

#30 (ROD BRUNSON)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Hi, Jerry Ratcliffe here with Reducing Crime, a podcast featuring influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers. Rod Brunson is the Thomas P. O'Neill Professor of Public Life at Northeastern University. We discuss is op-ed in the Washington Post that, at the height of the protests around the killing of George Floyd and calls to defund policing, pointed out that under-policing could be just as deadly for high crime neighborhoods as over-policing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Welcome. The guest theme tune for the previous episode was Hill Street Blues, one of my favorite police shows of all time. But being from the 1980s, definitely an oldie. For this episode's guest theme, well look, if you've been listening to this podcast for a while, and cheers if you have, then you probably figured I had to go here eventually. The theme you just heard is more recent from 2002 and is from season one of what in my view, and that of many TV critics and police officers, the most realistic portrayal of East Coast city policing ever made. Hell, it's some of the best television ever made. If you are not able to guess the series, don't worry, the answer as always is in the next episode of this podcast. Then go straight out and binge season one. Trust me, you won't be disappointed.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In this episode I had the pleasure of catching up with Rod Brunson. Dr. Brunson is the Thomas P. O'Neill Professor of Public Life in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Northeastern University. Professor Brunson co-directs the Racial Democracy Crime and Justice Network, a collective of social scientists conducting research on crime, inequality and the criminal justice system. He's received numerous profession awards and recognition of his scholarly work and was recently elected a fellow of the American Society of Criminology. Rod's expertise centers on police minority community relations, youth violence and evidence-based criminal justice policy. He's consistently called for effective crime reduction strategies that don't result in racially disparate treatment of minority citizens in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Rod's scholarship has featured in leading journals such as Criminology, the Annual Review of Sociology, and Justice Quarterly. In 2019 he co-authored with Brian Wade an important article in the academic journal Criminology and Public

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Policy titled *Oh Hell No, We Don't Talk to Police*, documenting the experiences of young black men involved in gun violence in Brooklyn and the Bronx. This work subsequently informed his opinion article in the *Washington Post* that pointed out scholarship has demonstrated that under-policing, not just over-policing, leaves residents feeling perpetually underserved and unsafe. At the height of the protests around the killing of George Floyd and calls to defund policing it provided a nuanced and thought-provoking counterpoint, and a great subject for our chat. With Rod in Boston and me in rural Maryland at the time, we caught up online.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How are you?

Rod Brunson:

I'm good. How about you?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Same shit, different day I think is pretty much what it's like.

Rod Brunson:

The days do kind of run together, right?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think COVID-19 seems to have gone on for, it feels like a decade already, doesn't it?

Rod Brunson:

Yeah. Well see, if it means anything, it used to, today's Friday.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, I know, but every day's just blending one into the other. It's just variations of crap really, isn't it?

Rod Brunson:

Yeah, that's true. It brings that expression, same crap, different day, right?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Absolutely. So you're up in Boston, aren't you?

Rod Brunson:

I am.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How's the weather?

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Rod Brunson:

Actually today it's a heat wave. Today, I think we're supposed to get into the high 50s or 60s.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The high 50s is a heat wave in Boston, right?

Rod Brunson:

Yeah, so you take it when you can get it in November.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, that's true. And you're surviving mentally?

Rod Brunson:

Oh yeah. I believe so.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I know, we're probably the worst people to ask, right?

Rod Brunson:

I was going to say, to the extent that I know, and again, you do things like, I go for walks, I go out and try to safely engage with the outside world, but certainly outdoors is still good. Today's a nice day. The sun's out, and I think, as I said, we're having a heat wave today and maybe tomorrow.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So look, mate, one of the things that I was really interested in talking to you about was ... You've been a respected scholar now for, I don't want to make out that you're desperately old or nothing, but for a couple of decades.

Rod Brunson:

Yeah, my knee knows.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How'd you gauge your scholarship? Is it your H-index? No, it's the feeling in the knees, right?

Rod Brunson:

There you go.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

My lower back says I spent way too much time sitting in an academic's chair, right? But you haven't done a huge amount of what I consider I suppose public criminology, some public-facing stuff. But after George Floyd I noticed that you wrote a really influential op-ed piece in the Washington Post. It was really timely. It was in June of this year, and it was

titled "Protests Focus on Over-Policing, but Under-Policing is Also Deadly". As I say, you don't do a huge amount of the more public-facing stuff. What inspired you to do that?

Rod Brunson:

I think it was a combination of my personal and professional feelings, and grief after seeing the George Floyd murder captured so strikingly and upsettingly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, it was brutal. I think it's affected everybody worldwide.

Rod Brunson:

Yeah, and in that moment, I was thinking you have these moments of reflection, as you pointed out, that you've been in a profession for a couple of decades, you have to think, "Have I done what I have intended to do and could I have done more?" Not to say that I could've, or any of us could've prevented what happened, but our understanding of how we shape perceptions and thoughts and policies around such issues, and it was one of those opportunities where I was approached and asked if I would be interested in offering some opinions and perceptions, and I really wanted to clear the air in the sense that there was a lot of discourse, some more productive and helpful than others. So I really wanted to comment on, we really need to listen to each other and certainly pay attention to the evidence and what we know from prior work and drawing on my own experiences. So some of the conversations, just personally and professionally to me, struck a particular cord, because I thought that they were not very productive and not very helpful to finding solutions and moving forward.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, there was a lot of emotion. There was a lot of thoughts and feelings. But there wasn't a huge amount that I think was helpful in terms of forming a dialog, and is that part of what you were trying to change that narrative a little bit?

Rod Brunson:

Yeah, I was trying to not necessarily change people's minds, but contribute to the ongoing discussion and helping to kind of redirect some of the understandable emotion and grief and outrage that people felt. But this is also an opportunity for us to move forward, as tragic as it has come to us, this opportunity, and let's take stock that this is an opportunity, even if it's an opportunity out of tragedy.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What was the reception? Because to some degree you were kind of agreeing with the existing narrative, but then you were also pointing out all the potential flaws with it, and that went very much against where a lot of the emotion was running in the summer of 2020 at the time. Did you get a lot of pushback around that?

Rod Brunson:

Not that I'm aware of, and I think part of it is akin to the grief process, that everyone grieves differently. So for me, I certainly had my moments of reflection and of sorrow and feeling despair. Then at the point when I had an opportunity to write something I felt that I need to push myself beyond those rightful and understandable emotions to, "What can we do differently as a society?" And I understand the anger and the passion and all those emotions that people have around these issues that certainly I have studied for a couple of decades, but that has been part of our unfortunate history and legacy in this country for considerably longer. So what can we do to move forward?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

A lot of your scholarship really has been around how especially high crime neighborhoods experience policing. How did that work influence how you thought about going about writing an op-ed piece?

Rod Brunson:

I thought, and again, we need to include voice of people who are impacted by policies and impacted by some of the decisions that administrators, executives and politicians make. But their voice is often excluded, and I think the thing that I found most troubling around some of, even though I understood the arguments and understand the arguments and have some shared concerns around efforts to defund the police, I think that we should purposely avoid policies that will leave people less protected and in more vulnerable positions. And I thought that the opportunity to do that was lost by not including the voices of people who have to navigate dangerous neighborhood conditions and settings every day. So through my work and through that opportunity with the Washington Post, I sought by proxy to be that voice for people who have to live in these conditions.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

One of the things that I think is really interesting about your work is that you've spent a lot of time speaking to young men in high crime neighborhoods, generally young black men in high crime neighborhoods, who are on the receiving end of policing that they've often qualified as bad policing there. They think it's overly aggressive and it's disrespectful and so forth. Yet for all of that to some degree they still see the benefit of policing and want policing. It seems almost contradictory, right?

Rod Brunson:

Yes. And I think that's the level of complexities and those are the nuances that are often missed from at least the public discussions. So I wanted to certainly add that element to that, that not to just accept this narrative that police are unwelcome and unwanted in high crime black communities, but there's also, as you said, the seemingly contradictory narrative is that you can have unfavorable and unpleasant interactions with the police and want to inspire change and reform, at the same time understand that there's a real need for a variety of reasons, structural conditions, ongoing issues with inequality and discrimination, that there's still a role for the police to play. It's just what role will they play and how will they interact with the people who want and need their services?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So middle-class white people who live a block from Starbucks don't necessarily speak for high crime neighborhoods then?

Rod Brunson:

Well, I think the danger is that, and certainly I don't mean to suggest that they should be excluded from those conversations, but I think that not having a lived experience dissimilar to the people who you hope to speak for is somewhat damaging, or potentially damaging, and it also assumes that you have some understanding that you may not of those different complexities and nuances.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think that's the key, isn't it? There's a kind of assumption that you can speak for everybody. It's one of these notions that I struggle with the idea that there is a community, and there isn't. There are multiple communities, and it's really difficult hearing all of their voices, because it's often the most active and vocal people who speak up the most, but you can't guarantee that they're not outliers. You can't guarantee they're representative of the whole community, and especially in places like Philadelphia where I am and Chicago where you did original work, wasn't it?

Rod Brunson:

I started my dissertation research in Chicago, on the South Side of Chicago.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you've got big communities of people who are very rarely represented in much of the discourse, right?

Rod Brunson:

And you point out that even within communities there's not a community. So some of the work that I started off doing in the South Side of Chicago was to understand how gang members navigated dangerous terrain, young kids. Like how did they go to school, or play in the neighborhood playgrounds, et cetera? So I wanted to better understand that, and I would attend police community meetings in the basement of often churches or recreational centers, and I looked around, and again, not to engage in any discriminatory agist kind of beliefs, but it was the grandmothers in the neighborhood, well respected, but in my view they weren't the best people for me to talk to about how young people navigate the neighborhood. And these were also some people who were very involved in community organizing, and they were the ones that were often calling the police. So they had a different relationship with the police than the youth had.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And they're often the community that the police go to, because I think it's easy, right?

Rod Brunson:

Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If you create a community meeting and you have a Neighborhood Watch meeting or a neighborhood meeting, the people turn up, the easy assumption is to say, "Okay, this is the community." Inevitably the community meetings I go to, the community are always asking for more policing. They're never asking for less.

Rod Brunson:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So I think you get these contradictory messages, and I think police departments have to make an extra effort to go and reach other communities, and young guys who are involved in crime are still part of the community.

Rod Brunson:

Yeah, exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So how different was it when you were reaching out and speaking to those young guys in Chicago compared to what you were seeing in the community meetings?

Rod Brunson:

Oh, vastly different, and it's one of those things as well that I stumbled upon speaking to young men and young women. These were teenagers probably between the ages of 13, 16, and I didn't have access to begin with. So I had, as you spoke about, the community meeting's a place to go where you can have some access with the community.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, you can have access with some communities, right?

Rod Brunson:

Right. Some segment of the community, but not the young people who I wanted to speak with. And again, I didn't purposely seek gang members or gang-involved persons, I wanted to talk to at-risk youth, whatever that particular population was at the time. So then I started spending time at community centers and started volunteering and helping set up tables and helping to sweep and mop floors at basketball tournaments, et cetera. So it wasn't until I had that type of access that I had an opportunity to start to schedule and engage in interview, and certainly had people who were working in the recreation center vouch for me, to say that I was okay and that I was somebody who the kids could trust.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How long did it take to build that trust?

Rod Brunson:

Thinking back 20 years or almost 20 years or so. But it didn't come overnight, and I've learned a valuable lesson that I shouldn't have expected it to. So when I went to the community meetings, the grandmothers and the elders in the neighborhood, they were willing participants. They wanted to talk and share their thoughts, and I'd done some prior work with young people, so I knew you had to build trust with them in ways that you don't necessarily have to do with older adults or people who may understand the issues from a different perspective. So I would say it probably took me several months, a lot longer than I would've liked, given that I was on a time table to finish a dissertation.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think that's something that's lost on a lot of young scholars, that if you want to do really interesting primary data collection that you really have to actually invest time in any group, any community, any agency, same with police departments. I've spoken about this on the podcast before with Geoff Alpert about how difficult it is for young scholars to sometimes appreciate the investment that is required. They get so used to just downloading data sets and think it comes easy, but then you go to do primary data collection and you wonder why people won't speak to you for months.

Rod Brunson:

Exactly. That's certainly been an issue, or at least a phenomenon that I've observed that has held true over time. So the data that I reference in the Washington Post articles collected in New York City with people who are involved, not all, but some involved in crime and gun carrying. It's frustrating that we couldn't enter the field and start collecting data on our timeline. There was certain challenges in working with organizations, other people's interests and agendas were prioritized, because research never happens the way that we intend it to happen. Our timeline was not ...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No shit, right?

Rod Brunson:

I know, that was an understatement. So we had an opportunity. It was an opportunity, but it was a challenge. But I had a talented group of young doctoral students, and what I suggested and they were very open to was, "That this is not going to be idle time. That we need to have a presence in the community." So for a year before we started actually talking to people we spent time, they mostly spent time, in the neighborhoods providing services in terms of resume writing reviews, attending vigils, being a presence in the community before they even actually started asking questions.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Did it open doors? Did you learn things that you weren't expecting to find? The reason I say this is I was on a ride-along with the police just last week and ended up having a conversation with a young guy in his 30s who'd had a drug addiction for four or five years, and just ended up spending 40 minutes talking to him out the window of the police wagon, and had a fascinating insight into the drug markets in Kensington in Philadelphia that I never expected to have, because I was really focusing on the policing side.

Rod Brunson:

Oh, definitely, and having those conversations when you don't have a set of questions that you're asking or things that you believe are the questions of interest to your study, but just having a free-flowing conversation. So I would say many of the things that were learned were helpful for the research that involved things as simple as, "Well, if you're going to go to these types of activities or events and you're going to be aligned with this gatekeeper, just understand that it's probably going to limit your access to other groups, because you're going to be seen as at least the messenger or the affiliate of the person who brought you.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So just to be open to what people wanted to tell you rather than what you wanted to ask them?

Rod Brunson:

Exactly. And having the relationships, and again, that we're not just going and extracting information from people and using them to advance our careers. We're here to help, and even if we helped through our scholarship we're still helping, but we aren't just here in a predatory kind of condition where we're just trying to exploit people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Scholarship isn't just then about writing peer-reviewed journal articles and getting published in the Bangladeshi Journal of Sheep-stealing and Criminology that nobody's ever going to read, right? There are other ways to use scholarship to help those communities.

Rod Brunson:

That's always my orientation, and again, I'll just say how that came about, and I believe I always had those sort of sensibilities, but where it's hard to resist when someone's asking you for help.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No shortage of academics seem quite incapable of figuring out how their work can help. But yeah, anyway.

Rod Brunson:

Well, I'll say, again, going back to my dissertation research on the South Side of Chicago and all these things that I thought I wanted to learn and that I was well positioned to learn from this group of young people who were living in a gang-involved neighborhood, but at the end of one particularly rich interview with a young person who was maybe between 13 and 14 years old, pulled me aside and said, "Well, you asked a lot of very interesting questions about the challenges that we face in going to school and going to playgrounds and how we do this in an environment where people are using violence and particularly gang violence, but one thing that you didn't ask about we really need help with is, can you do something about the police?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What's nice about that is if we fast-forward a decade or two to you writing the op-ed piece in the Washington Post, you come with some advocacy for a position, but you do it with the scholarship behind it and an evidence-based position. And I see a lot of advocacy, especially around policing at the moment, and people don't have the scholarship to back it up. What was it about the existing narrative of the time that had you concerned around defunding the police or even arguments for abolishing the police?

Rod Brunson:

Again, I think it was just lack of recognition of the role that the police can play, and even if they aren't playing those roles adequately or to the satisfaction of the community presently, I've spoken with and been in enough communities, and not to say that they're all the same, and spoken with community groups, and as you pointed out, often the ask is for more policing. It's certainly for different types of policing, but it's certainly not for less police. So to have the opportunity to say that these two things can coexist and that we can have over and under-policing simultaneously and that they cumulatively erode legitimacy and trust in the police. I understand the anger and the passion, desire to defunding.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh definitely.

Rod Brunson:

But defunding has the potential to inadvertently further leave people who are in these situations where they are underserved or they experience ineffective policing, it's not going to leave them better protected, it's going to leave them more unprotected.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I think that's a key part that I found fascinating, is that you bring this knowledge of, let's face it, a community that you would think would be pretty much onboard with the idea of defunding or abolishing the police. We're talking about young men, repeat offenders with criminal backgrounds. If there was a group that you think would think, "Great, less policing," from that group or even abolishing the policing it would be them. But what you bring is the insight that they're saying, "No, we want better policing. We want to feel safe in the neighborhoods." Going back to, "We want to feel safe going to school and going to the playgrounds." That for me was a real nuance that was lost on so much of the discussion that I really appreciated reading.

Rod Brunson:

Well, thank you. And I would like to also highlight that even though we have 108 people in our sample broadly, we limit it to 50 young black men between the ages of I think 18 and 24, people who had expressed having experience with gun violence, even as perpetrators or offenders. And even that subset of folks who you think would not want the police anywhere near them recognized the need for police, and many times they justified their gun carrying by saying, "The police aren't taking the dangerous people off the street. If I see someone who I know shot someone else a couple

weeks ago and they're still in the community walking around, I can't depend on the police to keep me safe," and that influenced their decisions to be armed.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And it's not a lack of policing, it's the wrong kind of policing.

Rod Brunson:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I want to read one of the pieces that I really liked in your op-ed piece, and you write, "The result in that many black and brown communities now suffer from the worse of all worlds, over-aggressive police behavior and frequent encounters with residents coupled with the inability of law enforcement to effectively protect public safety. But defunding police departments would address only one side of this problem, and the real and significant dangers of under-policing would just get worse in the neighborhoods that most need the police to improve, not disappear." The part that I really liked about that was the reality that it's really great for people to say, "Be supportive of defunding the police or abolishing the police," but it seems that those calls are coming from the people who would be affected least by the possible negative repercussions of that.

Rod Brunson:

We think about affluent middle-class communities where the police perhaps don't have enough to do, but we don't hear these calls to, "Let's defund them, or reduce their budgets," and not to say those couldn't be appropriate conversations to have, but we often don't hear those conversations if they are being had. They're not part of the broader public discourse. I certainly believe that there are opportunities to revisit police budgets and to see whether or not some of the responsibilities that we as a society have laid at the feet of police are probably better shifted to some other group of trained professionals who have the expertise, talents and training to handle those situations.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The challenge with that is it's probably not going to completely replace the police, but it'll have to be in addition to that. And the communities that need that the most are the communities that don't have the budgets for it. That's the part that I worry about this, because you're right, you could defund policing in affluent communities and they would have slightly less shiny police cars, but the places where I see the really beat up police cars that are just about limping along and being kept on the road are in the communities that need more investment in policing, not less investment in policing. The trouble in the United States is having this model of policing where the community is responsible for its own budgets is that you can't redistribute the policing wealth from the wealthy communities to the places where you really need it.

Rod Brunson:

Exactly. And I guess my concern also was that the people who were the least likely to suffer the consequences of those kinds of knee-jerk responses, which I consider them to be, and I think that the arguments have become more refined now months later, that some people mean defund is for a shift in resources and do some thoughtful budget analysis, and for some it means abolishing the police. But I think having all those ideas presented under one umbrella of defunding has made thoughtful conversations much more difficult.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Have you thought somewhere you'd like to see it going?

Rod Brunson:

I certainly would like to see different people at the table. And I say different people, I mean the voices that are not often represented, and policing shouldn't be something that we do to people, it should be something that we do in collaboration with the various voices that are represented in a particular neighborhood or a community. And as you pointed out, I've often called for, which some police agencies and city officials do a better job than others, of working with people who are difficult. Not that they're difficult people, but they may be difficult for you to wrap your head around that I'm working with a group of ex-offenders, or I'm working with a group of activists who have been nothing but a pain to us. But that those groups will also, and individuals have important contributions to make.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They often have a disproportionate capacity to influence the things that police are interested in. I've often said that it's really nice having Neighborhood Watch meetings where you get the grandmothers and the local pastor, but it's not like they're heavily involved in neighborhood crime.

Rod Brunson:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I was going to point out that when it comes to talking about different communities there's a phrase I heard that made me laugh, but was actually painfully insightful, which is, "Upper-class people get police service, middle-class people get police response and working-class people get policed." With your experience working with young men, younger offenders, the people who are probably the community that police should really be spending a lot of time with, how can police departments engage with that a little bit more?

Rod Brunson:

I would draw from my experiences being a researcher and being outside of a community and wanting to work with the people in the community toward finding solutions, and I think it's coming and interacting and having sincere and genuine dialog when you don't want something. So you're not looking for information, you're not looking to ask questions about a recent shooting or a recent victimization, but it's establishing those relationships in the community that are not self-serving. So when officers have the opportunity, and I know that depending on where people work in

high crime communities, they're chasing calls and going from call-to-call, but when there's an opportunity to interact with people and connect with people outside of your law enforcement duties and expectations, that you take advantage of those. So again, at the risk of dating myself, I'll go back to my experience growing up when we had Officer Friendly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I wasn't going to make out that you were that old, Rod, but I think we're leaning towards ... Was that the late 1800s? I don't remember an Officer Friendly.

Rod Brunson:

It was a different time. So certainly a different time.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How many times have you had your knees replaced, mate?

Rod Brunson:

There you go. And similar types of programs. And again, I don't know from an evaluated standpoint whether or not they were effective or what the intent was, but I'll just say as a young kid, for me it was about getting coloring books, or seeing the police officer demonstrating the traffic light and how they worked, even though we may not have had any in my neighborhood. But having those types of interactions with the police during your formative years I think are very important, and if you only have experiences with the police when they are arresting someone or when they come to your house and they're looking for your older sibling or a neighbor and they're asking questions, that's not the opportunity I think. Even though you can establish some good rapport then. But I think that having those types of interactions and connections with young people outside of a law enforcement capacity are important.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think what you're raising here though is a challenge for police departments, because budgets are strained, some people are trying to defund police departments, numbers are down, recruitment is difficult. So police departments are not exactly flush with personnel, and there is still a public expectation that response policing will take place and that the public expecting the police will turn up at a reasonable amount of time. So you have to put bodies into response policing. That limits the number of people who can do this kind of community engagement work, which has a long slow burn, and it's really difficult in an evidence-based environment to justify the personnel in those areas, because the payoff may be years down the line.

Rod Brunson:

Those are valid points, and it's about prioritization. And again, I know that the longevity of a police administration is not one that may lend itself to longterm planning, but I think police departments prioritize how they use their resources. So we can't suggest that the current use of those resources or prioritizing crime fighting and other types of efforts from an evidence-based perspective are being effective either.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Very true.

Rod Brunson:

So let's think about doing other things. And as you well know, you spend enough time with enough officers to know that there are officers who would be interested in performing or engaging with the community in that type of way, but the structure of policing and the culture of policing may not prioritize that type of community engagement.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right, and it's hard for them to get rewarded for doing that kind of work.

Rod Brunson:

Exactly. But that's a policy decision too, the, "What do we reward?" And as we know about organizations, people will perform, or at least aspire to perform, in ways that are rewarded by the organization. So how do we measure positive community engagement other than you didn't get a complaint. That shouldn't be the default.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, that seems like an almost reverse perverse disincentive or incentive, I'm not sure what I'm really saying there. I think one of the other issues is that police departments do or don't sometimes do a great job of selecting the officers for community engagement. Sometimes they're pushed into it, whereas it's such a vital role to have somebody who actually enthusiastically volunteers that steps up for it. And I'm always looking to work with police officers who have at least five years service, if not 10, because I think they need to get all the initial gung-ho bullshit out of their system.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They need to drive around fast cars for whole chunk, kick in a few doors. They need to get that out of their system and then see that it doesn't have a huge impact and to just see, "Really? Another day of doing this?" And eventually they reach that point with five, seven, eight years service. They're going, "Is this what it's like for the next 20 years?" And a few of them start to look for something else, to go, "Okay, how can I have a different kind of more longterm impact?" And find those kind of officers. They're often I think much more suited to the role.

Rod Brunson:

Yeah, and I agree. And I think it comes back to this notion of I believe officers, they want to help as well. But sometimes how they think they're helping becomes somewhat distorted through their experiences in the academy or their experiences with their training officers, and it's at that time where they realize that, "What I have been doing doesn't seem to be reducing crime or helping to solve problems in ways that I thought." So perhaps being willing to have some reflections, some deep reflections, and say, "Well, how else can I help, or assist, or to improve the community?" And some agencies, that type of work is not only not rewarded, but it's frowned upon, or you're not seen as a real police officer, or it's a punishment. You get banished to these types of units because you aren't cutting it as a bonafide police officer.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, "If you misbehave we're going to put you on foot patrol and send you out doing community work," which is kind of like punishing people to do potentially some of the most effective policing that they could actually do.

Rod Brunson:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

One of the things that I think is interesting is that there is possibly a shared experience that people haven't really thought about. In your op-ed piece you point out that there's a significant frustration with young people in neighborhoods when they see known shooters, known doers, out on the street almost flaunting the fact that they've engaged in a shooting, they've possibly killed somebody, and they're out walking the streets. And it strikes me that that's a similar experience and frustration that police officers have. They actually have the shared experience of the sheer frustration of seeing this bastard still walking the street, who everybody in the neighborhood knows shot somebody last week. But how do you convey to people that in the community that's not down to the police, that's down to the district attorney, or it's down to the county prosecutor?

Rod Brunson:

I think it's one of the notions that it was really surprising to me as well. We often hear police officers, and sometimes rightfully so, are very frustrated by shooting victims not providing them with names and addresses and the information that would help them to bring the assailants to justice.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You mean you're talking about the no snitch culture that's in so many places now?

Rod Brunson:

Exactly. And again, to add some kind of nuance and complexity to that, many of the young men that we spoke with on some occasions really didn't know who shot them, and some of that might be a result of them being involved in so many different beefs and altercations with people they don't know who the assailant was, or that there is a group of people who are in a rival gang, et cetera. So I think that some of the frustration that they experience was that police didn't believe them, because it doesn't resonate with you. Like if somebody shot you, you should know who it was.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

"I don't know who shot me," doesn't mean, "I don't know who shot me," it just means, "It could be one of so many people."

Rod Brunson:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think it's difficult for a lot of people outside of policing, and I think quite a few people inside policing, to conceptualize that in some neighborhoods in Philadelphia, some neighborhoods in Chicago, people are living with this potential threat of gun violence just trying to go down to the corner store, and it's not from just one person or one group, they've potentially got these minor altercations, these minor beefs, that blow up into these potentially fatal incidents with a group of people that they've just had run-ins with.

Rod Brunson:

Yeah, as you well know, it extends to their peers, their family, et cetera. And I think one of the differences is that the police officers by-and-large don't have to worry about those people who are remaining free victimizing them. Some young men said to us that they would rather take their chances with the criminal justice system by carrying a gun as opposed to not having a gun when they came across someone who was looking to harm them. And as you said, just the pervasive nature of taking a gun with you everywhere you go, to the corner store, to meet your younger sibling at the bus stop, or at the train station, or wherever. It was just this overriding consideration in their lives.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, you've got to take your nine with you.

Rod Brunson:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think that's a difficult thing for people to get their head around. We're not saying these young guys are angels by any stretch of the imagination, but having some beef with some guys down the road shouldn't come with a potential for a death sentence as a result of it. I think it's also interesting that the police are almost kind of neutral participants in the neighborhood. They're not a major cause of threat to these young guys, but they are just this sort of catalyst for a potential entry into the criminal justice system, while what they're really trying to do is to go and pick their sister up from school in a way that doesn't end up with them getting clipped or their little sister as collateral damage.

Rod Brunson:

Yeah, and that speaks to the importance of having the lived experiences of people who are in these environments and who make different choices than we would perhaps want them to make as far as carrying a gun, and not to legitimize it, but to understand it and why they wouldn't feel comfortable sharing information with the police, as you talked about the stop snitching culture, and particularly when you don't believe that something's going to happen as a result. Then you have the added stigma of being labeled a snitch and then the person is still not brought to justice, and as you spoke about, that there are other actors involved in that decision making, it's not just about the arrest as it relates to delivering justice to victims.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There's the role of the prosecutor in terms of this, and I think you nicely put it, delivering justice. There is a sense that at some point there has to be some sense of justice. I think this is often underappreciated, that people who have been victimized either directly or indirectly just by living in a neighborhood all the time where all this is going on, is some sense of justice would be nice at some point, right?

Rod Brunson:

Yeah. And there's also this kind of nuanced understanding that there are some rules of the road so to speak.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

As Omar said in *The Wire*, "A man's got to have a code."

Rod Brunson:

Yeah, there you go. So some of that was around when people got shot or killed that certainly there was grief around them, family members or other people who were close to them, but they also understood that that was kind of the cost of doing business. And it was when violence wasn't contained amongst those warring groups when it extended to broader community members who were described as not deserving that. But that is a reality that even if people aren't very sympathetic to, as you pointed out, that the young men, at that we spoke with, that they weren't angels, but they weren't the only ones in the community who stood the risk of experiencing gun violence. It's the unintended victims, or the nextdoor neighbor, or the person who they happen to be with that day. So it extends to the broader community and makes everyone less safe.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And it doesn't help to label the entire community as just being black and white, and I don't mean in terms of racial of course. I mean just the world is full of good people and bad people. That's an incredibly unhelpful way of looking at things. And I think the other thing that I think is important about what you're saying about, for these young guys, carrying firearms, you're not legitimizing it, but it is mitigation. It is understandable why they would choose to do so, not that in any way anybody's advocating that it's acceptable.

Rod Brunson:

Yeah, and I think sometimes we use language for convenience when we say, "Senseless acts of violence," but for the people who are involved, it made sense to them. At least it made sense to them at that particular time. And the broader article that the Washington Post piece is drawn from was a Criminology and Public Policy article where we also talk about or discuss this notion that because people aren't coming forward, because people aren't providing the information at the pace or at the level that police officers would want them to, it doesn't mean that they condone the violence in the community. There're real world reasons why people don't come forward. They have to live in the community, and again, the violence extends to them as well, and I think that's an important consideration.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I'll put links to both the Criminology and Public Policy piece and your Washington Post op-ed on the podcast page at reducingcrime.com/podcast for the listeners.

Rod Brunson:

Thank you.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Now that you've reached out into more of this sort of public criminology now and dipped your toe in the water with this op-ed piece, are we going to be seeing more commentary from you?

Rod Brunson:

I don't know. I would like to have those opportunities, but it is a very different type of writing and a very different type of thinking, and it goes back to the comments that I made about police organizations. Academia is similar in a way with what it rewards. So I think there is a growing recognition of the importance of publicly engaged scholarship, but we also aren't quite at the place where we reward that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And you've been successful at the traditional scholarship, but it's hugely time consuming. So the challenges are the people who are good at scholarship don't have time for the advocacy, but the people who are doing so much of the advocacy don't have the scholarship to back it up.

Rod Brunson:

In an ideal world people would do both, because I do believe that if you're going to have an opportunity to comment on particular issues that are of great importance, you have a responsibility to have those comments grounded in evidence and in scholarship.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Absolutely.

Rod Brunson:

And again, it's not an either/or, it's that we can do both. And academic institutions and departments and fields also have to recognize that there's value in different types of scholarship and that we're not trading one for a lesser form of intellectual engagement.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And when the public read a byline that comes from an academic, from a scholar, they should have an expectation that there is data and evidence and logic and science and reason to back all of that up. Absolutely.

Rod Brunson:

And to be totally transparent with you. I don't think that I would have taken advantage of that opportunity at the Washington Post earlier in my career. Part of it is having the confidence of believing that what you have to say is important and accurate and based in science, but the other part of it is, as I said before, that if it's not rewarded then as police officers do, as most of us do in other occupations, you make a decision about how do you want to spend your time and what is going to be rewarded for that investment of that time.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So what would your advice for younger scholars be?

Rod Brunson:

I would say that as difficult as it is to balance, I would certainly suggest that you do both. But I think you have a responsibility to engage the public and inform them based on science and based on the evidence, and that doesn't mean that you can't advocate for certain positions, but those positions of those thoughts and perceptions and perspectives should be grounded in science and evidence.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Absolutely. And we certainly need more scholarship in public debate right now, don't we?

Rod Brunson:

Oh, certainly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Rod, as always, it's bloody good to see you, mate. Everybody's listening to this on the podcast, but I'm seeing Rod on a Zoom call. And it's lovely to see you, mate. And you look well.

Rod Brunson:

Thank you.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And thanks for spending the time with me, I really appreciate it.

Rod Brunson:

Thank you for inviting me. I appreciate the invitation.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was episode 30 of Reducing Crime, recorded online in November 2020. Links to Rod's op-ed piece in the Washington Post and his article in the journal Criminology and Public Policy can be found in this episode's segment at reducingcrime.com/podcast. There you can also find transcripts of every episode. New episodes of this podcast are generally released around the end of each month and are announced on Twitter @_ReducingCrime. Don't forget the underscore. Be safe, and best of luck.