of the city's trash tax to dedicate more funds to pay for the new officers. But the expansion of Los Angeles police, at a time when other city departments face cuts, is also the result of the chief's argument.

Mr. Bratton has made a case that spending on his department returns financial dividends to the city. "The idea of being seen as an investment is that if you make it safe they will come," he said.

For years, police chiefs have argued that safer cities are better for business, increase tax revenues and help property values.

What distinguishes Mr. Bratton's approach is the rigor with which he crunches the numbers, linking the performance of his police department to specific cost savings and new revenue.

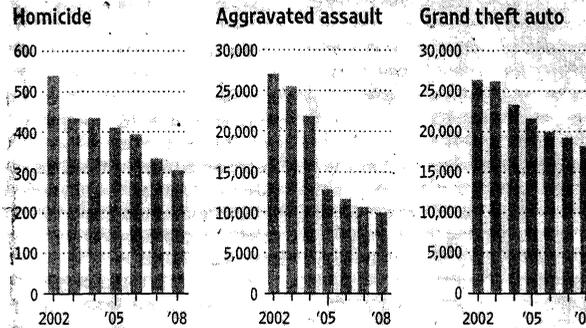
Mr. Bratton, 61 years old, arrived in Los Angeles six years ago, after successfully heading up police departments in his native Boston, and New York. In Los Angeles, he has presided over a steady drop in crime. This year, the police department projects Los Angeles will have 374 homicides, down from 647 in 2002, when Mr. Bratton took over, and a level not seen since 1968. Aggravated assaults so far this year have declined 62.9% from 2002. Grand theft auto is down 31.1% from then as well.

Mr. Bratton said he thinks of Los Angeles's crime reduction as money in the bank. "The cost of a homicide to the city is \$1 million," he said, citing an estimate based on a study by the National Institute of Justice that takes into account such costs as criminal trials and police salaries. "We've reduced the homicide rate by nearly 300 in six years," he said. "That's a \$300 million annual benefit to the city."

His department, he said, has a record of making arrests and winning convictions in 70% of the homicides in the city. Keeping a convicted murderer in prison in California costs about \$70,000 a year when legal costs and other items are factored in.

Safer Streets

Incidence of crime in Los Angeles, through Oct. 25 of each year



Source: Los Angeles Police Department

With close to 300 fewer homicides a year, that is about 200 fewer people "getting convicted and going to prison for murder. Multiply that by \$70,000," he calculates, and it leads to more than \$13 million in reduced costs.

Factoring in declining property crimes, such as auto theft, he said, the savings skyrocket, covering the department's roughly \$1.3 billion budget. "The overall crime reduction in the city gets us close to my budget, so I'm basically cost neutral."

Some question Mr. Bratton's math. Rick Rosenfeld, a criminologist at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, says Mr. Bratton's numbers assume that policing is capable of controlling the entire crime situation in a city.

"Bratton has a view that police own crime," said Mr. Rosenfeld, and that social and economic factors aren't as significant. "There is a strong kernel of truth to the argument, but he takes it too far."

Historically, he said, crime wanes during periods of economic growth and surges during economic downturns. "We haven't had a recession since late 1950 in which crime did not go up," Mr. Rosenfeld said. "The one we're entering is not likely to buck that trend."

Mr. Bratton countered that, considering all the varying social and economic factors in Los Angeles, the city should be on the verge of a major crime wave.

"The traditional argument of

economists, academics, criminologists, demographers is that crime is caused by the economy, unemployment, racism, poverty," said Mr. Bratton.

He noted that in Los Angeles, unemployment has been rising for several years, and the city is home to a large group of illegal immigrants, many of whom had been working as day laborers in hard-hit industries like construction.

"But my crime is down," said Mr. Bratton. "It's been that way for two years. And I expect my crime to go down more this year."

It is an argument that Mr. Bratton used to his advantage in budget negotiations. He pledged that with more funds for his department, he will be able to deliver even lower crime rates.

"If you're a political leader, it is very hard to go to Bratton and say, 'We hear what you want but we're not going to give it to you,' after he has made such a compelling case," said Anthony Pacheco, president of the city's police commission, which oversees the department.

Mr. Bratton's argument has also won over much of the city's business community. Tim Leiwake, chief executive of sports and venue-management firm AEG Worldwide, has co-chaired two campaigns for ballot initiatives that sought to raise revenue for both the police department and the Los Angeles

County Sheriff's Department. He said Mr. Bratton's effectiveness in lowering crime in the city "had a huge impact on our decision to invest \$2.5 billion" in a downtown entertainment complex that is expected to generate \$30 million in sales taxes.

Historically, Los Angeles is one of the most underpoliced cities in the country, with a force of 9,700 serving a community of nearly four million, compared with New York's force of about 38,000 serving a community of more than eight million. Yet efforts by past mayors to increase force levels have met with mixed success. Former Mayor Richard Riordan, in the wake of the 1992 riots, pledged to increase the police force, then at around 7,200, by 3,000 officers. By 1998, levels hit 9,800 but fell back as funding dried up.

The current increase is linked to a rise in the city's trash tax pushed through by Mr. Villaraigosa, which has risen to \$38 from \$12 for a single-family home. Though other areas of the police department's budget are facing reductions, such as money allotted for new vehicles, the mayor has pledged to ensure there are sufficient funds to hire new officers.

"The irony is that as we go into this economic downturn, we're expanding," said Mr. Bratton, "which is exactly what you need to do when the economy turns bad."