Police need better training in deciphering crime scene details

BY RAYMOND RODRIGUEZ

When Gov. Ryan declared a death penalty moratorium for Illinois, he cited “grave concerns about our state’s shameful record of convicting innocent people and putting them on Death Row.” As the governor noted, between 1977 and 2000, 12 inmates were executed, and 17, who had been convicted on the evidence available, were later exonerated. His dramatic gesture highlighted one of the important ways in which our criminal justice system has broken down.

There are many reasons for this breakdown, from overzealous prosecutors succumbing to political pressure to “solve” cases to the relics of racism, but thoughtful observers have to admit that police training is also part of the problem. We continue to train officers in the traditional investigative paradigm of establishing motive, means and opportunity. This paradigm (which, when it fails, has sometimes led to police relying on forced confessions) doesn’t take into account advances in science and technology that can throw new light on many difficult cases.

Meanwhile, in the college programs that police departments have come to rely on to train officers, students are not learning the scientific and even the practical skills needed for criminal investigations.

In higher education, criminal justice curriculums tend to fall into two categories: social justice/criminology, which emphasizes social inequities, and law enforcement administration, which focuses on organizational management, and civil and criminal liability. Both focus far too heavily on theory and not practice, in part because teachers whose academic advancement depends upon arcane areas of research do not have the interest or expertise to train criminal justice students in the applied scholarship they will need to be successful on the street, in labs or in court.

As a whole, for instance, criminal justice programs have not embraced the forensic sciences even though DNA analysis has been a viable investigative tool available since 1988. And even while courses relating to the basic identification, collection and preservation of physical evidence are beginning to appear as electives in some programs, there are very few courses in the techniques that help students decipher important crime scene details.

Criminal justice programs have not embraced the forensic sciences.

According to the membership directory of the International Association for Identification, there are only 24 credentialed senior crime scene analysts for the state of Illinois, and fewer than half are engaged in field investigations. Only one in 10 public forensic labs offers services in crime scene investigation and computer crime investigations.

A successful criminal investigation involves a synthesis of investigative theory and scientific methodology, including interviews and the collection and analysis of data accumulated from physical evidence. Criminal investigation should be taught as a serious discipline that requires both qualitative analysis and quantitative research.

Not only is it imperative to build the appropriate curricula and research base for criminal justice programs, but it is also necessary to develop national curriculum standards.

If professions such as nursing, law and even journalism have training that is generally applicable across the country, why shouldn’t criminal justice programs be able to establish a consistent set of standards that clearly articulate what students need to know to practice their profession?

Many elitist academicians are resistant to the idea of criminal justice training deeming it too pedestrian for institutions of higher learning. They would rather it be left to the police academies. But training is standard in many professions. So, why shouldn’t higher education treat criminal justice with equal respect? Why shouldn’t the academy embrace a practice as important as this one, where professional skills can literally mean the difference between life and death?

Raymond Rodriguez is a senior administrator at Kaplan University and a retired Illinois police detective.