#88 (BEN BRADFORD)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Reducing crime features conversations with influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers.

Ben Bradford is a professor of Global City Policing at University College London. We chat about police legitimacy, his research on what people want from the police, and what law enforcement leaders need to know about improving trust in policing.

I am Jerry Ratcliffe and this is Reducing Crime, a podcast that's now been downloaded more than 300,000 times. Thanks for listening. In fact, whether it's listening to the podcast or following my short Reducing Crime random ramblings on social media, I appreciate you engaging with what we're trying to do here and playing your part in spreading a little more knowledge and evidence around policing crime and public safety.

One of those important areas is police legitimacy and Ben Bradford is a huge name in this as well as many other fields. So it was handy that I saw he was on the agenda of an evidence-based policing conference back in July, hosted by the Society of Evidence-Based Policing and the executive master's program at the University of Cambridge. Ever the opportunist, I grabbed the chance to chat with him.

Ben is professor of Global City policing in the Department of Security and Crime Science at University College London, where he is the director of the Center for Global City policing. His eclectic research interests include public trust, police legitimacy, cooperation and compliance along with social identity and how people see themselves in criminal justice settings. He also works on organizational justice within police agencies. It's all very practical work, and Dr. Bradford's research explores public-facing police work, such as neighborhood patrol, community engagement, and stop and search. Ben has collaborated with numerous organizations, including the Metropolitan Police Service, the London Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime, the College of Policing, Police Scotland, and West Midlands Police. We chatted at the conference hotel in what turned out to be a less quiet area than I hoped, but it worked out, with both of us..well, largely me... recovering from a splendid dinner the night before, arranged by our generous hosts, during which I learned that Ben was the living embodiment of Wallace or grommet. Take your pick. You'll hear why...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

All you ate was cheese. You had a cheese starter or a cheese mane and then cheesecake afterwards. How is it? You are not massive. You're like still slim and healthy. For those of us who struggle, I have to work hard just trying to keep vaguely mediocre. It was really annoying.

Ben Bradford:

Baggy t-shirts, conceal many sins,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Just disgraceful. That was a mountain of cheese. I just didn't, whether you weren't getting cheese sweats or something like that. What conference? What's conference? It's about drinking and having cheese, sweat and red wine. Yeah. You never started as a criminologist. You started in archeology. How did you get into that?

Ben Bradford:

I wanted to be Indiana Jones. There you go. And then I realized after three years that archeology is really hard work, so I didn't want to do that for the rest of my life

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Tell me about the transition to how you got from there to here. Did you go from school to university?

Ben Bradford:

Yeah, straight free. So when I left at university, that was back in the 1990s, so I signed on, I was unemployed for six months, got bored with that, got a job in a secondhand record shop, did a part-time master's in social anthropology at UCL while I was doing that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

University College London?

Ben Bradford:

Yeah, university College London. And then I thought, I can't work in the record shop for the rest of my life,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Which is a shame really, because we should have a world where people can work in a record shop for their life,

Ben Bradford:

But we don't have that work and also gets a bit bored. So I started working in the civil service, ended up at the Office of for National Statistics, ended up working on the census ethnic group statistics.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What is the skillset that archeology gave you that you found useful in the Office of National Statistics?

Ben Bradford:

Not much I wouldn't say. I mean, how did you get the job then? It was very low. I mean it started as a clerk. They weren't called Clarks anymore, but it was basically as a clerk and then got promoted a couple of times and ended up in the social statistics section. They funded me to do another in social research methods at the LSE did that and I got onto the PhD program. But about that in methodology.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What's the sort of speciality, the methodological work that you were doing then?

Ben Bradford:

Not a huge amount. I mean this is back in the UK criminology in the mid two thousands, so just doing quant work, survey based work was pretty unusual as to IS to an extent,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Which is funny really because I mean the things like the Crime Survey of England and Wales or the National Crime Surveys been running for years.

Ben Bradford:

Yeah. And so horrendously underutilized in academic research. I think the crime survey for those kinds of reasons, so, so I did just enough now multi-level modeling and structural equation modeling, that kind of level. It's nothing really fancy

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Structured equation modeling, but nothing really fancy. Your bar for fancy is kind of, and that's it. Yeah, but this seems like a sort of not a drifting path, but you didn't start a PhD until you were sort of a little bit later. I think you were 34, weren't you?

Ben Bradford:

Something like that. Yeah. 84, 85.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, I started a PhD when I was 30.

Ben Bradford:

I don't regret any of that. I'm really glad I didn't do the whole undergraduate master's, PhD. Get to 26, 27, first academic job with no life experience, no understanding of

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What do you think you picked up from the life experience side that's helped you?

Ben Bradford:

I mean, working in shop shoplifters, calling the police, running off down the street when people nick stuff.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They don't do that nowadays. Everybody, people just walk out the stores these days, right?

Ben Bradford:

Yeah, we had security guards. Wasn't one of those. We had security guards who'd come around there. And also, I mean, I spent most of the nineties going to illegal warehouse parties, so I saw the other side of the equation. So yeah, just things like that. Just a bit of kind of understanding of the way the world works outside academia,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And that sounded also a chunk of just dealing with people

Ben Bradford:

And all sorts of different people as well, not just people on that kind of academic career path.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There's a tendency nowadays for people to sort of take sides, but if you're going to a legal warehouse parties and hanging with those people, now you're working with the police in many of the areas that you're working with. Has that been a struggle, that juxtaposition?

Ben Bradford:

So when I was doing my PhD was when Betsy Stanko was working inside the Met 2008. I went in there almost on a part-time contract in her unit, and that was the first time I'd really spent a lot of time going into police buildings and all this kind stuff. There was a bit of, this is a bit strange, where am I? How

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Did you adjust to that experience then?

Ben Bradford:

I've had it very easy actually. Everyone was very, people see now say to me, and I had more rings in my head and stuff then however police review, but it just accept me for I am because I fit in a bracket. I'm the geeky academic,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

kind of linen jacket to bigger earrings kind of stuff,

Ben Bradford:

And it was fine. And yeah, very rapidly got over that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

To be honest these days. You could also look like an undercover cop.

Ben Bradford:

Yeah, exactly. I think you're right. I think being able to see both sides of the coin has been very useful and it gives you an understanding of the extent of shared interests, even among people we might label as offenders because we know they're victims in other contexts.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Even with repeat offenders, they're not offending all the time and when they're not offending, they would like to feel safe too.

Ben Bradford:

Exactly. And obviously there's a hardcore of people for whomever solutions are needed, but as a rule, you can get everyone obviously not on the same page, but there's shared interests and ways of thinking about things.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've become very well known in the space of police legitimacy. I mean, you are originally doing methodological work. How have you moved into that space?

Ben Bradford:

So my master's dissertation at the LSE was on stop and search. I was interested in,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Let me just interrupt, because the horn came blasting pass and that's the London School of Economics.

Ben Bradford:

Yeah, my master's dissertation was on, I did on stop and search. I was interested in ethnic group classification, what I was working on. I read Tom Tyler. That seemed like a really obvious thing to do. So my whole PhD was based around procedural justice and that really wasn't well known in the UK at that time. A couple of Richard Sparks, Tony Bottoms had talked a bit about it. There was a couple of other people, Jon Jackson, who's my supervisor at the time, he'd done a bit, but there weren't many of us back then. So I kind of caught it at the right moment.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Just explain if you can for a moment, what procedural justice really is.

Ben Bradford:

So it's a theory of people come to judge and understand in terms with authority figures as fair.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I don't need a theory. I'm very judgy.

Ben Bradford:

Yeah, I mean, to be fair, I think we still call it a theory. I mean, in some sense it's almost moved beyond that. Yes, it's so well supported and when people are interacting with, it could be police officers, but it could also be judges, anyone in the criminal justice system, prison guards, but it could also be teachers, employers, even your parents. In those interactions you're having with people who have power of you in various contexts, what are you looking for in those interactions? What makes you think they are fair? And it's all about the quality of the process. So are you treated, respect, dignity, et cetera?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There are sort of four elements to it, and those four are, you've touched a couple of them. Teach somebody with respect, dignity,

Ben Bradford:

Allow people voice, demonstrate trustworthy motives,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And it seems to touch a bunch of areas. There was a recent speeding trial in Queensland where they just sent people more procedurally just letters. And those letters were saying, look, here's the reasons why we stopped you. It's not just here's your ticket, you were going too fast. And for people over the age of 25, there was a significant reduction in them getting tickets again in the future.

Ben Bradford:

Yeah, it's really not rocket science in some sense. It's just treating people with dignity and respect,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Even when they've been offending and speeding and all sorts of stuff. Yeah,

Ben Bradford:

Yeah, exactly. One reason for that is, as we were saying before, even people who commit crimes most of their time not committing crimes, and when they're not committing crimes, they're citizens worthy of respects and dignity. Even in the instances where they're being fined or whatever, it's right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So this was for your master's degree and then after your PhD you decided to come back and revisit it?

Ben Bradford:

Well, the PhD was on that, and then I did the classic thing of one year postdoc in Edinburgh, a one year postdoc back at the LSC, and then I got a job at Oxford, what's called as an early career fellow ricocheting around on temporary contracts like everyone does.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So now you're at University College London and Correct you are the professor of global city policing. Global city policing. That does sound very fancy. I could see you started laughing before I even said anything. I clearly can't play poker. I had a face. I mean it sounds well fancy. That does.

Ben Bradford:

Yeah. So I was appointed to be professor of Global city policing and director for what was called then the Institute for Global City Policing, which was set up by the Metropolitan Police and MoPac Mayor's Office of Policing Crime, which is a local government oversight agency for policing in London. And they wanted or had been convinced to fund a center of policing research in London, and the name comes from, well, a London is a global city, so there was some meaning there. But I think also, I think it's fair to say that Boris Johnson was mayor at the time room has, it had to be an institute and it had to be the Center for Global City policing. That sounded grand.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So even though it's called Global City, it's really all about London

Ben Bradford:

And no, and obviously we've got a London focused to our research and that is given where the funding was coming from.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's a city of what, 10 plus million people. I mean, you can just dedicate your career to even parts of the city.

Ben Bradford:

Yeah, absolutely. But on the other hand, I kind of struggle to think what are policing challenges that are unique to London outside diplomatic protection.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's funny enough, that's the job I used to do.

Ben Bradford:

Yeah, yeah. Does it really? I didn't it. Yeah. And there's a few bits and pieces like that, but the policing challenges are replicated in other parts of the uk, in other cities around the

Jerry Ratcliffe:

World that work has, you probably never left it, I think, but come really back to really focusing now on the legitimacy for your presentation you gave yesterday. You are identifying that policing, and I think this is an issue globally, certainly in the United States as well, has been struggling with a legitimacy crisis since about 2017, 2017. How bad is it and what's been driving it?

Ben Bradford:

Because policing is so context specific. I think I really struggle with any effort to kind of say that there is a thing globally called the police because the nature of these organizations, institutions vary so much from country to country and even countries that are relatively similar that in the United States and UK policing systems are in some respects wildly different. There was some crossover, there's some kind of effect of what happens in the states in particular finds echoes in the uk. I think most obviously around Black Lives Matter, one of the main reasons for what happened in the UK was budget cuts from 2010 under austerity, reduction in the number of police officers, reduction in the number of levels of visibility. I don't think that happened in the States. I

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Think well also police funding is so variable because 18,000 police departments in the United States, that's an issue. So there are some unique components to British policing, but then increasingly it is, and this seems appropriate for a professor of global policing, there are these commonalities. I mean, the Black Lives Matter, and George Floyd, I saw demonstrations and riots taking place here in London, which seems preposterous like four. Minneapolis is four 5,000 miles away in a completely different country in a completely different continent. And yet it had these ramifications,

Ben Bradford:

I mean, activated us existing tensions within the UK society, one of those kind of focal moments where a whole bunch of people sit up and start paying attention to something that they'd probably many of 'em had cared about before, but not in the semi

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Provided a focal point to hang all these ideas

Ben Bradford:

On. Yeah, I think one of the, the interesting things in the UK is most of the really high profile demonstrations for around that time were not really about the police there with much greater concern with the statues and the history of colonialism and imperialism, and that seemed to be more aware the tension was lying.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So there's portions that have an international flavor and then we add these unique local additions to it and give it the little extra spice.

Ben Bradford:

Yeah, absolutely. Like the statues in the river in Bristol,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There's also, and you talked about this yesterday, we're entering a stage where there's confusion or a bit of a crisis about what people just fundamentally want from policing. And I love the work that you're doing right now because you seem to be going back to basics and just going to people and saying, look, what do you want the police to be? Which

seems a really nice kind of way just to go back to some basics, not make any assumptions and just say, tell us what you want.

Ben Bradford:

In many respects, what they want for the police is entirely in line with the kind of ideas of civil justice. So we went to people and just in a very unstructured, unfiltered way, we asked them what are the set of services think the police should be delivering in your community? But not just neighborhood policing, we didn't just want 'em to talk about neighborhood policing in a broader sense. And almost everything they said was concerned with the process of policing, not the outcomes of policing. In some sense, they fought, policing was for certainly investigating crimes and solving crimes, but not reducing crime, not having some overall effect on the level of crime. And they thought policing was literally for engaging with their community, talking to them. And it is really interesting and exactly as you say, we who work in and around policing assume that we know what policing is for and everyone shares that view. And there are wide areas of agreement. People absolutely fought. The police should investigate crime, for example, but they tend to think it about it in a subtly different, but importantly different kind of way.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you think that's because they simply don't know that police can perform a crime reduction function or they more see it as an emergency service?

Ben Bradford:

I think it's more the latter. I mean, I certainly don't think if you told them that police can do it, they think they're great, that's brilliant. Most people, they wouldn't have a problem with that. But I think it's more, as you say, their first framing of the police, if you like, is an emergency response function. Absolutely found that people are instinctive veterinarian. So Bittner's famous sociology of police famously define the police. Police are who you call when something is happening that ought not to be and about which someone had better do something now from Bittner. And that is absolutely in line with what they thought. So things happen. It could be bad things, it could be dangerous things, risky things. It could just be uncertain things where there's, I'm not sure,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I don't know what's going on, but somebody should have a look at this,

Ben Bradford:

Somebody to have a look at it. And they were very clear and they kind of said this, what do you need in that situation? We need someone who might need to use force and who can use force to solve these problems. And that's the police. So no one else can really do that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes, the police, if only just for democratic accountability, the police are the only organization that have the authority to come and use forces necessary on behalf of people. So yeah, it makes sense.

Ben Bradford:

And they were equally clear that if when the police had turned up and there was no crime, the police go away again. And if there was an ongoing problem, for example, mental health or homelessness or whatever, other services should step in and deal with those problems, emergency first response and kind of general assistance. They didn't think it was strange that the police turn up to scenes of accidents.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So that's interesting. Why do you think that is? Just because they bring a sense of authority.

Ben Bradford:

Yeah. Order to something that is disorderly and an accident is kind of in some sense the ultimate form of disorder. And I think also they would say, well, we don't know what's happening with the accident. Perhaps it wasn't an accident. Perhaps he was drunk or whatever it was.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Now you did this research doing focus groups and work in interviews with people in a number of English cities and towns. It strikes me though, you could have done the same thing in cities and towns in Australia or in the US and probably got very similar answers,

Ben Bradford:

I think. So I got a former PhD student of mine, former county sheriff in the States. He's done a lot of work going to and asking them who they think police should be, police officers, what qualities and characteristics should police officers have and what comes out of that is very similar.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you think their expectations

Ben Bradford:

Of the police are realistic? Well, one of the things we did in the focus groups is we went into the first ones saying what services you expect from the police? And people respond, well, I don't expect any service from them. Not here. They're absent. So most people in focus groups were aware that budgets have been cut, and not just in policing, but in all the services that sit around policing. And most of them were aware that police were being asked to do things in the past may have been done by other services, which isn't to say that some of 'em weren't really angry at the police, they were. But there's a relatively sophisticated understanding of the kind of limits of police and what we could expect this organization to do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's interesting. One of the things you mentioned was about the visibility of the police, and especially around police stations. As I was coming here to Cambridge, I walked past on Seven Sisters Road, a police station that was clearly in a not great state. There was a public entrance, but it was shuttered and closed. I actually thought about broken

windows policing. It was like, this is a terrible sign. You've got this shuttered, abandoned, closed police station. What does that sign say to the community? And you found something about in your research around visibility of the police.

Ben Bradford:

Yeah, I, and that's been the key theme for many, many years. If you look at work that was done in the early two thousands, one of the things that people would say is police aren't visible. They used to be. So there's a certain kind of nostalgia to it, which we need to be slightly careful about. But almost everyone in the focus groups brought up visibility presence, which is more than visibility. So meaningful presence. Lots of them talked about closing police stations. A lot of what's going on, much wider than policing in this country is people feel abandoned by institutions. They feel left behind. And the way that they want those institutions to demonstrate they care about 'em is pre presence being in their community.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They don't really care about detection rates or anything like that. They just want to see the police and get a sense that there is some sort of government authority presence in their life.

Ben Bradford:

They care about things that don't necessarily fit particularly well within an evidence-based policing paradigm. So they value rapid response even in not particularly serious situations, made a call to you, I want you to come and deal with my problem, and I want you to do that. Now. They care about meaningful investigation, even when as a police officer you'd look and there's no hope of us dealing with this.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So there is these issues. So when we send people just like a bullshit proforma letter that's clearly been written by a computer that says, oh, we really care a great deal about this. They see through that.

Ben Bradford:

Yes, absolutely. And I think you touched on an important point. I think there are ways of managing those expectations that policing is not very good at. So a story of what's happened with burglaries in England or Wales has been quite interesting. So traditionally a house burglary police would turn up and try and conduct some sort of investigation. Around 2015 forces started to say, we're not going to send officers to scenes of burglaries. It's a waste of our time. It's not a good use of our resources. There was a huge pushback on that led by the media and others. And lots of people feel very strongly about this. If I've been burgled, I want to call the police. Right?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, it's a very personal thing. It's an invasion of my personal space. Every man's home is their castle, that kind of stuff. And now it's been invaded and it's been the word I'm looking for. Desecrated. That's the word. Thank you. Yeah. How many beers last night? It's a problem when you end up in the eagle in the bathhouse having a few beverages. The English language abandons me the next morning and that sense of that your home is desecrated, and it's a very emotional thing. I remember being a young cop, burglary was a massive issue in the 1980s. They were realistic about

your chances of getting their stuff back. They were realistic about your chances of catching the offender. They weren't really fussed about that, but they just needed somebody to understand how upsetting it was.

Ben Bradford:

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. There was all that pushback. I think some of it justified. So the police did the thing that police very often do, which is overcorrected. So now there's a commitment to send officers to every burglary, which is causing problems. And obviously the logical thing would've been to say just to ask people, would you like us to come out and invest again, give the choice to the member of the public to the victim. I think one of the things that police struggle with in the UK certainly more widely is kind of giving people that choice to other people, because police always want to degree control.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And you raised an interesting point, so it makes me think about what are some of the sort of policy implications of the work that you're doing? Some of the things that you kind of think, oh, we should be thinking about doing that.

Ben Bradford:

Yeah. One of the things you've touched on part already is the quality of communication. Inevitably in the 21st century, much communication between the police and the public is electronic. Police organizations are sending a lot of electronic communications out in lots of different formats, and I think there's a huge space for those quality of those communications to be improved in line with principles of serial justice.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you think that changes generationally? Because I mean, I'm old now, right? And it's like texting is something that I do, but it's not my primary source of communication really though increasingly because everybody else is. But younger generations, their phone is connected to their hand almost biologically, and they seem far more comfortable with that. Do you think that makes a difference?

Ben Bradford:

I think it must do. I mean, I think one of the things that's happening, so you take, for example, the process of reporting a crime. The variety of ways you can do that in the UK are growing. Now there's multiple ways of doing that. Could do it with an online chat. You come to some kind of portal. You might be doing it with an online chat, even with a chat bot, and people are going to self-select into the one that's best for them as long as you give them the choice. And we've done some work with young people, which kind of suggests that they absolutely think that the police should be present in those online spaces and communicating with the way that they're used to communicating. But they'll also often say, but I also want to know police officers. They got this kind. I do want to have the potential to meet 'em face to face, or they might need them to be physically there. I think a lot of that goes back again to this correct understanding that people have. What can the police do ultimately? So what is the point of them? It's to potentially use force to solve problems. And that's a physical thing. You can't solve my problem if you're not actually present

Jerry Ratcliffe:

With me at time that's occurring. Stop doing that, or I'm going to send a really nasty text.

Ben Bradford:

Exactly. And I think people kind of get that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It comes back to this notion of the importance of police legitimacy, which is you have to see the police was legitimate because they're the ones that are going to give you the legitimacy to be re-enroll in society in some fashion. I've got that wrong.

Ben Bradford:

No, I mean a lot of

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's highly likely that I have, I frequently get most things wrong.

Ben Bradford:

No, I mean a lot of what we call legitimacy is really recognizing, understanding, believing that the police share our values and our norms and our objectives and our ways of thinking, our sense of right and wrong. And that's all about group membership. That's all about seeing police officers like us or like me. And to the extent that people do, then they legitimize the police. The real problems start when they start seeing the police officer not like them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Are there limits to this, because things like use of force, obviously it is a reality of our world that we keep specifically for the police in a domestic society, we'll use the military overseas to do this kind of stuff, but within the country it's just the police have this monopoly on the use of force. Does that limit the scope of our understanding of how much we can all be part of this whole thing?

Ben Bradford:

Yeah, I think there's two answers to that question, but there's one understanding that of course, the police, by the nature of the job they do, are going to end up doing things that are potentially undermine trust and legitimacy. Let's put it like that, and use the force as a good example of the flip side, trust and legitimacy perhaps especially empowers the police. So when you legitimize and its one of the things you're doing is you are seeding the right to make decisions affect you because you now believe think that those decisions are going to be made in a correct way. It's dangerous to overstate this, but you can certainly see trust and legitimacy as a kind of a resource on which police organizations can draw when they have to engage in those problematic activities. Clearly one of the challenges for police organizations is to maintain those levels of trust and legitimacy where trust and legitimacy have essentially been lost. All you've got is force, and the more you use force when you're a hard power trap, you've lost trust, you've lost legitimacy. The only

way you've got to deal with things is the application more force or at least the threat of force. The application more force further undermines trust and legitimacy

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And you end up in a negative spiral. It just reinforces itself.

Ben Bradford:

Yeah, yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've mentioned trust and legitimacy, and yesterday you were talking about confidence, trust, legitimacy, confidence. Are these just all words for the same thing? Are there subtle differences between them?

Ben Bradford:

Yeah, definitely definitional differences. So I would say, and there is continuing debate about all of this, less about trust. I think trust is fairly clearly people will agree now that trust is a willingness to be vulnerable to another under conditions of risk. I don't know. When you leave your children with a babysitter, you're making yourself and your children vulnerable to the actions of the babysitter when you're not there

Jerry Ratcliffe:

As somebody who doesn't have any kids, by the way, the idea of leaving them with a babysitter sounds great. The problem is having to pick the little buggers up again. But

Ben Bradford:

You might say that I can possibly comment, they might be listening, why have you formed those positive expectations because of the evaluations you've made on them? Most importantly, in policing, personal contact, vicarious contact, also all the other sources of information.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Those are the things that are most important. When you've had a personal contact with a police officer, that's the thing that the top of the list is

Ben Bradford:

It. And vicarious contact can be just as supportive

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Family members that have had contact and they tell you about their

Ben Bradford:

Experiences

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And how is that trust different from confidence or legitimacy?

Ben Bradford:

So I think this is where it starts getting a bit controversial. Controversial in

Jerry Ratcliffe:

An academic sense, which is not controversial, everybody. Yeah,

Ben Bradford:

That's right. So I now think that confidence is those perceptions of trustworthiness. So competence is a general understanding you've formed that the police are benevolent, competent, well intentioned, et cetera. And then legitimacy, which is more contested. I think legitimacy is about value alignment and normative alignment. So when I legitimize the police, or to the extent that I believe that the police share my own sense of right and wrong, then I grant them legitimacy. And that's really important. I grant them legitimacy. I don't just assume that they have to demonstrate it to me, that's the first component of legitimacy. The second component is the reciprocal sense of duty. I now feel I have towards them because they're legitimate. So this is where people talk about the duty to moral duty to obey. If we hold an institution legitimate, then when we receive instructions from that institution, we feel that we have a moral duty to obey those instructions. And that's the power of legitimacy because it makes people feel that following the instructions of institutions is the right thing to do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What would be a couple of bits of advice that you could convey to police leaders, to police chiefs or police officers?

Ben Bradford:

That's a really good question. I would say remember where the bulk of your business comes from, which is from the call centers. One of the things that I think I observe in British policing is a continuing emphasis and huge amount of attention given to relatively small areas of business because they're high profile, they look like really great police work, and the bulk of the business is coming from those calls of service that people are making to call centers.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So to go back to bread and butter, day-to-day basics and just work on that

Ben Bradford:

In a sense, I mean, at least work out a way of doing both.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you think police services put enough importance on trust and legitimacy, or do they put too much on the outcomes, whereas what you are really saying is the process of policing is way more important to the public than the outcomes

Ben Bradford:

At the general level. Yeah, I think it is. Obviously there's going to be variations, and one of the challenges for policing is clearly they spend a lot of time dealing with people who are very, very heavily invested in the outcomes for obvious reasons, either because they're victim or they've been arrested or whatever it is. But in a general sense, bits of policing that people pay most attention to is, as you say, the process and the process involves investigating crime. So to give a complicated example, the police saying we've reduced crime by 10% in an area probably doesn't have much impact on the way that people think about policing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It also follows into, within policing, what are we measuring better? Measuring of trust and legitimacy sounds like a really key part to this.

Ben Bradford:

It does, as long as you don't make the performance targets. I think that's always the danger for the reasons that we were discussing just now. That's a problem because trust in the police might be going up and down for reasons that are quite unconnected to things that police do,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What's happening thousands of miles away.

Ben Bradford:

Exactly. So making it a target for field police organization to follow is a problem, but they absolutely need to be tracking it to use the language of best policing. You can track it to understand what's going on without it becoming something that you are actively working towards. In that sense, that could be counterproductive. And then my other piece of advice would be don't assume that your problems are all the fault of frontline officers because the problem might be being caused not by what they're doing, what your frontline officers are doing. By the way you've set up your organization, so how long you're giving people to deal with calls before they have to go to the next call,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right? So what you're saying is that there's a possibility that somebody would complain, well, the officer turned up and they were just brisk and in a rush, and they just didn't seem to care. Whereas what the officer's really doing is like, I'm going to get dinged if I spend too long on this call and I'm under pressure to get to the next thing and the next thing and the next thing.

Ben Bradford:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So it's an organizational crisis that's driving an interpersonal connection problem.

Ben Bradford:

Yeah,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Absolutely.

Ben Bradford:

What police organizations should try and do, and this isn't necessarily a popular thing to do, particularly in some parts of America, is to actually allow police officers to use their discretion, give them the space to decide what they think is the right thing to do in a situation and act on it. Those

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Good bits of advice.

Ben Bradford:

What's next for you? Much the same. You have a research agenda and you stick with it. And we're going to do some more iterations of the work we're doing about what people think the police are for one of them is going to be working with police officers. So asking the same set of questions we asked the public up to the police to kind of do a bit of compare and contrast. We're going to do it with young people. We're going to try and put some stuff together on really trying to get to grips with what visibility means and how and why and where.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, because it sounds like the quality of visibility. I see a police car tons of times driving past, but can that be trumped by a couple of police officers walking past going morning?

Ben Bradford:

Yeah, exactly. Exactly. So where and how does, and of course alongside that, you need to understand that not everyone reacts to visible policing in the same way. There's not going to be some places where people are not welcome.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

A lot of the places I work, people will wave at the police, but not with every single finger.

Ben Bradford:

Yeah,

Ben Bradford:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Fascinating stuff. Hey man, thanks very much for taking some time with me. I appreciate it.

Ben Bradford:

Thank you.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was episode 88 of Reducing Crime Recorded in Cambridge in July, 2025. At reducingcrime.com, you can find episode transcripts and if you are an instructor and DM me, I will send multiple choice questions for every episode. Subscribe at Spotify, SoundCloud, Apple, or wherever you pod, or I'll make you eat all the cheese in Cambridge.

Be safe and best of luck.