

#24 (KEVIN BETHEL)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Jerry Ratcliffe again with Reducing Crime, a podcast featuring influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and police researchers. Kevin Bethel is a retired Philadelphia deputy police commissioner and now chief of school safety for the Philadelphia School District. We chat about his work rethinking the role of police in schools.

This is episode 24 of Reducing Crime, which means the podcast is now officially two years old. Thanks so much for listening over that time. I can't tell you how much I appreciate the feedback and support I've received from so many of you.

To celebrate, if that's the word, you may have noticed that I've changed up the theme tune. Like the original, it's the theme to an old policing TV show. Did you guess which show it was? I'll post the answer on Twitter at Underscore Reducing Crime. For fun, I'll be changing the theme tune for the next few episodes unless I get jammed up and run afoul of copyright stuff.

In this episode, I chat with Kevin Bethel. Kevin's a retired deputy commissioner in the Philadelphia Police Department where he commanded patrol operations for the entire city. On retiring in 2016, he served as a Stoneleigh Foundation Fellow and Drexel University senior policy advisor in the area of juvenile justice reform. He's now a senior advisor and chief of school safety for the Philadelphia School District.

He's developed a school diversion program within that system. It diverts first time low level juvenile offenders to other programs within the Department of Human Services. This diversion approach has reduced the number of school arrests by 71%. He testified before the president's 21st Century task force on the need for a concerted effort by law enforcement leaders to address the school to prison pipeline across the nation. He serves on the Pennsylvania commission on crime and delinquency, disproportionate minority contact subcommittee and is a former member of the National Academy of Sciences Committee on law and justice.

Recorded in early March, before the recent shocking and disturbing events that shook the US, we had a socially distant chat in his beautiful garden north of Philadelphia. We were supposed to talk about his current work addressing school safety and the school to prison pipeline and don't worry, we do get to that but we started off chatting about his 30 years in the Philadelphia police department and his time working with Commissioner Chuck Ramsey. He had some heartfelt insights into mentorship, data-driven policing, and the stress of police leadership so I left them in. They're important.

Having one, that patio outdoor space but having two it's just fucking flash at this point.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. It was a blessing when I bought the house.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's nice to have a respite.

Kevin Bethel:

Oh, yeah, man. Oh, yeah. I enjoy the respite. What is this a part of?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In other words, why am I doing this?

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think what kind of turned it around for me was when Philly PD put my Intelligence-Led Policing book on the promotion exam.

Kevin Bethel:

Okay.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I started to read some online reviews of cops going, "This sucks" and I'm going, "I don't blame you. It does suck."

Kevin Bethel:

Right. Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because it was never written for those guys.

Kevin Bethel:

Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I wrote Reducing Crime: A Companion For Police Leaders to be more of a promotion type book.

Kevin Bethel:

Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

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Then I was thinking, well, if you're going to reach out to those kind of people with stuff that's interesting, they're not going to read academic journal articles.

Kevin Bethel:

Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They might listen to a podcast.

Kevin Bethel:

Okay.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's like a monthly podcast.

Kevin Bethel:

Okay. Okay. I ain't worried about it, Jerry. After all these years, I'm like Ramsey, after a while just it is what it is, brother. I don't have as many filters as I used to.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's good. How long did you do in Philly PD?

Kevin Bethel:

30.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you miss it?

Kevin Bethel:

There's times. The people I still stay connected to as relates to the work and the stress.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The stress? [crosstalk 00:03:56]. Say it's not so.

Kevin Bethel:

I mean, there's times I do. Sometimes, especially when I saw they were floundering, for a minute there I was like, "Did I make the right decision not to come back?" I'm in a good place.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, it was you and Ramsey and [inaudible 00:04:10] and all those guys and it was a hell of a time to be in a leadership role in Philadelphia.

REDUCING CRIME PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Kevin Bethel:

I told people, man, to this day, Jerry, I can't tell you how blessed I was to be working under Ramsey.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If I remember correctly, Ramsey brought you up, skipping a couple of ranks, didn't he?

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. Yeah. I was a captain but I knew he was [inaudible 00:04:28].

Jerry Ratcliffe:

He brought you straight up to deputy commissioner.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. I think that was part of his model, right? Bring some young guns up and he had saw some of my stuff because I had been doing a lot of stuff and I was in South Philly and I had a town home and I remember I had like 300 people show up. We did this town hall and they gave me a standing ovation. You know what I mean? Best experience of my entire career. I'd do it all over as a captain in the district.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah?

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah, because people just so appreciated you working for them, supporting them, loving them up. [inaudible 00:04:56] expected. You were expected. There, you were rewarded.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Kevin Bethel:

Every time you did a living room meeting or sat on the stoop ... I used to walk through a neighborhood with my community [inaudible 00:05:07] officer and we'd just walk through and just sit down and just walk through a neighborhood. We'd pick a route and let's just walk.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And people [crosstalk 00:05:13].

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. Yeah. You know what I mean? At the end, man, love those folks, man. Love them to death. Still to this day. Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When you get higher up there are no wins. It's just you're trying to avoid losses?

Kevin Bethel:

That's a good way to say it. I'd like to adopt that, man. Ramsey was tenacious, right? He came in, he was given a directive from the mayor and I always understood the pressure he was under but also knew I loved working for him. Do you know what I mean?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

He's quite unique in terms of police leaders.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah, man. That's an understatement. At the end of my career, I used to sit there because I would sit across from him and so I always tried to figure out what he was going to do. I knew the better I got to predicting what he would do, the better I felt I was getting. He was always good, coming back, telling me the why. I'm always a young guy. I want to know they why, why, why. Why'd you do it that way? Sometimes he'd sit there for an hour, man. I'm like, well, that doesn't make any sense? Why? He'd just sit there and walk me through the why.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's mentorship, isn't it?

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. Even though he was not old enough to be my father. My father left when I was a young puppy, man. Eight or nine years old. He actually would become like a father figure to me because of his presence. You know what I mean? And the fact that he would take so much time with me. You know what I mean? I don't think people realize how much mentoring he would give me because I stayed late. I worked late. I worked early, got in early, and stayed late. When he stayed late, he'd always drift over to my office.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I learned to turn up to headquarters as late as possible in the afternoon. Find somebody's sofa to sit on and then just learn so much just listening to people talking.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. Yeah. But he just was good. Even to this day. I mean, we're still very close and ...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

His energy ... I mean, he's been in policing over 50 years. His energy levels are off the charts, man.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. Not often do you find folks who have gone through generational change. They're usually kind of set in their ways and after a while they just can't get them to change their ways. Here's a guy who was able to adapt, right? He wasn't going to turn away from research. He wasn't going to turn away from new technology. He was going to dive right into it because most of us being old, we get kind of set in our ways and kind of feel this has to be this way.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You miss the good stuff. What are the parts you don't miss?

Kevin Bethel:

The grind. I don't think people realize the toll it takes on you physically. That was one thing when I was a young puppy and forties and thirties and running around. Now I'm entering my fifties and every time I go to the doctor I got some new malady that's popping up. You know? You're sitting there saying he's looking at you, okay, the only thing I can point to is stress.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, you were at the top three in the fourth-largest police department in the United States in a city with 25% poverty and a violent crime problem.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. You take it personally. I grew up in the city. I want it to stop. You give to get. What you give is your family life and your health and quality of life, all that stuff wrapped together, you start to lose, and then you look up and you're like, "I don't have that many friends" because to get it done you got to push people. It won't work if I'm sitting there with a love and a hug, right? You're a paramilitary department? You know what I mean? You just felt like you always had to lean forward and you're always pushing and so your circle gets tighter. You're not home. You're watching your kids grow up and you're missing all of the events and you're not around.

That's the part that you can't get back. I have a 30 year old and she looks at me like, "You weren't there." You know what I mean? She loves me, I love her, but I realized I wasn't there for her. You know what I mean? You give up, if you really do it right and some people can come in at nine and go at four but if you really dive into it headstrong like you do your work, you're going to keep swimming, man but you don't see the end of the pool. You know what I mean? Where is the break pedal? There's no break pedal. You know what I mean? It's always the gas.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How do you pace yourself for that kind of thing, man? What would you do differently?

Kevin Bethel:

If I did it differently now I think I would delegate more to [inaudible 00:09:05] so delegation. It's okay, you can't win them all. You know what I mean? Don't take it personally. Carve out a time. It's okay to take a week's vacation. You know? Taking four days in the summer. Leave on a Friday and you come back on a Monday or when you do do that one week you're taking your phone with you and you're still checking ... You know what I mean? I've seen some folks have been able to do that. I never learned that, learned how to take a moment and to recharge.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, Philadelphia and I don't think any of the big cities give you a moment unless you actively grab it. I remember constantly sitting in meetings with you guys and the thing was constantly going because everybody got notified every time there was a shooting and it's like we get 2000 shootings a year, hundreds of people just staring at their phones every time there's a shooting.

Kevin Bethel:

Then when you work with the executive team, Ramsey didn't take off, Rich didn't take off and then it became like this cascading effect. If your bosses ain't taking time off the expectation is I'm supposed to be here. At some point, I did, I got my week. I did one week a year. You know what I mean? Vacation.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's just nuts.

Kevin Bethel:

One week a year.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's crazy.

Kevin Bethel:

That didn't make any sense. You know what I mean? If I had to do it all over again it's okay to find time for yourself. It's healthy, right?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Did it feel like you couldn't step back from it?

Kevin Bethel:

I never felt I could step out because you got to remember, we go through this transformation. It takes about four years for us to really get to be data-driven, right? I mean, obviously, the commissioner comes with a plan, Mohler is trying to really work that plan, right?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

[inaudible 00:10:38] the head of strategic initiatives at the time.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. I didn't think about it at the time. Early in the process, [inaudible 00:10:45] tell me what to do but then I'd just watch. She never interfered in my space, right? She never came and even though she had Commissioner Ramsey's ear she [crosstalk 00:10:56].

Jerry Ratcliffe:

She has the pedigree as well. She has the background.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. Just the way she did it. Just a subtle chipping away. I remember her talking about ... Kate asked who, what, when, where, and why with data. Like let data tell you when to put the officers there, let data tell you why you put the officers there, let the data tell you how many you should put there. You know what I mean? I'm looking down like, "This

makes sense." You know what I mean? When the light bulb goes off, did the work around ... Remember our early work around the foot beats?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). The Philadelphia foot patrol experiment.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. [crosstalk 00:11:28]. I don't want to do the foot beats. This ain't going to work. I know what he wants. I remember calling you and saying, "Jerry ..." After the fact, right? I think, "Can we just take a look at this?" It turns into this huge study but I walked away from that study saying it works. If you just be patient, right? If you allow the data to drive you, you could find that sweet spot.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Was that like the epiphany moment for you about really sort of understanding the value of data and policing? Lots of police leaders never get there.

Kevin Bethel:

I think it was funny going through that process because it was a control group so I'm like, "Control group? What's a control group?" I'm a cop, right? Control group? We don't leave stuff alone and let something happen here. You know what I mean? It was just a slow awakening. It wasn't one moment. I can't say one moment I looked down but it was just these little pieces. Sitting down with the GIS mappers and just talking to them. We go downstairs and talk to them.

They weren't cops but they were doing all these dots on the map and I start throwing these hypotheses. "I wonder if I had that?" I'd go on the crime briefing and all the GIS guys and all the women would look over and say, "Hey, click on that layer" and all of a sudden I'd see this layer, "Oh my goodness" and then all of a sudden, man, I'd be sitting at my desk sometimes and every data thought that came in my mind I'd run downstairs. "Hey, can we put this on? Can we put this on?"

I mean, next thing you know I come into the mapping environment for comms stats, I want to know how many cops are working four to 12. I want to know where they were here. I want to know where they were there.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you think there's value then in having the analysis unit, the analysis sections really close to the headquarters wing?

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. It is the fuel that drives the engine. I mean, I can have the fanciest car out here. If I don't got no gas in it, rocket fuel and if you put it in [inaudible 00:13:15], you know?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think for a lot of leaders, though, isn't that sometimes a hard sell. They've got 20, 25 years and they know what's going on. You were essentially running one of the biggest departments in the country and it took a while for you to get there.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. I used to be that anecdotal, "I knew. I saw it. I could see it." Yeah, but I just saw the moment. I could read that there was a shooting at 53rd and Chester today. Oh, okay. I could remember anecdotally there was a shooting maybe last week ... Didn't we have a shooting there last week? But I couldn't see a trend. If I went back five years then guess what? The data says I've had 10 homicides at that corner. The data says that all these men and women are from the same subset of groups or organizations [crosstalk 00:13:58].

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Same network. Yeah.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. Then guess what? This guy was with the other guy when he was shot, all of that connectivity, that link analysis work, all of that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You can't keep all of that in your head.

Kevin Bethel:

You can't keep all that in your head.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Not for the sixth largest city in the country.

Kevin Bethel:

Listen, I used to try ... You know, I came from narcotics, I could remember a lot of the players in the field but it was another thing to be able to use data and what data gave you the ability to fight back all of the BS.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Kevin Bethel:

You know what I mean? The guy who is sitting there and BS-ing me at the table, "I'm doing this." Oh, really? The data made me be able to say, "Well, let me show you what really is going on." What it helped us do is turn the department around because now it wasn't going to be an organization led by what we felt and you could see the results.

When we started to use data to say these little micro areas and all the work we did, right? [inaudible 00:14:45] focus work and all this stuff, we'd say, "Listen, you go in here and you do this and you do this and then you look at the trend lines and say, 'Hey, guess what? We went two months without a shooting, we've gone three months without a shooting.'" People start to say, "Oh, I want a little bit of that."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

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I remember sitting in a comms stat meeting that you were running and the captain we both know, who will remain nameless for his memory, was up there saying, "Oh, yeah, well, I've got my bike patrols and I've got my foot patrols right in this area."

Kevin Bethel:

Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You just asked [Len 00:15:16] to press one of the buttons and up came those bike patrols and those foot patrols had been doing all their pedestrian stops and their tickets and it was nowhere near that area. I think you just went, "What do you see here?" I just remember the captain doing a fantastic impression of a goldfish.

Kevin Bethel:

They would. It was like that for the beginning. In early stages, getting the buy-in from them it was a kind of brutal process, right? You grow up with these guys but you know if I'm going to accomplish the goals, I mean, it was going to have to be hard but part of that data was really being able to click on a dot and at some point I even had every car where they would be.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It seems like it's key to that accountability that comms stat was really about.

Kevin Bethel:

Comms stat wasn't run like that for us for a long time. It was a gotcha moment. You come in there, you get teed up with what questions you're going to get asked. I got rid of all that. Listen, you need to know all your crime. I'm not going to give you the answers to the tests.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Just don't bullshit, though.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. Jerry, I was a captain in the 17th District, coming to my comms stat, my 38th comms stat, I've had 10 homicides, 25 shootings, and they ask me a theft from auto question. I'm looking at the deputy commissioner Pat Fox and I'm like, "I can't tell you anything about theft from autos." Everybody is looking at me like you're crazy, right? I have not looked at one theft from auto. I've been trying to deal with my violence and I will make sure I pay attention next period but I think everybody in the room looked like, "Is he going to get away with it?" She looked at me and she says, "Okay, Kevin."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What's really lost on so many people who are in the command seat in comm stat meetings is the questions that you ask, set the tone as to what people are going to go and do.

Kevin Bethel:

Absolutely.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If you ask about bullshit stuff, you're going to drive the department and the district to go and chase ...

Kevin Bethel:

Chase BS. You know what I mean?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Shoplifters while there are shootings going on around the corner.

Kevin Bethel:

For me, it was the most critical meeting I would ever have. All I had to do was ask a question at the first session and then it just permeated across the department. It would just infect the department and so I was relentless in that, right? I read every white paper.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

These are the reports that are written about the shootings and the serious crimes.

Kevin Bethel:

All the shooting reports. I read every one. I felt in fairness to them that I need to be just as prepared coming into the crime briefing as they were because I thought it was fair to them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Kevin Bethel:

That if they felt like they were value that I took the time to really see what was going on.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You're deputy commissioner, Philadelphia Police Department, you're doing comm stat, it's violent crime, it's shootings. What got you into working around policing of schools and this whole area around the school to prison pipeline?

Kevin Bethel:

I know the answer but it's something [inaudible 00:17:46] how do I get here? I like to be in everything. The crime fighting was not getting easier but was getting a little bit easier. You know what I mean?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It was becoming a bit rote?

Kevin Bethel:

It was just ... I mean, I enjoyed it, right? We're having a nice ride but I've always had this yearning around young people, even when I was a captain in the district [inaudible 00:18:05] young mentee that I had from when I was in South Philly and so I get asked to be a part of a national program from the office of juvenile justice programs around law enforcement leaders and juvenile justice. You know?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It just came out of the blue.

Kevin Bethel:

It just came out of the blue and so I make the decision that, yeah, I'll participate and get to travel a little bit. They fly us out to Chicago and I'm in this room with all these law enforcement leaders and they're conducting these programs, talking about juvenile justice and from there, man, I just started to get a little interest.

Really wasn't sure initially and then I meet an amazing judge, [Steven Tesky 00:18:45], out of Clayton County, Georgia. Love this guy, man, but he started to really talk about the school to prison pipeline and the work he was doing in his county and how many kids were getting locked up for these low level offenses. [inaudible 00:18:57] locked up I think at the time in his jurisdiction just disrespecting a police officer could result in an arrest. I was shocked. Like really?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In Philadelphia, disrespecting a police officer is like a rite to passage. It's not something you get arrested for.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. In the old days but today, yeah, it was. He really challenged me and I was really good friends with Rob [Listenbee 00:19:16] who was first assistant at the DA's office now but he also served as the administrator for the office of juvenile justice prevention. He was appointed by Obama. He knew I was starting to get this interest in juveniles so he, rightfully, started to send me to these places. I was part of ... The Academy of Science did a big program around [inaudible 00:19:35] development and next thing I knew, man, my light bulb was just on.

I come back and I just feel this yearning, man, that I have to do something different with our juveniles and I oversaw the schools as a part that came under my umbrella. I came back and data. I pulled the data. I mean, I tell people that's why data is so important.

Jerry, I pulled this data, man, and I almost was ... I was just devastated, man. I'd go back ... The judge, he kept saying, "Go look at your place, man. See what are you doing in Philly? You have an opportunity, you're a big city, you can set the trend." You know?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What people say and what the data says can be so different.

Kevin Bethel:

It's so different, Jerry. I sit there and I get this data, my guys, the GIS guys, and Kevin Thomas [inaudible 00:20:20], why don't we pull per capita numbers? Then I find my smallest schools, some of them were worse than my big schools when you took their per capita numbers. I'm looking down and I said, "Are you kidding me?" In 2013, I locked up 500 or

600 kids for fighting in school? For fighting? Take them away? You're locking up kids for coming to school with a pair of scissors?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, I think other countries people are just amazed that we have police officers in schools at all. How did that happen?

Kevin Bethel:

Well, it takes you back to the gun-free act and in response to trying to address active shooters and these instances in schools, federal government comes in and says, "We're going to put the gun-free act, no guns in school."

Listen, I think everybody accepts that, except for a law enforcement officer, a gun in school but then the downstream implications of that are, well, how do we find who has a gun? In some cases, like our jurisdiction ... Well, actually, Philly was a little bit different. They did have two shootings in their schools and so even before the gun-free act they put metal detectors in high schools but most places we're going to bring metal detectors in and it's going to bring additional law enforcement into the space and then the federal government, right? That's pushing for SROs in schools and offering funding.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

School resource officer.

Kevin Bethel:

School resource officers to come into school settings so they're funding that. They've been in that setting going back to I think even early '50s when Detroit was I think one of the first locales that had a school resource officer but it just accelerates the process and next you know ... I tell people, what do you expect when you put a law enforcement officer in a school? You shouldn't be surprised that they're going to arrest people. That's what we're built to do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's pretty much the tool that we give police officers. Yeah.

Kevin Bethel:

That's what we do, right? That's what we were trained to do is to lock people up.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In a previous episode of this podcast, Lorraine Mazerolle, who is a researcher in Australia, talking about work that she's doing with Queensland Police and the schools and the police are actually teaching them about procedural justice.

Kevin Bethel:

Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Have we found once you put police officers in the schools it's as easy for the school systems and the teachers to kind of go, "Okay, all of this is your problem now."

Kevin Bethel:

I came in with some of those early biases, right? I came in thinking that it was a principal problem, a teacher problem, administrator problem but one of the things I started to realize, it was a problem ... Just like anything else, when you don't properly fund the system, when you don't give them the ability, the tools ... I'm doing a project in Atlanta and I walk in and we're talking about a diversion program in the school. They had a psychologist, two counselors, a social worker, and I'm like whoa.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In one school?

Kevin Bethel:

In one school, right? I'm like, oh my goodness. You start to realize, particularly, in Philadelphia where such a poor city and the school district was underfunded for so many years, that they sit there now and the teacher who has a kid who's got all these issues, and not anything in between and so when that behavior manifests itself to a [inaudible 00:23:09] where it becomes a criminal behavior or even in some cases, a code of conduct behavior and the officer responds and it turns into a criminal issue when he takes them out, I started to have to check myself and say part of the system it drove it that way because there was nothing. That has changed significantly. Dr. Hite has done a lot. There's a lot of programming [crosstalk 00:23:28].

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The head of the school district in Philadelphia.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. Bill Hite. The school districts really changed and evolved and with trauma care and positive behavior interventions and support, I believe that's it, PBIS, where you can have different tiers of support for young people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Does this come all under the umbrella of diversion?

Kevin Bethel:

No, no. I think diversion still sits over as that other leg, right? That other area where the behavior still rises out of all the interventions you're doing. At least there's a more layered approach where you don't have to immediately grab the officer or the school officer at the school and say, "Hey, I need you to solve this issue." You now can turn inward to have all of these programs available.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This is before we call the officer? What can be done in terms of the diversion once the officer gets involved?

Kevin Bethel:

What I learned is really up to the law enforcement entity and the school district on how much you'll tolerate. The Philadelphia Police Department when I was there, I mean, you really just kind of sit down and you really have a conversation. For example, in the state of Pennsylvania, the minimum age for arresting a child is 10 years of age. You

close your eyes and you think about a 10 year old child. You say, what would I lock up a 10 year old child for? I mean, two 10 year olds get in a fight? No, two 10 year olds stole something in the school.

I mean, you start to realize that something was just not aligning so our ability to sit out there and delineate what offenses do we not? We really just went through this process. We recognized using data that those kids represented 2%, 3% of our kids.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You could actually look at all the data and decide if this is where we draw the line, this is what the implications are going to be in terms of how many arrests we're likely to make and how many incidents we deal with and that's where you can kind of set the rule, "Okay, if we set the line here, I can go home and sleep at night."

Kevin Bethel:

That's exactly how we did it. I looked down on the sheet and I said, "Listen, if I take off a kid coming to school with scissors, if I take off young ladies who come in with mace [crosstalk 00:25:20]."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Take off and arrest you mean?

Kevin Bethel:

Take ... Yeah. If I stop arresting kids for coming in with scissors, stop arresting a kid coming with fights, stop arresting young girls coming with mace as a protective device, how about I stop arresting young people who get suspended the day before and show up to school and we charge them with trespassing? We won't do that either. 65%, 70% of our 1600 arrests were those.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. But then how do the schools deal with the kids that get suspended and then turn up the next day?

Kevin Bethel:

We don't charge them, right? But we'll talk to the kid. I mean, we don't even see that as the verbal issue anymore. Those cases you handle them in a more humane way. I tell people ... Here's what I would tell people. If you think a child gets on the bus, drives an hour on the bus or has to transfer to show up at the school, maybe an hour away from their home, come to that school to get arrested, that's just not true. There's got to be something about that school that causes that child to get up every day and come to that space.

Not only through the diversion process do you say, "Hey, I'm not going to arrest", you also bring the data and the science together that talks about [inaudible 00:26:23] development and taking a more developmental approach.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think for some of the kids it may be it's the safest place for them.

Kevin Bethel:

Safest place for them. As a city with so much violence and so much poverty, those kids come into our system and they represent a large percentage of our kids coming from single parent homes who struggle to eat every day, who are getting beaten and abused. God knows what happens to them. Then they come into our schools and it should be a safe place. It should be a haven for them to feel that they're not under attack, they're under surveillance, and, yeah, they're going to make stupid mistakes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've told me in the past that ... I throw that in because that's my bullshit way of saying you sent me a text message to talk about this.

Kevin Bethel:

[crosstalk 00:27:01].

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm going to edit this bit out, you see?

Kevin Bethel:

I know you are.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That an arrest doesn't just affect the kid. It also has some kind of collateral damage as well.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. What I would come to learn ... You know, you hear this term school to prison pipeline and you're like ... You get defensive. That's not what I'm trying to do. We build our systems, particularly, our policing system on accountability [crosstalk 00:27:21].

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You did something bad, you have to pay for it.

Kevin Bethel:

Absolutely. You're raised that way.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's not the goal. In some cases, yes, but maybe the goal is also the bigger picture aim is we're trying to prevent this happening again, right?

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. You don't think in those terms, right? You think that action, consequence, stops action. Then you look down and you say, "Well, we weren't using data, right?" I looked back and I said, "Well, we've been locking up 1600, 1700, 1800 kids a year in the school district. If our consequence model was working the data should be trending downward, right? That

REDUCING CRIME PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

these kids learn from those kids and those kids say, 'I don't want to be like him so I'm not going to do that so we're not going to have those arrests in the schools' and then you look down and you say, "Well, we have just as many arrests every year so clearly this model doesn't work."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm just amused at the idea of learning from data. Kind of shocking.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Come on. That's not how we do public policy.

Kevin Bethel:

No, no. I know. I know. What I would learn as I went through this process is that I arrest this kid and you think it's no big deal, right? A kid gets locked up and the next day he goes to his intake hearing. Now the DA's office in our case here in Philadelphia, the DA's office, they created a great program, the Youth Aid Panel, so many of those kids would go through that diversion model.

That kid, though, if he didn't complete the program would go before a judge or he went right to the judge. The kid who came to school with a knife may not be diverted. He goes before the judge. You start to realize, "Well, what happens when he does that?" Not only does he have to deal with the fines and fees that come from that. The judge may say, "You know what? I'm going to put you on probation."

I met a child one time, a young person, who had been on probation for five years because every time he got in trouble stemming from a case where he got locked up in school, his probation would just keep getting continued. Well, whether the kid I locked up for a summary offense for disorderly conduct who would then not get an adjudicated delinquent and went into the adult court, a \$300 fine but if he had money he could go to a Saturday program and get that expunged. If he didn't, prior to five years ago, they couldn't even get that expunged from their record so they live with that all the way into their adulthood as they apply for a job. I started to realize the sheer consequences of that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They do this one thing and they're in the system and that's it, that's them.

Kevin Bethel:

That's it. They've seen it, right? They've seen their grandmother, their mom, their brother, their sister, their cousin, a whole family and so, uh oh, tag, I'm it. I get that fine number. It's not a Social Security number. It's a photo number.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I remember a guy I arrested once in the east end of London and I'm filling out the paperwork and he says, "I know how long it takes to get my criminal records office number, my CRO number, here it is" and he rolls his shirtsleeve up and he has his criminal records office number tattooed on his arm.

Kevin Bethel:

Right. Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

He said it saved the processing time every time he got nicked.

Kevin Bethel:

Right. You start to realize the impact it has and especially on our younger children.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But have you found that that's a hard sell to turn around to people who have got strongly held views about how things should be and you turn up with the data that says something different that they struggle to appreciate that?

Kevin Bethel:

I think there is but I think the way you get that is you make them part of the process, right? It can't be my way, data way, and no your way. It's my way, the data, but walk that walk with me. You know? I remember bringing in 84 school officers into a meeting and having that conversation, that I had this idea that I want to change how we deal with young people.

You know, right away there's immediate resistance because they have not been exposed to anything different. They felt, "Hey, listen, we were meeting the demands of the system."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, you have to have that willingness to be open to the possibility that what we're doing doesn't work. That's a hard ask for some people.

Kevin Bethel:

I'll tell you what, I made that conclusion already that it wasn't working. You know what we were doing? Wasting a lot of people's time. We'd process a kid for an incident and then the DA's office sends them to the Youth Aid Panel. You know what I said about that? I said, "Well, then if I go through all of this processing, I take a kid into the cellblock, I fingerprint them, photograph them, hold them in the cell block and I charge them and the next day he goes into his intake hearing and then when he meets with the DA's office, they say, 'You don't need to go see a judge. You can go back out here in the community to our Youth Aid Panel and if you deal with the Youth Aid Panel you won't have to ...'"

Well, that's not even money, right? The Youth Aid Panel is free, [inaudible 00:31:30], and if they stay out of trouble they get their record expunged. My question was so then why did I need to arrest a kid if you send him out here to a community program and I don't need to do any of that and I don't need to inflict the trauma that that arrest puts on the child in addition to the consequences that go with it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The amount of time, it takes how many people earning how much and costing how much an hour? Throughout the whole process.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. Yeah. For me, personally, it became a thing about being humane and being fair and being just but one thing we knew going in, it was the right thing to do. Part of what I also recognized, I failed the men and women who worked for me. I sat in a room with 84 men and women talking about [crosstalk 00:32:16].

Jerry Ratcliffe:

These are your police officers who worked in schools?

Kevin Bethel:

[crosstalk 00:32:18] police officers who support the schools and I'm looking at them and they got it. They wanted it. They didn't like locking up 10 year old kids. I mean, they knew that the system should have been better but I recognized my failure to not give them a different tool.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Are some places taking a zero tolerance approach?

Kevin Bethel:

I think there are. I think there's some places that still take zero tolerance as an approach and I think it's wrong. I remember doing the zero tolerance when we went through the broken windows theory and at the time we were working under Commissioner [Timminy 00:32:48].

Jerry Ratcliffe:

John [Timminy 00:32:49]. That's going way back.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. Going back. You know, we're going to do this zero tolerance, quality of life offenses, and we're out there every day, man. Anything that's ... You know, drinking on the highway, speeding on the highway, littering, I mean, anything. You know? What we were doing in community is kind of a bookend. It was a match, right? Schools are doing zero tolerance in the schools. We're out in the community doing zero tolerance but we also recognized the impacts of that as well.

You know, when you put so much pressure on a system at some point, it blows. You see that across the nation where we have these flareups after police shootings and the zero tolerance mentality. I don't know what that is. I don't know if that's even possible to have zero tolerance. What's left on the sidelines? Empathy and understanding and really even the data, right? Even though, the data, you may be driving to this zero level but you evaluate the collateral damage that comes with that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think the issue to some degree is that we don't think that there are consequences but that's I think because we're not measuring them.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. It took me a moment to get there too. You know what I mean? What is the consequences of ... It takes work, right? As you know, it takes ... You have to look within yourself and say, "You know, I get it. I may not find the answer I

want but I need to find the answer", right? Just sitting there and ignoring it and then you're sitting in a meeting where someone pulls the raw data off of a website and next thing you know you've got a reporter sitting in front of you saying, "Hey, can I share this with you?" You do know you locked up 10,000 people this year and they're all African American or they're all Latino or they're all this.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There is the issue around open data is that there's a good chance that it's going to drive more data-driven policy making because it's easier to hold people accountable if the data are publicly available.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. Absolutely. I didn't ever want to be surprised, right? It was good that we were always tracking that to see ... I wouldn't say that we were perfect at it. We still had our growing pains and probably in policing it will continue to be that way. It's hard to come and say ... Especially when you see good numbers, everybody is looking, "Crime is coming down", no one wants to know ... Sometimes folks purposefully don't want to know the answer.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think a lot of police leaders I've spoken to are going you know what? We're used to bad news. We just don't want surprises.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. Yeah. That was Ramsey's [inaudible 00:35:12], right? He'll work with the researchers all day long but just don't tell me two years later I did something stupid. Let me know kind of ... I think it worked. It opened up the door for us to be comfortable to work in that space and I think folks make a mistake when they go back into their bunkers and don't want to be data-driven or have somebody from a third person.

I remember telling you this. I mean, I could sit there and write, not like you, but an article about foot beats. Nobody is going to listen to me. If Temple University, Jerry Ratcliffe, and the criminal justice department writes about it, everybody and their mother.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I wouldn't go that far.

Kevin Bethel:

Well, but I'm just saying but you see the network that you have able to spread that across and those universities go to their law enforcement and they say, "Hey, maybe we could do something like this."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, I don't think it's as much that. I, certainly, don't think I have that much credibility but I think the issues to some degree it's really difficult to be a prophet in your own land. People are skeptical of police departments that do their own evaluations. [crosstalk 00:36:13]. If a third party comes in from outside, it is easier to get a third party in to give you that legitimacy.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. Absolutely. You said it more eloquently but that's where I was going.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If you could determine for the country, for police officers and schools, school resource officers, what would be the most important training that we should give them?

Kevin Bethel:

I think first and foremost is ongoing training just like any of the other professions.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We don't do that in policing hardly ever.

Kevin Bethel:

I know. That's the challenge, right? Here's what I tell folks. If you're going to have an adult in a child setting then there needs to be trained how to understand that child. You know? It's like no different than a childcare worker. You're not going to put the plumber in their childcare center and have them work with kids with no knowledge.

I think the core areas are [inaudible 00:37:03] and development and how to deescalate situations. You know, trauma training. All of those things that often times policing has shied away from, those soft skills, are incredibly necessary in a school setting and we fail our men and women when we put them in a setting and don't provide them with that level of training.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In so many places in the country, you just go from being mainstream policing to be assigned to the school and good luck.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. Then we sit back and we're surprised when we see these national stories that come up where an officer has used force to hold a child [crosstalk 00:37:39].

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Putting eight year olds in handcuffs and stuff like that.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah, and because we haven't given them the tools. I mean, I remember some years ago, the incident I think in South Carolina where they had the officer come in and he's pulling the young lady out of the chair. I mean, I say, you have administrators standing around watching him do that. First, the training also says that I shouldn't be in those spaces for code of conduct issues, right? We start there. What is my role and responsibilities in this setting? I shouldn't be called in a classroom to take the kid who doesn't want to put his hoodie off.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Start by managing the situation before we even think about the police.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. It's got to be multiple layers and then when you bring that officer into that space, the more trained he is, the better he or she is prepared to deal with the complexities of our kids but sometimes, man, you get to that place at the end, you'd be surprised. That kid will come back tomorrow and say, "Hey, how you doing, officer?" He'll respect you, he'll appreciate you, and he'll be a different time. Next time you come back all you have to do is say his name, "Hey, Jerry, knock it off." "Oh, that's Officer Smith."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Can't tell you how many times I've heard that when I was at school.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. He's not a bad guy, right? It's not about his uniform or his title. It's how you treated him.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Sounds like you're enjoying it.

Kevin Bethel:

Let me tell you something, man. It's the best thing I've ever done in my life. I've always felt I have an opportunity now to impact so many young people's lives, whether it be the school district where I'm at now or the work I've done nationally to say ... Yeah, I sit up in the front of the big bad chiefs and tell them, I say, "Listen, I could tell you my world, I've done it all, I've locked up guys. I've been the guy who pressed the buttons, who's done all of that, the stop and frisk and been involved in all that but I also can be that guy who sits there and says, 'You know what? As much pressure as we put on the system, there has to be outlets.'"

When you look at data, right? I remember looking down at data and talking to my guys and saying, "You know what? I have 100% clearance on arrests in schools. I've got a 20% clearance on the 1500 shootings I had last year." You know what I mean? I got a school, kid comes in, kid got this, lock kid up, kid comes in ... 100% clearance. You know what I mean? What does that say? You know?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. That's been [inaudible 00:39:52], not the outcome, which is what's the harm reduction and the safety of the community?

Kevin Bethel:

I think what hopefully as we continue to do the research, just through a process turn into a longitude of study, right?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Look at you, using all of the research terms.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. It's true, man but [crosstalk 00:40:08].

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Welcome to the dark side, brother Kevin.

Kevin Bethel:

I know. I don't know all that language. I don't know the equations. That stuff drives me crazy. I don't know how you get that. My hope is that I can show those naysayers at the end of the road to say, "Hey, look at this, this kid that I didn't lock up in ninth grade made it through high school and the data says ... Hey, listen, we know only 35% of the nation had degrees, right? Majority of our nation does not. They get him or her on the other side, set them up for all those things that they could do.

I always tell people, I say, this is your next person who could kill a cop, this is the next person who could kill anyone. We look at some of the raw data for the kids we were locking up, even the ones we lock them now, some of them have already committed murder, some of them have already been murdered, many of them have already been shot.

We can demonstrate that, "Hey, guess what? That kid that you don't lock up for that low level offense made it through" and I tell people the added bonus [inaudible 00:41:01] said this to me one time, which I never thought through, she said, "Kevin, this can change generations."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. If you think about it, if an officer works in an area or a city for 10 years, we've had run ins with 23 year olds, 25 year olds, how we deal with now with the 13 and the 15 year olds was going to have an impact on how we're dealing with them when they're 23 and 25 and those interactions, those small interactions or small differences might make a big change.

Kevin Bethel:

Yeah. I mean, the school is like a little incubator. I mean, we started a youth court program and watch the young people talk to other young people, sharing their stories, and why they sometimes do what they do. It's been a great experience, man. It's been a great ride for me. I'm fortunate enough to be continuing on that ride and see where we go, man.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I don't say this about many people but you're a bit of an inspiration, mate. I think when I grow up I want to be you.

Kevin Bethel:

Oh, I don't know about that. I don't know about that. I want the accent. I'll take your accent and we can switch for a day and see how that goes. You know?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Kevin, thank you very much.

Kevin Bethel:

I appreciate it, Jerry. I appreciate the opportunity to talk about what we're doing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've been listening to episode 24 of Reducing Crime, recorded just outside Philadelphia in March 2020. Other episodes at Reducing Crime dot com or pretty much anywhere else. New episodes are announced on Twitter underscore Reducing Crime. Be safe and best of luck.