

## #41 (CHARLES RAMSEY)

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### Jerry Ratcliffe:

Reducing Crime is a podcast featuring influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers.

With over 50 years' experience in and around policing, Charles Ramsey is one of the most revered police leaders in America. He rose through the ranks in Chicago, was chief in Washington, DC, commissioner in Philadelphia, and co-chaired President Obama's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. In our chat covering policing in America, he reflects on where we have been and where we are.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm Jerry Ratcliffe, and welcome to Reducing Crime. Before we get into this month's episode, a quick note. My most recent book, *Reducing Crime: A Companion for Police Leaders* has just been published in Spanish. My thanks to Myrna, Jose Luis, Daniel, and Jim Rose for their help and support with the translation. The Spanish version costs 249 Mexican pesos, which is about 13 US dollars, and there is a link to the purchase website at [reducingcrime.com/podcast](http://reducingcrime.com/podcast). Just check out the section related to this episode, number 41.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

And for this episode, I got to have morning coffee with a legend.

Charles Ramsey's been in and around policing for over 50 years. He joined the Chicago Police Department as a cadet in 1968 and was sworn in in 1971. He rose through the Chicago ranks to deputy superintendent in the 1990s before becoming chief of the metropolitan police department in Washington, DC. It was quite a turbulent time. He was at the helm during the Chandra Levy murder investigation, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the 2001 anthrax attacks, remember those, and the 2002 DC sniper investigation. In January 2008, he moved to be the police commissioner in Philadelphia, and during his tenure homicides dropped below 250 for the first time since the 1980s. Just to put that achievement in some perspective, we are now over 500 for this year.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

In 2014, President Obama tapped Ramsey to serve as co-chair of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. Chuck Ramsey has also served as president of the Police Executive Research Forum and the Major Cities Chiefs

## REDUCING CRIME PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

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Association. He has bachelor and master's degrees from Lewis University in Illinois and is a graduate of the FBI National Academy, the National Executive Institute, and the Naval Postgraduate School. A few weeks ago, I stopped by his house and we popped over to a local coffee shop and bakery on Germantown Avenue in the northwest of Philadelphia. It was really noisy inside, so we found a spot outside in the autumn sunshine. Please bear with me as you'll occasionally hear folk coming and going because, well, it's a really popular spot. But as you join our conversation, we are just settling into some marvelous coffee and muffins...

**Charles Ramsey:**

They have very good baked bread here, fresh every day.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

This is one of the things I like about Philadelphia, not just chains. You still get these little neighborhood coffee shops where people have got interesting, weird drinks and the baristas have all got humanities degrees.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Well, you'll find a lot of interesting stuff up here in Chestnut Hill, good food. We just happened to come at a time when the whole lacrosse team decided to stop here for breakfast. There was a time when I was that young. I have a hard time remembering.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You joined the job in '71, didn't you?

**Charles Ramsey:**

Well, '71 as a sworn, '68 as a cadet.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Holy shit, that's more than 50 years.

**Charles Ramsey:**

1968 as a cadet, and all that counts toward my pension.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So more than 50 years. Do you think you've got the hang of it?

**Charles Ramsey:**

Nope. Nope. Still learning.

Times change. I mean, you have to adapt and change along with it. Policing today is a far cry from the '60s or '70s or even '80s or '90s.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Is it better?

**Charles Ramsey:**

I think in a lot of ways it's better. I think in many ways it's certainly more challenging. There's no question it's more challenging.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Would you do it again?

**Charles Ramsey:**

Oh, yeah. In a heartbeat. In a heartbeat. I was just very fortunate because I accidentally became a police officer. I never thought about being a cop as a kid growing up. I wanted to study medicine. My dream at that time was to become a doctor. I was a freshman at the University of Illinois Chicago, and I was working in a grocery store. There were two cops, three cops, actually, that used to come in, plain clothes officers from the Englewood district on the south side of Chicago. One of them's sister was a cashier there, and this was in kind of a dicey neighborhood, so they'd check in on a regular basis to make sure we were okay and all that sort of thing and over time struck up a friendship. And one day, I never will forget, this one cop came in and he asked me, he said, "Where do you see yourself five years from now? What do you want to be doing?"

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

How old were you then?

**Charles Ramsey:**

About 17 probably.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Hell of a question to ask a 17-year-old.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Yeah. And I said, "Well, I hope to be a medical school. I want to become a doctor." He said, "Well, have you ever thought about police department," and I said, "No, I never thought about it." He said, "Well, the city has this cadet program that the city will pay your tuition. There's no obligation to become a police officer, but you have to be enrolled in a college university full or part-time and you have to maintain at least a C average." I asked how much they make, turned out to be double what I was making there. I said, "Okay, well, where do I sign up?"

**Charles Ramsey:**

So my dad and I got on a bus literally and went down a police headquarters. I signed up and went through a battery of exams, psychological tests. It was more difficult to become a cadet actually than it was to become a sworn officer in

Chicago. Out of 1000 applicants, they chose 50, and I was one of the 50. Once I became a cadet, it was just the right fit for me. I just knew that this was something I could see myself doing for the rest of my life, and I did.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

What do you think it was, the sense of structure, the sense of purpose?

### Charles Ramsey:

I think it was a sense of purpose more than anything. When I was a kid, my brother's best friend... So I would've been 15 years old. His best friend would come over to our house quite a bit. I grew up in Englewood on the south side of Chicago, which is, to this day, a very challenged neighborhood. I know now my parents would do things just to keep my brother and I and my sister off the street, especially in the summertime. So we had a pool table, we had table tennis set up, our father made a little makeshift BB gun range down in the basement shooting at clothespins and stuff, just to keep us occupied, and we could ask a friend over. Well, he was our next-door neighbor, my brother's best friend, so he spent the entire day.

### Charles Ramsey:

On this particular day, it got late and it was time for him to go, and he was supposed to go in the house and do some chores for his mother. But it was a nice summer day, and as he was walking to the house, some gang banger walking down the street saw him and stopped him and said, "How do you ride," which meant, "What gang do you belong in?" Well, this kid wasn't in a gang and he panicked, turned to run. This guy stabbed him in the back. I never will forget. It was the second time I ever saw my father cry. The first time was when my grandmother, his mother, passed away, and then it was on this day.

### Charles Ramsey:

This kid's name was Tony Brown. He's laying on the sidewalk, wagon crew came to take him to the hospital, and I saw then what I've come to know as the last gasp when they put him on the stretcher, that rush of air leaving his lungs, and he died. That was the first homicide, actually, I ever saw. I think the helpless feeling I had was one reason why I thought becoming a doctor would be a way in which I could help, but then becoming a cop filled that same void. So when I look back on it, I think that was it. Once I became one, it filled that hole that I had as a result of what I had witnessed. So that's how I became a policeman.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

A few weeks ago, I spoke to Bill Bratton, and he was saying he feels that policing has gone full circle almost and is almost back to where we started again. I'm not sure that feels that that's the case.

### Charles Ramsey:

It doesn't feel that way to me.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

But in the '60s, the country coming to a realization of racial injustice, especially in the '60s, and here's you joining the police. Kind of wondering about the parallels to today because Black recruitment into the police service is really difficult for the moment now in 2021. Is it feeling similar? What was it like joining the job then?

**Charles Ramsey:**

Well, recruitment in general is difficult, not just with African-Americans, but it's always been a bit of a struggle getting African-Americans in because when you really think about it, the kind of abuses of power and authority that some police officers have engaged in normally takes place in communities of color. That didn't like stop at the end of the '60s and then pick back up with Michael Brown in Ferguson. I mean, it's been going on all the time. So it's always been difficult to recruit. Even when you do recruit successfully, many get knocked out in the background process. Sometimes, that's legitimate. Sometimes, it's not. So there are some parallels, but it's never been easy to recruit people of color, men or women, and a lot of it has to do with the history of policing, what not only took place in the past but what continues, unfortunately, in some cases to take place.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

During the '70s when you were on patrol and then you worked narcotics, you were a commander in narcotics eventually, I have no sense of really what the Chicago Police Department was in terms of how it dealt with race internally.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Well, I mean, there was definitely systemic racism in the department back in those days, but it was systemic racism everywhere, so it's not like I felt it any more than I felt it in my daily life. Chicago was a very segregated city, continues to be a very segregated city, and when you went into the police department, black cops worked in black areas, didn't work in white areas at all. White cops, of course, could work wherever they wanted to work. If you were Hispanic and Spanish-speaking, you were in a Latino district or area. Those kinds of things took place. I mean, there were no women in patrol at all when I started. They were just starting in Chicago in the mid-'60s a social experiment of putting a Black and a white officer together in a patrol car. They called them salt and pepper cars-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Unbelievable.

**Charles Ramsey:**

... to see whether or not a black and a white cop could work together. I mean, that was a big deal.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Did you work one of those?

**Charles Ramsey:**

They kind of forced break-up of partners, and on occasion I worked with white guys. I had one in particular that was a negative experience, but I had others that weren't. It all depended on the individual, just like it does now. So, yeah, it

was an issue, no question about it, but I wouldn't say it's come full circle. I'd say in some regards it never left. It never really went away. It never really went away.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Did you think about that when your son told you that he was going to join the Philadelphia Police Department?

**Charles Ramsey:**

Well, yeah. First of all, I never steered him one way or the other.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So he just came to you and said, "Dad, I'm thinking about joining the Philadelphia Police Department?"

**Charles Ramsey:**

Well, he went to Penn State.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Oh, that was his problem to begin with.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Yeah. And his major was criminal justice.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Oh, even worse then, right?

**Charles Ramsey:**

And so that's when I started thinking this kid was thinking about maybe going into policing, and I was hoping it would be probably at the federal level. He became a juvenile probation officer here in Philadelphia.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That's a tough gig.

**Charles Ramsey:**

He wanted to go with the FBI, but during the recession, the feds weren't hiring. So he was on a team there called JET, Juvenile Enforcement Team, which is made up of juvenile probation and Philly police officers, and so some of the cops from Philly said, "Man, you ought to come on the job." So he applied, and he came on the job as a Philadelphia police officer. Out of all the time I spent as a police officer and as a police chief, the proudest moment I had was when I swore him in.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Beautiful.

**Charles Ramsey:**

That was a very unique and meaningful experience. He then later left and went to ATF, which is good. He's enjoying it, and he's still here in Philadelphia. I'm a parent. Obviously, you worry. I never worried about myself, and I worked in some pretty hazardous units, but I never worried about myself. But it's different when you're thinking about your child.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Well, I mean, you were heading up the narcotics unit right through the crack epidemic, right, in the '90s.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Well, I was a sergeant in narcotics for seven years before I became a commander of narcotics. I mean, I was going on raids and back in those days, we didn't wear bulletproof vests. In fact, if you wanted a bulletproof vest, the department made you go out and buy it yourself. You know, it was heavier, so it didn't fit underneath your garment, so you had to put it in a carrier and just throw it on when you're going through the door, take it off right after. There aren't too many things in policing that are more dangerous than executing a search warrant. There really aren't.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah. When I see a lot of these armchair critics, I don't subscribe to the idea that you must have a policing background to comment on policing, but every now and again, there's a few people you say, "Really? You should go do a solo traffic stop late one night or be the first through the door. Just give it a go, and then see how you feel about the pious attitude that you've got from the exalted ivory tower from which you speak."

**Charles Ramsey:**

Well, there are a few, especially some of the talking heads that you see, that really have no experience or, even worse, limited because they're an attorney or something like that. But they've never been on the front line dealing with this stuff. Sometimes, that definitely does show with the commentary. I do a lot of work now with CNN. I try to be as objective as I can be, but, also, I can't ignore the experience I have. I mean, I know what it's like.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

One of the things that I was always impressed with, you're a little bit like Jon Stewart in his peak when he was doing the Daily Show. He knew when to be funny, and he knew when to be outraged. You always seem to get the right tone. You knew when to defend policing to the hilt, and you knew when to say, "You know what? We kind of screwed up there. We kind of fucked that one up, and we need to think more about that." Was that gut, or when things happened, did you spend a lot of time thinking through...

**Charles Ramsey:**

It's just instinct.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

How did you get that feel?

## Charles Ramsey:

But it's actually watching others. One thing I learned early on, and that is that bad news does not improve with age. The longer it goes before you get it out, the worse it actually is for you, and so if it's an issue where you did something wrong... And I think about this one case we had where we had a traffic officer that was in charge of calibrating breathalyzers and he didn't do it correctly. The bad part is he knew they were not calibrated correctly but he continued to use them.

## Jerry Ratcliffe:

Good grief. Yeah.

## Charles Ramsey:

Yeah. We found out about it, and I called a press conference because it's just a matter of time before they'd found out anyway, and I told them exactly what we had. One of the reporters asked a question, "Well, what do you think we ought to do with those people that actually were charged with DUI?" I said, "Those cases ought to be dismissed unless it's a situation where we had a serious DUI to take a sample and so you've got that as evidence. That's different. But if you blew a 0.09, slightly over the limit, it could cost you your job, it can cost everything"...

## Charles Ramsey:

Listen, we screwed up. That's on us. Then you don't defend that. How can you defend that? You can't. You get it out there, man, and take whatever lumps you have but stand it up. If you've got a situation where a police officer's actions were not only within policy, they were reasonable, it may not look pretty because use of force never looks pretty, but if the officer's actions were justified, then you say so. It's not going to make you popular, but if you're trying to be popular as a police chief, you're in the wrong business. I mean, you're there to just do your job, call it as you see it, and just let the cards fall where they may.

## Jerry Ratcliffe:

You came into DC, you came into Philadelphia from the outside. How do you go about the process of figuring out what to change, moving change forward?

## Charles Ramsey:

Well, first of all, I don't go in there with the attitude that I have to just go in there and just start changing stuff. First, you have to scan the environment and find out what's going on. Where are we now? What are the talents that I'm working with in terms of some of your senior command and other people?

## Jerry Ratcliffe:

What do you look for then? I mean, because I know you came into Philadelphia and, suddenly, you promoted a couple of guys, Tommy Wright and Kevin Bethel, who's been a guest on the podcast as well, and I've been around Philly a while. I'd not heard of those guys, and suddenly these guys are deputy commissioners, but they are just rocking. How do you identify that talent?



**Charles Ramsey:**

Some of that came as a bias that I have. I spent time as a district commander three years on the west side of Chicago in a district that unfortunately, to this day, continues to usually lead the city in the number of homicides, which in a city like Chicago is saying a lot.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Right now, it is. Yeah.

**Charles Ramsey:**

But you know what? It was my favorite command. Of all the commands I had in Chicago Police Department, I enjoyed being a district commander more than anything because of the complexity of the job. You were a mini police chief. You had to deal with community. You had to deal with your own officers, some good, some not so good. You had to deal with politics because you had elected aldermen and so forth. You had to deal with your bosses above you. If you can run a district effectively, then, to me, the sky is the limit.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I think what people fail to appreciate is that in some of the big cities, if you're a district commander, in the rest of the United States, you'd be a member of the Major City Chiefs Association.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Yeah. Exactly right.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah. 200 cops, you have a population of 120,000 people with all sorts of chaotic problems, you'd be a major city chief anywhere else.

**Charles Ramsey:**

And people don't realize the complexity of it. Now, Kevin had the 17th district in South Philly, which is no joke, and Tommy had the 25th.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah. They have some entertainment.

**Charles Ramsey:**

[crosstalk 00:18:08], right? And so I spent time visiting all the districts, talking to all the commanders, getting a feel for whether or not they were on top of their crime, what they were doing about it, relationships with communities, and these two were outstanding. Plus, I wanted to send a strong message in the department that if you are good at what you do, you do your job, then you can be rewarded with promotion because I got Mayor Nutter to change the law that really prevented me from doing things like that. So I brought up these two captains and made them deputy commissioners, and it worked out very, very well.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Do you think that's an important thing when you go somewhere new, is just to get out into the districts, go and visit people, get out of the office?

**Charles Ramsey:**

You got to know who you're working with, and you got to know the communities and what their expectations are. When you come in from the outside, that's something that's really, really important, is to be visible, to be out there because Chicago is Chicago, DC is DC, Philly is Philly. There are some similarities, but there are an awful lot of differences, and you have to respect that. Just because something is not familiar to you doesn't make it bad. It's just different. So understand that and then find out why are they doing things this particular way? If it makes sense, leave it alone. If there's a way to tinker and make it a little bit better, then do it. I don't go in with the attitude that I just have to clean house or whatever. Even with staff, I didn't go in making command changes right away. It was about six months in. I needed to see what I had to work with.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And you didn't necessarily, like a new lion taking over the pride, have to kill all the cubs.

**Charles Ramsey:**

No, you don't. I mean, if I can use an analogy, this is football season, so you can have an all-pro defensive tackle playing for the Eagles. You move him to wide receiver. Guess what? He's not going to be that good. He's too big, he's not fast, probably he doesn't have good hands. You're playing him out of position. We've played people out of position in policing all the time because we're just filling slots as opposed to putting people in there that either have the ability to succeed because of their experience or you're giving them the kind of support in terms of education and training so they can succeed. Don't just fill a slot and then say, "Oh, this guy's worthless."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah, and then complain when they can't do this job.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Exactly right.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That feels like so much of police leadership right now. I wrote a book, Reducing Crime, which you kindly wrote the foreword for, which was geared at trying to help mid-level police commanders because it feels like, in so much now, you take people through patrol officer, sergeant, lieutenant, and then captain, but it feels like all their training up to that didn't prepare them for that job. They're good at individual cases, they may have been good detectives, but now they're in charge of the strategy for a small town.

### Charles Ramsey:

But there are reasons for that, Jerry. The only way to really move forward and make more money in policing is through the promotional process. So you could be smart enough to pass a multiple choice exam and make it through the ranks, but you never had the desire to try to lead others.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

And there are some great cops wearing blue shirts, really smart people who love that level.

### Charles Ramsey:

And if you like being that beat cop, you love community policing, you don't want to get promoted out of that position, why can't you get recognized not just us in terms of an award but also financially for what you bring to the table? Same thing with detectives and so forth. Then the promotional process should be for those people who truly do want to lead, and if we're going to do that, then what we have to do is even look at our evaluation process because right now performance evaluation is more of a joke than it is anything else.

### Charles Ramsey:

But even if it weren't a joke, what you're evaluating is a person's skills and abilities in their current role. But we don't look to see whether or not they're ready to move to the next level because we don't even understand what are the new skills and abilities they need for the next level and then how do we develop that in that person, mentoring, developing. Good leadership in policing is more by accident than by design because we do not develop on a consistent basis the next generation of leaders at any level. Then we complain and say, "Oh, poor first line supervisors." Well, what are you doing to fix that?

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. I think half the battle is that I don't think anybody knows what policing is going to look like in 10 years' time or in 15 years' time. We train for the skill sets of what we think is around now. We don't train that broader sense of skills that will enable people for them to figure out how to solve problems in 10 or 15 years' time.

### Charles Ramsey:

And that goes right into recruiting and hiring. I mean, you're hiring people now, and even though I've heard people say, "Young people don't stay on jobs long," and blah, blah, blah, they would if they felt comfortable and if you gave them some reason to stay, they would. But what you're hiring today-

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

They're very different now. They're very different now.

### Charles Ramsey:

But when you hire today, you're actually hiring for the next 20 years, or at least that's the attitude you have to have, right? So what does that 21st century police officer look like? What are we looking for in that individual? I'd rather get

25 of the right kinds of people as opposed to 100 where 75 of them are a little on the iffy, questionable side and they're going to keep me writing reports or doing press conferences.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Right. You just get nervous every roll call, right?

**Charles Ramsey:**

Yeah, because they really don't have the right mindset, they aren't service-oriented. So policing today is challenging. It is tremendous opportunity because people are looking for reform, they're looking for something different, and now is the time when you can actually make that happen. But it's going to require fundamental redesign and rethinking of policing, and that includes policing structure. Now, it's difficult with unions, but it's going to require that sort of effort, I think, to really make the kind of real change.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Was this really heightened to you when you co-chaired President Obama's Task Force on 21st Century Policing?

**Charles Ramsey:**

I had those feelings even prior to that, but that gave me an opportunity to really explore it even more, getting those different perspectives. Even when you look at the 11 people on the task force, we had civil rights attorneys, we had activists, we had academics, we had police professionals. I mean, we had a variety of people.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Sounds like hell.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Right? In fact, when I looked at that lineup, and President Obama ultimately chose the majority of them, I had influence on a couple of them, I didn't know if we could reach consensus on anything. But you know what? Every single recommendation in that report, we reached 100% consensus on it. Sometimes, we stayed up all night with the language, trying to get the wording right.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Oh, I'm sure. Yeah.

**Charles Ramsey:**

But we did because we were closer together than we thought, and I think that's true for society in general.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That strikes me, that what you had were people who were reasonable and had an experienced perspective of what was going on. I mean, it's starting to abate now, but we are just on the tail end of some of this abolish nonsense with people who I think spend way too much time in their ivory tower wherever they are and not enough time actually coming out to North Philadelphia.

**Charles Ramsey:**

But even when people talk about defunding and they talk about abolishing, what they're talking about is just something that's different from what it is now that's more effective. I don't necessarily disagree with that, but you don't have to throw the baby out with the bath water.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Right, exactly.

**Charles Ramsey:**

But when people say defund, for an example, most people, they're talking about, "Well, that money should go to mental health. It should go to the"... And I don't disagree with that.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It's a more measured response, absolutely. Abolish is nonsense, but defund is a, really, discussion about reforming how we address public safety, not just criminal justice, but public safety-

**Charles Ramsey:**

It is. It is.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

... and I'm good with that discussion. That's important.

**Charles Ramsey:**

But, see, we have to change the way we think. When I think of public safety, I think in traditional terms. I think of police, fire, emergency, medical, those agencies that typically fall within that umbrella. When I use the term community safety, it broadens my thinking because that incorporates mental health, homelessness, substance abuse-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Drug addiction, yep.

**Charles Ramsey:**

... all those kinds of things in addition to your more traditional public safety.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Would you include in things like that just minor disorders? It always struck me when I go to community meetings in the worst part, the hardest-hit neighborhoods. You think, "Well, everybody's going to be complaining about shootings," but so often what the community complains about is the day-to-day bullshit that just grinds them down-

**Charles Ramsey:**

Disorder, disorder.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

... just the minor disorder that's so pervasive. It's just exhausting for these poor folk.

**Charles Ramsey:**

And they're absolutely right. But you know what? We don't listen as police like we should. We still walk into that same meeting with an armful of statistics of Part I offenses to try to convince people that they're safer, and they know damn well they're not safe.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

No, because they walk to the bodega and it's crazy.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Or they go to bed at night and they hear gunshots and they hear them so often they don't even bother to call 911 anymore.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Right.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Right? We don't listen and hear what people are actually saying to us, hear what they're saying when they say defund and abolish. That should scare the hell out of you because what they're telling you is this ain't working, status quo. You can-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You are not reacting to what I need.

**Charles Ramsey:**

The words that they use were not really necessarily carefully and well thought through, right?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

True.

**Charles Ramsey:**

And it turned a lot of people off, but the message is there.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah. Agree. Completely agree.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Even something as extreme as abolish. They know they need some form of police, of some [crosstalk 00:27:29]-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That's [crosstalk 00:27:29]... I kind of hope so.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Okay? And I think the majority of people do.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

The majority of people do. That's very true.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Okay? But what should that look like? Because if you had community safety and you had all these other elements, which includes mental health, substance abuse, housing, all those kinds of things that lead to safe, healthy neighborhoods, that means the city has to rethink. They need to be thinking in much broader terms instead of these silos that they have where they got a housing department, then they got mental health over here, then they've got some other, license and inspection, over there, and they don't communicate with each other.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And even if they do, they don't even step up.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Right. So how do you bring them all together to be able to make for real safe neighborhoods that are sustainable? I don't think of public safety anymore. I think of community safety. Police don't have to be first responders. Now, granted, the first responders... Because cities have grossly underfunded these other services for decades. But police don't have to be first responders, but it doesn't mean that... Some of these calls are dangerous. You'll need a cop to be there.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I also think sometimes that there is an underappreciation for how well some cops actually deal with people with mental health problems. There's some really great cops out there who just have the right tone and can strike the right balance. There's definitely a place for professionals in many, many cases, but I think we also underestimate that there are a lot of good cops out there actually dealing with these things pretty well.

**Charles Ramsey:**

They are. CIT, Crisis Intervention Training, that goes a long way to help with all that sort of thing. But the other part of that, too, is... Or, at least, we're just starting to appreciate the fact that many cops have mental health problems. The trauma that you're exposed to on a regular basis as a police officer, that is just not normal. If a police officer's shot or stabbed, we take care of them. They get the best medical care and so forth. What about the psychological scars that are there? How often do we get a mental health check?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And for the colleagues who've been there, who've been around when one of their officers got shot... I've been reading up a chunk recently about the increasing pervasiveness of compassion fatigue in first responders. It's like you have a bank of compassion and it just gets depleted, and it gets depleted quickly-

**Charles Ramsey:**

It does.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

... in tough cities with big problems.

**Charles Ramsey:**

That's a mental health issue, and that's where that mental health counseling, whatever you want to call it, would really help get through those periods of time. How does that then affect the community? Because when that bank of compassion has been depleted, people look at you and they say, "You're cold, you don't care," because you're not outwardly showing any kind of empathy or compassion because that tank is empty, and you have to protect yourself. So you can't cry over every single homicide, and so you build up these walls, but you have nobody to talk to. Officers begin to self-medicate, take care of it themselves, high rate of divorce, high rate of suicide, high rate of substance abuse, and it's just like resilience, compassion, all those things over time really take its toll.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Does that stretch all the way to the top floor office?

**Charles Ramsey:**

It does. It definitely does.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

When you were in the commissioner's office, we had a number of officers killed in the line of duty.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Well, I'm going to tell you something here. I was police commissioner in Philly for eight years. I had eight officers killed in the line of duty. I lost five within a nine-month span, and two months prior to me taking over is when Chuck Cassidy got killed on Halloween.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah. I remember that.

**Charles Ramsey:**

So, the department hadn't gotten over that. When I lost my last officer March 5th of 2015, Robert Wilson-



**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Oh, I remember that. Yeah. He was killed in a GameStop.

**Charles Ramsey:**

GameStop.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

He was on duty, popped in to buy a-

**Charles Ramsey:**

On duty, popped in to buy his son a game because his son had done well in school and his birthday was coming on. I was trying to decide whether... Did I want to stay? Did I want to retire? The mayor had said, "If you want to stay, you can," but he clearly wanted to bring Rich in, and I didn't have a problem with that. A mayor ought to be able to pick their own police chief. But when Robert got killed, I knew then it was time for me to go because I couldn't bury another police officer. Emotionally, I couldn't do it. I couldn't bury another one. I told my wife, I said, "That's it. All I can do is hope I don't have another one between now and the date I announce my retirement." But I knew that was it because my bank of resilience was drained. I couldn't do it again.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I've seen a lot of officer-involved deaths in my associations with police, but I remember that one being particularly devastating. I just remember everybody in the police department being shocked. He was very, very popular.

**Charles Ramsey:**

He was popular. He was a damn good police officer. But the other part of that is that was captured on high-definition video, the entire thing. It was a homicide detective that actually got on the elevator with Rich, and Rich told me the story, and he asked him-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Rich Ross, the deputy commissioner?

**Charles Ramsey:**

Rich Ross. And he said... A detective who had been in homicide for 13, 14 years said... He said, "Last night was the first night where I couldn't sleep," because he's watching that video. We talked a little bit about trauma and the psychological impact. Now that we have video, you watch people getting killed over and over again on video, and there's not a damn thing you can do to stop it. You can't warn them. You can't do anything because you see it coming. What impact does that have on people that have to investigate these crimes now? You're not just coming after the fact. You're actually living it. You're seeing it. We have to take these things into account and deal with the mental wellbeing of our officers. I hate to keep going back to that, but I think it's such an important topic. In fact, in the President's Task Force report, one of our pillars is officer safety and wellbeing.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So the Robert Wilson murder was kind of like a breaking point for you?

**Charles Ramsey:**

It was. It was. It's emotionally draining, one, the tragedy of it all and having to look family members in the eye and deal with the small kids knowing that their father or their mother is gone forever, that sort of thing. There's also guilt that you feel. We make the decision-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Even in the commissioner's office?

**Charles Ramsey:**

In the commissioner's office. You know why? We make decisions every day putting officers intentionally into harm's way in a sense, looking at crime pattern, here's the robberies, here are the shootings, blah, blah, blah. What do we do? We put cops in there. They encounter the guys that are committing these crimes. You have to do it. It's the right thing to do, right, because that's what you're paid to do. But don't think that doesn't bother you. I remember when John Pawlowski was murdered, and this was at Broad and Olney.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

One of the more adventurous areas of the city.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Actually, yeah. 2009, a guy threatening a cab driver, they respond, didn't tell the dispatcher, was the guy said, "Cop shows up, I'm going to shoot them," and they stopped this guy. He's got his hands in his pocket, won't take his hands, and shoots right through the pocket. He hits John, kills him. We're at the hospital. His wife comes, Kim. She's months pregnant, and she's screaming, and she's hollering. "Oh, why did he have to be working?" He was working in overtime detail on high crime. "How come these guys have to work? How come they have to do this? How come they"... And I'm listening to all that.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Of course. Yeah.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Listen, I love Kim to death. I was there for the birth of his son, actually. They called me up, and I went to the Abington Hospital.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Oh, that's beautiful.

**Charles Ramsey:**

I was there for the birth of his son. But I shouldn't have been there. John should have been there.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Well, I hoped it was at least helpful for you.

**Charles Ramsey:**

These things add up, though. I mean, we talk about that bank of compassion, the bank of resilience, it eats away, and even though you learn to suppress your feelings, you learn to deal with stuff, it takes its toll. I was a police chief for 17 years, but I spent 47 in policing, 45 active service as a sworn officer. I've seen so much death, man, I couldn't even begin to give you a number of homicides and sex assaults and kids being abused and all those kinds of things. It adds up. Now that you're at the top of the organization, it doesn't mean that stuff goes away. Now, you're still dealing with it at a different level and sending people out to deal with it. But it affects the organization top to bottom, and so when we talk about mental health, everybody in the department needs to have... At least every other year, there ought to be a mental health checkup. That includes the chief, everybody.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

A couple of departments have started mandating it once a year. You go and speak to a psychologist.

**Charles Ramsey:**

That's what it needs to be. I say every other because Philly's so large. I don't practically think you could run almost 7,000 guys every year through it, but every other year at a minimum.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I think a lot of people were impressed when they saw the task force report on 21st century policing that that was included as a pillar. What is your sense of what the response has been like to that report?

**Charles Ramsey:**

I mean, mixed results. There are still some departments that are using it as a guide, but I was very encouraged that there are departments that still are going online trying to find a copy to report. But we went through four years of the Trump administration that pretty much threw any idea of police reform out the window. They actually took the report off the COPS Office website, so we lost momentum. If we had it to do over again, we would've added a seventh pillar, and that's recruitment, hiring, and retention. But in 2015 that was not the crisis that it is today.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

We talked about the worst parts of the job, but yet you'd still do it again. So what were the best parts?

**Charles Ramsey:**

The best parts of the job is knowing that you are making a difference. You don't always see it, but you have to believe that. As bad as things are, what would it be like if you weren't doing what you were doing?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Very true.

**Charles Ramsey:**

The media focuses a lot on the negative because that's what sells. But when you get the positive reactions from community members and so forth, even from your own police officers, and they tend not to say it too loudly because that's part of the policing culture, is to always be grumbling about something-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Do you think that's ever going to change?

**Charles Ramsey:**

No. And they say, "I like what you did here," or, "I like this," it's enough to keep you going. What really renewed my energy was actually having the opportunity to go to different cities. My dream job was becoming superintendent of Chicago Police Department, and I made it as one of two finalists for the job, one of the most depressing days of my career. The very next day, I got a call from a search firm, literally the next day, saying, "Listen, we hear you didn't get the job. We're looking for a chief in DC, and we'd like to talk to you." One thing led to another, and I went to DC. I learned more during my nine years as chief in DC during some pretty exciting times when you really stop and think about it... I mean, I was there 9/11 and anthrax, DC sniper, all those kinds of things. What was probably the lowest point in my career turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to me.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Right. That's very zen.

**Charles Ramsey:**

And I never would've come to Philly if I hadn't had the DC experience because I would've never left Chicago.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Right. So what did you learn in DC?

**Charles Ramsey:**

DC was a very dysfunctional city and very dysfunctional department-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It's absolutely fine now.

**Charles Ramsey:**

... in the '90s because, well, Marion Barry was the mayor. I mean, they were driving 10-year-old police cars. They were buying used tires from the US Park Police. The facilities were terrible, had raw sewage leaking in locker rooms in a couple of the districts, no heat in the winter, no air in the summer.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Now, they should put that in the recruitment adverts, right?

**Charles Ramsey:**

Absolutely ridiculous. And so we were able to really make a lot of changes and get all those things changed, all those things improved, and that satisfaction, that sense of knowing that you made a difference and the attitude of the officers, how it changed. So I learned a lot of valuable... There was no one thing I learned. I learned how to be a police chief.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Can that be taught?

**Charles Ramsey:**

I don't know if it can be taught because until you have it and until you're in the chair, as they say... But I think you can give people a more realistic expectation of what the job entails to better prepare them for some of the colleges that they'll face. One of the recommendations in the task force report is that there be command colleges established. In England or the Scottish Police College, we need that sort of thing here that really develops that leadership.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That's not really got much traction, unfortunately. We certainly need a castle. The Scots have a castle, for crying out loud.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Oh, yeah. I've been there. It's nice. You can do a lot toward preparing people to assume these top command positions, but we really don't do enough. One of the questions in a presentation I do, it came from a guy, Greg Brown, the CEO of Motorola. He asked a question, he said, "Do you want the job or do you want to do the job," because wanting it and understanding what it takes to really do it are two different things.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That's a huge gulf between those. I think people want the respect, the authority, they want the trappings of the position.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Exactly right.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

They want the 'scrambled egg' on the shoulder.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Exactly right.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

But then when you're in it, it's just all grind.

**Charles Ramsey:**

But are you ready to do what it takes to do it and do it successfully?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I remember coming to your office a number of times after meetings in the Roundhouse in Philly, and you were always in there late. The afternoons are always better because they were a more chance to be more reflective, but the mornings were just slow death by meeting for you because it was just a grind to keep going.

**Charles Ramsey:**

It is. And if you also remember, and going back to something earlier about that well of resilience, in the conference room, I had pictures of every officer that died on my watch, killed in the line of duty, right on that wall. I did that intentionally. I wanted them looking over my shoulder to really constantly remind me of the importance of the decisions we make in that office because it affects their lives.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You found that empowering rather than depressing?

**Charles Ramsey:**

I did. It was very empowering, very empowering. I didn't want to forget them. I didn't want to forget them.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And nor should they be forgotten.

**Charles Ramsey:**

I was always praying another picture didn't go up, but I did not want to forget them, and I didn't.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Is it even possible to be a police chief nowadays?

**Charles Ramsey:**

Sure it is. I mean, it's challenging. It's always been challenging, but you see it as an opportunity.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

But there doesn't seem like there's much space for mistake.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Well, that's because right now the public pressure, but when you take the job, you got to make sure who's your boss going to be? Is it a city manager? Is it a mayor? What do they want from you? How much autonomy are you going to have? How much authority? Are they going to back you up? Because I was lucky. I had Tony Williams in DC, and I had Mike Nutter in Philly.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Who, other than having a fantastic name, was a very, was, he's not dead or anything, is a very smart guy and a very thoughtful mayor. He's a very good mayor. Yeah. When you're thinking about what your team is, it's not just bringing up good people from within the department, but who are you working with outside?

**Charles Ramsey:**

It's who you're working with outside, especially in big cities. You've got colleges and universities with talented people there that can help you in terms of research and things like that that you need to really make sure you're on the right track, what's working, what's not. Nola Joyce was with me in Chicago.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Fantastic woman.

**Charles Ramsey:**

The first person I asked to come with me to DC was Nola, and then I talked her into coming to Philly.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Now she knows who to blame.

**Charles Ramsey:**

She has strengths where I have weaknesses. I'm operational, and I avoided those administrative positions, which was a mistake in retrospect. She has strengths where I have weaknesses. So part of being a good police chief, I think, and not saying I was able to [crosstalk 00:42:39]-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Oh, trust me, you were. Don't worry. You were.

**Charles Ramsey:**

But you have to know yourself. You have to know your strengths and your weaknesses and build a team around you that really compliments you in the right area.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That's the key lesson straight from Sun Tzu right there, from, what, 500 BC?

**Charles Ramsey:**

Don't be afraid to admit what you don't know.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

There's a tendency for police chiefs and for leaders to bring on people who are like them. What you're saying is the key is to bring on people who fill in your gaps, the people who are not like you.

**Charles Ramsey:**

And I want people that aren't afraid to push back. But you have to create an environment where they feel comfortable pushing back. Because if they're afraid to speak up and you say, "Okay, I'm going to do X, Y, Z, I'm going to change the district boundaries here," or whatever it might be, and they all say, "Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah," or they don't say anything-

**Passerby/well-wisher:**

Excuse me gentlemen, officer Ramsey, how are you, sir?

**Charles Ramsey:**

Yeah, I'm doing well. How are you?

**Passerby/well-wisher:**

Good to see you, friend, and thank you for service-

**Charles Ramsey:**

Good to see you. Thank you.

**Passerby/well-wisher:**

... on this Marine Corps birthdays.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Oh, okay.

**Passerby/well-wisher:**

It's Veteran's Day tomorrow. I'm a marine, sir-

**Charles Ramsey:**

That's right.

**Passerby/well-wisher:**

We get our day today. We get our veterans tomorrow.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Thank you for your service.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Good on you, sir. Cheers, sir. Thank you for your service, too.

**Passerby/well-wisher:**

Thank you, friend. Enjoy your day, gentlemen.



**Charles Ramsey:**

Thank you.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And you, sir.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Knowing your own strengths and your witnesses, but people who aren't afraid to push back, you create an environment where their opinion matters. People will sit back and they'll think. They'll say, "Oh, man, we tried doing that before. It didn't work." But they won't tell you that because they're afraid to speak up and say it, and especially when you come from the outside. You don't know where all the landmines are.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That's the truth.

**Charles Ramsey:**

But other people do.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Is there a role then for academics-

**Charles Ramsey:**

Sure, it is.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

... to speak a bit of truth to power?

**Charles Ramsey:**

To say, "This city tried this, and here were the result... Here's what happened. Here's what they found." When I was in charge of implementing community policing in Chicago, the CAPS program, years ago in the '90s-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You worked with Wes Skogan up there.

**Charles Ramsey:**

We partnered with Wes Skogan and formed a consortium to evaluate community policing. But I told Wes... We had a meeting around that, him and Dennis Rosenbaum, and I told him, I said, "Listen, I'm going to give you full access, 100%, whatever you want, whatever you need. I want to know if this stuff works as much as you do, to be honest with you." Because I was a little skeptical of community policing initially, right? "And if it does work, I want to know why. But here's

the one condition. If in your evaluation you see something that's really not working the way it ought to, I want know about it. You still write about it and say that it didn't work, but then you can also reevaluate later on and say that these changes were made and now it's X, Y, Z. I don't want to wait three years or five years for you to write your book telling me everything I did wrong. We need to know."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Right. Work in collaboration with you.

**Charles Ramsey:**

When you did the foot patrol experiment for us, we got feedback, right? Is this just a feel good thing or is it really having an impact?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yep.

**Charles Ramsey:**

It had an impact. Well, that helped me sell it to others. Bethel was skeptical of foot patrol.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

He was, yeah. And maybe that's a key to some of this, is a little bit of healthy skepticism.

**Charles Ramsey:**

But Kevin was skeptical, and he told me he was skeptical. But you know what? We went ahead and we said, "Okay, well, let's see," and that's when we brought you on board to take a look and see and give us some actual feedback because we needed to know. If it turned out it was nothing, why would we continue doing it?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Right. But that requires embracing a sense of doubt, and I don't think that's a character-

**Charles Ramsey:**

And that's healthy.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

But that's not a characteristic that a lot of police chiefs are willing to admit having. What you're talking about is this healthy doubt, let's find out.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Well, it is healthy doubt, and even if you know something works, you may not know why, and it's important to know why. Flood the area with a bunch of cops. Yeah, you suppress it. Shootings are going to go down, I guarantee you. You got a cop out every other block. But can you afford to do that? Because eventually you're going to pull them out and go somewhere else, and have you really solved the problem, or did it take that many cops, or could you have done it with

five guys on foot patrol in a given area? Could you have done it with better strategic planning and identifying people who are causing the most harm in that community, building cases and getting them off the street?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So if we were sitting here with a 17-year-old young Chuck Ramsey right now in 2021, would you tell him to join the job? Would you tell him to go on and be a police chief?

**Charles Ramsey:**

Oh, yeah.

**Passerby/well-wisher:**

Have a great day, gentlemen.

**Charles Ramsey:**

Okay. You take care. I got to be back by 12:00 anyway.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Well, I know you have another thing to go to, so for finding the time to come and have morning coffee with me, thanks very much. This is fun, right?

**Charles Ramsey:**

Right? Thank you.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That was episode 41 of Reducing Crime recorded in Philadelphia's Chestnut Hill Neighborhood in November 2021.

New episodes are announced on Twitter, @\_reducingcrime. Instructors and lecturers can also DM me for a spreadsheet of multiple-choice questions for every Reducing Crime episode. And, as always, you can find a transcript of this and every episode at [reducingcrime.com/podcast](https://reducingcrime.com/podcast).

Be safe, and best of luck.