

#46 (WES SKOGAN)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Reducing Crime features influential thinkers in the police service, and leading crime and policing researchers.

Reducing Crime features influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers. Wes Skogan is emeritus professor at Northwestern University and the leading authority on community policing. We discussed the origins and development of community policing in Chicago, the importance of case workers, alongside violence interrupters, and the core components that can reinvigorate community policing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm Jerry Ratcliffe, and welcome to Reducing Crime. The 2021 American Society of Criminology Conference was held in Chicago and if you know anything about the study of policing in Chicago, you'll know the name, Wes Skogan.

Wesley Skogan is emeritus professor at Northwestern University, where he's been since 1971. He holds joint appointments in the political science department and the university's Institute for Policy Research. His work has focused on the interface between the public and the legal system, crime prevention, victim services and community or into policing. And in the area of community policing, Wes is one of - if not the - foremost authority in the world. He's written numerous key books on the topic, been awarded the Distinguished Achievement Award in evidence-based crime policy and testified before President Obama's task force on 21st century policing. Google Scholar shows him to be one of the most highly cited policing scholars of all time. Wes is a fellow of the American Society of Criminology, a member of the Scientific Committee of the International Society of Criminology and he was a senior fellow of the Open Society Institute.

He chaired the National Research Council's Committee on Research on Police Policies and Practices, and was a member of their committee on Law and Justice. Hell, Wes was even featured on a two-page spread in People Magazine. Seriously, he's a huge name and a huge man actually, he's really tall. In this episode, he recounts the history and development of community policing and identifies key ways it can move forward. My contribution to the chat is pointing out, you don't need to wear pants to be on a Zoom call. As you join our face-to-face conversation, he's explaining his Norwegian name, which I managed to butcher about 10 seconds in...

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Did I hear you say yesterday that your origins are Norwegian?

Wes Skogan:

Yeah, many, many generations ago. Skogan is a Norwegian word, it means woods, like as in trees. There's even a town in Norway, Skogan.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Are you sure it's not pronounced something like Skogan?

Wes Skogan:

Well, I'm sure it's pronounced differently. I've actually never been to Norway. And I tried to get skogan.com, but it's being cyber squatted by David Skogan who's a computer scientist in Oslo. So I was stuck with skogan.org. But since I figured I was pretty nonprofit anyway, that would be okay.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But I mean, that certainly explains your height, right?

Wes Skogan:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How tall are you?

Wes Skogan:

I was originally 6'6" and now in old age, I've shrunk about three quarters of an inch.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've certainly stood out in the crowd as an academic.

Wes Skogan:

I remember being in a country western bar in Stockholm with PO-Wikstrom. And it was a sort of place that had saw dust on the floor and you sort of stand up to watch the music and the entertainment that night was Huey Zetterberg and his Chicago Blues Express.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm scared already.

Wes Skogan:

But when I looked around, everybody was my size. The women were all about six feet, it was really...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's fantastic. How did you end up here? When you started, was academia always going to be the plan?

Wes Skogan:

Academia was going to be the plan beginning when I was an undergraduate in political science and I was quite taken by data. In those days, we're talking now about 1964, was uncommon in political science departments.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So it wasn't much science, it was a lot of political?

Wes Skogan:

It was a lot of political, a lot of government, about study of constitutions. My senior thesis was Constitutions as Instruments of Social Change, but I was quite taken by voting studies, which had just started to emerge. And I actually took a course which was on voting studies. And I said, "Ah, this is really good."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So numbers ...

Wes Skogan:

Surveys and numbers and charts and things go up and down.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So it peaked your interest. Where was your undergraduate?

Wes Skogan:

Indiana University. Then I went to Northwestern for graduate school and I came out with a specialist in urban politics and my first teaching job was teaching urban politics.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, wow.

Wes Skogan:

At a really good private college in Saint Paul, Minnesota called McAllister College. That's where I caught the policing bug because 1969-1970 was a period when police chiefs all across the country were running for mayor on law-and-order tickets.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's an amazing tradition in the United States, that you transition from being the police chief to often being the mayor. That's a weird thing.

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Wes Skogan:

Yep. They're known by anyone, by everyone. If they have the support of their rank and file, then they'll have the rest of the public safety infrastructure, the firemen and stuff like that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, you even see it in the bigger cities, I mean, I've heard rumors that back in the day, Rudy Giuliani felt threatened by the success of Bill Bratton.

Wes Skogan:

Well, they were the two largest egos on the planet. Their chests would bump under any circumstance.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If there isn't space for two people and it's New York City, that's a pretty big ego.

Wes Skogan:

Yeah. But I think it was mostly the fact that Bratton was on the cover of Time Magazine and not Rudy Giuliani in the story on the decline of crime in New York, when they finally cottoned to the fact that it might actually be happening.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So this time between politics and policing, there's been a thread right through then?

Wes Skogan:

What's interesting, of course, is over time, the tenor of policing as it begun in a shift toward community policing, you also observed police chiefs running for mayor as friends of the people. So Tom Potter got elected mayor in Portland based on his successes of bringing community policing to Portland. Clarence Harmon ran for mayor in St. Louis on the basis of his being a policing reformer. And in some places, chiefs lost their jobs because mayors felt threatened by the fact that they were so popular and well known.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You mentioned community policing obviously you're the most well-known name in that space. I mean, the work you've done in here in Chicago in terms of evaluating and looking at community policing, you're now one of the most cited schoolers in policing of all time. What are your reflections now on that whole community policing movement now you have a chance to look back on it a little bit?

Wes Skogan:

Well, let me give you a little lead up. I spent a lot of time in the 1980s, working with the Police Foundation, doing evaluations of lots of innovative policing projects around the country, working with Maryanne Woihoff and Tony Payne and Larry Sherman.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Larry Sherman? I think a couple of people have heard of him.

Wes Skogan:

I've heard of him as well, that's right. And it involved a lot of different kinds of things. The scary one was a undercover narcotics operations in public housing in New Orleans and Denver. [I] went out one night with the team and my closest informant was the guy who carried the shotgun, when we went into the Desire Project, which is where the streetcar ends in New Orleans. It was an interesting place. The day before I first arrived in New Orleans as part of that project, the Executive Director of the Housing Authority of New Orleans, HANO, was indicted for basically leading a large-scale cocaine merchandising operation in public housing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, I guess he was in the right place for it.

Wes Skogan:

Yes. The important one that was really a precursor in my experience in community policing was a project we did in Houston and Newark. Again, still in the 1980s. As it evolved, we began to call it the fear of crime project, because we didn't know what else to call it. The word community policing had not yet entered the lexicon, we'd never heard of it, but that's what it involved. Another neighborhood we conducted a true randomized sample of the impact of a newsletter. We did newsletters both in Houston and in Newark, in both places, the chiefs were a little reticent about the newsletter, but I pointed out, to think that we were planning on putting their picture on the cover.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, there you go.

Wes Skogan:

And in both places immediately, they became more interested.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The value of understanding ego in policing can never be understated.

Wes Skogan:

It was a very interesting time. We did lots of good quantitative work in these projects. And the chiefs in both places were not just willing, they were really interested in trying something different. About the time that was done, it became apparent that we had been studying community policing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Where did the name, the term really first come from?

Wes Skogan:

Herman Goldstein traced it to some things that were done in 1979, but it didn't get its label or its visibility as a truly citizen-oriented responsiveness to public concerns kind of strategy until the end of the 1980s. But it was quickly picked up. It was popular with mayors, it was popular with city councils, and that goes a long way in cities.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But in academia, certainly, I mean, you popularized it with your work, *Disorder and Decline: Crime in the Spiral of Decay in American Neighborhoods*.

Wes Skogan:

That's right. One example of how it spread was a very interesting program in Fort Worth, Texas. They brought in a new chief, who'd been an area commander in Los Angeles and his remit was to bring community policing to Fort Worth. He began by decentralizing the department to neighborhood storefront offices. He empowered lieutenants to go out, find a storefront that they could rent within their budget, find donations of furniture from companies and open up their storefronts. And they were running all kinds of interesting things in Fort Worth in a very decentralized manner out of these neighborhood storefronts, which previously they had not.

Previously, all the squad cars parked in a giant parking lot by the expressway, were sent all over the town by a computer dispatching system that didn't care where they should be, just that they're available. That's an example of the kinds of things that were happening in cities, in a lot of different places, just at that time in the late 1980s, early 1990s. And then came Chicago's interest in the program. Chicago is often not ready for reform. So, community policing came late to Chicago and it came because the Mayor, Richard M. Daley, in Chicago, we distinguished between Richard J. Daley and Richard M. Daley who were of course related.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Are you saying for a moment that there's some hint of nepotism in American politics? Say it's not so. Say it's not so.

Wes Skogan:

We still have a Daley on the city council and in the state legislature.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, good grief.

Wes Skogan:

But he heard about it at mayor's conferences. At mayor's conferences, they were having plenty of recessions and discussions about this and police chiefs were coming to mayor's conferences and talking about it. He had not heard about it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think this is something that's lost on so many people, that if you really want to influence policing, you had to figure out who has influence over policing, and understanding the conferences of mayors and the leading political figures, is something that's underappreciated by a lot of people who want to reform policing.

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Wes Skogan:

Yeah. So he came back with this idea, but didn't know quite what to do with it. So he contacted a consulting company and Booz Allen and Hamilton had just opened a law enforcement wing of their company. And they'd hired a former director of NIJ and former California State Trooper, James K. Chip Stewart to head their police consulting wing. They came to Chicago, they did a lot of data crunching. They actually crunched the numbers and tried to figure out dispatch times and how they could allocate manpower to support a community policing program.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Now is that about the time you met Chuck Ramsey?

Wes Skogan:

The Ramsey story will come in a minute.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, my goodness. Okay. There's more.

Wes Skogan:

This time, he's about three echelons down within the Patrol Division, which itself didn't at that time, report directly to the chief of police, but reported to his deputy. So he was a noticeable person but down the hierarchy. And Chip Stewart's argument was that unless they found special uses for officers and gave them dedicated job, they would just disappear back into the business as usual in the department. And Chip Stewart made the pitch that community policing was both something that the mayor did and should know about, but also it was a place where they could assign officers and give them a task that would be independent of the traditional activities of the department, which they thought at that time was actually overstaffed. The mayors was always interested in municipal efficiency. He was the most detail-oriented mayor I've ever known.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So what were you doing through all of this?

Wes Skogan:

Well, I'm still working on my various Police Foundation projects at this point.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And you're at?

Wes Skogan:

Northwestern University,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Northwestern University.

Wes Skogan:

And the mayor gave the team in charge of finding a replacement, to bring in the new police chief, there was going to be somebody who supported community policing in Chicago. Given the way things work in Chicago, a number of people applied, Charles Ramsey applied. He wanted to get his name in the hopper and he spent a great deal of time thinking about community policing and talking to community policing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, and he also talks about being at least initially skeptical. And I actually admire that you can come into something willing to try it, even if you're skeptical and see where the evidence leads.

Wes Skogan:

Right. So they picked a chief, Matt Rodriguez who had said, "Yes, sir, I will bring community policing to Chicago." Because that was obviously a job requirement. Many forces within the department of course, didn't want to do this and so they would get in the way and starve him of resources. But eventually this guy who was three or four levels down Patrol Division was promoted up and given the difficult and probably bound to fail task of making something happening on the street, because the mayor wanted to see some action. And this is how Chicago developed its unique approach to community policing, which is they threw it into the field to see what happened. In many places, they plan it to death for years and then announced a citywide program and everybody's got to do it. What they did instead was they said, "We'll try it. We think we can staff it in five police districts of the 25 and we'll put it out there for a year or so and we'll feel free to fix it." So they called them the prototypes, which was actually a terrific name. Because prototyping is a strategy of making a model and trying it, if it didn't work and fix it again and making it a product and it doesn't work. So you fix it again and that's what they did.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But this seems awfully brave because that involves a degree of failure and then incremental improvement or at least trying different things.

Wes Skogan:

It did.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's almost a Darwinist approach to trying to make community policing work.

Wes Skogan:

It did take organizational courage, but the reason Ramsey was really supportive of the strategy was he was convinced that the department would planned community policing to death, years and years would go by nothing much would happen. And this was a way of getting it out the hands of the planners and out of the hands of the top executives and throwing it out in the street and making it his fault, but throwing it out on the street. So there was actually activity.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

He's always had a bit of a JFDI approach, you know, "just fucking do it".

Wes Skogan:

Yeah. They had to have some media on this. So the chief of police and one of his top Booz Allen Hamilton Consultants, we're going to appear on the major local talk show. The producers were calling around trying to find somebody to be on the talk show. When they finally called me, the producer said, "We've been trying to find people who thinks this is a bad idea, but we can't find anybody who thinks this is a bad idea."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Surely that's telling you something.

Wes Skogan:

Right. So I said, "Okay." I said, "I think it's probably a good idea too, but I'm willing to state tough problems and ask some tough questions if you put me on the show."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So what are some of the tough questions to ask of community policing?

Wes Skogan:

Well, I was going to ask questions like, "So would it survive resistance from police culture?" For example, I was asking whether officers would believe that this was just yet another reform that was going to come and go, like all the previous reforms.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You could ask those same questions today.

Wes Skogan:

Absolutely, still relevant questions, but that was my entree into it, while I had the chief of police attention, he got on the phone and then got in contact with Ramsey. So kind of isolated and without resources, he was, the fact that there might be somebody interested in evaluation was to him a resource. So, he supported the evaluation right away because I might be able to bring in some money and some attention and some people who could help him figure out what was going on. And then came the deputy of our local State Planning Agency. And we had as the director at the time, fellow by the name of Dennis Nowicki who had been Deputy Superintendent of the Chicago Police Department. And Dennis Nowicki knew everybody in the police department. So, he gave us a very substantial amount of money to get started. So unlike many evaluations, before the program began, we had a citywide survey before the five prototypes were in operation. Really, as soon as we knew what the boundaries were going to be, we had surveys of the residents of the prototypes, before there's a program.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's so important because I think it's so often lost on so many people, don't call academics once you've started the project, call them beforehand because we can establish a baseline and then see the change from that baseline. But if we're not in there before the project starts, there's no way to establish a baseline and you're just looking at a moving target.

Wes Skogan:

Well, we're still going to be a moving target, but at least we had a baseline of before it began.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You worked on this project for how many years?

Wes Skogan:

12 years.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's an incredible amount of commitment on your part to something, obviously, one of the most substantial evaluations that's really taken place of any kind of policing project. When you got to the end of it, you've written a couple of incredibly influential works, *Community Policing, Chicago Style*. And you also wrote *Disorder and Decline: Crime in the Spiral of Decay in American Neighborhoods*, which have become hugely influential in the field.

Wes Skogan:

Let's not forget *Police and Community in Chicago*, which is sort of the capstone book. And there's also one which is lesser known, which is called *Police and Community Problem Solving*.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Pulling that together, when you think back now on those evaluations that work, has community policing ended up looking like what you thought it might?

Wes Skogan:

Community policing did fine for a while, it was popular with the public. It was popular with city councilmen. Local politicians started running for office and one of their credentials that they would widely advertise, was that they were a community policing activist. That was a credential in Chicago politics. It showed you were a neighborhoods guy. But what happened in Chicago I think is what unfortunately happened in a lot of cities, is the great Financial Crisis of 2008, 2009. It hit the city's budget very hard. The mayor cut the budgets of every city agency because the police department is so big and it's so expensive, it took the biggest hit. They were... It dropped by about 1700 positions, and they stopped doing a lot of things. And this happened really around the country. And what you saw on the websites everywhere was that we no longer have special units. We no longer have special initiatives because the whole department does community policing. It's our regular style of business. But it means that resource cuts had impacted things that they had been doing and probably wanted to do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is it more effective you think with specialized units doing a whole bunch of those activities?

Wes Skogan:

I think it depends entirely on the locale. In Fort Worth, which had a very interesting program. They put it very much in the hands of a dedicated community policing officer who worked in every one of the small, now small decentralized police districts. They had a car, this was early, they had a cell phone. They were the only people who had a cell phone in the department.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, one of those great big bricks that nobody could steal it? Because you needed-

Wes Skogan:

You need a car to tow it around. Their job was to work with local groups and organizations, church groups, storefront businesses.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you think that was predominantly problem oriented policing or were there other components that were just as important?

Wes Skogan:

Other places did problem-oriented policing with a team. They would often use centralized department resources or city databases and try to turn up places that were in need of special attention, and some of the best early evaluations of what became called community policing were in fact done of these team operations by people like by John Eck. So in some places, it was teams. They tended to work on police defined problems and not to involve the community so much, but it was new and different problems. And it was focused on things that really concerned many neighborhood residents. So we hold that under the umbrella of community policing as well.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There's a lot of discussion around whether community policing [and] problem-oriented policing get conflated or whether they overlap or whether one's a subset or the other.

Wes Skogan:

Well, I think you can't do community policing doing problem solving. The one thing that came out of Chicago's experience and the prototyping, it was absolutely clear that when police officers met with the public in empty storefronts or in church assembly halls or park district buildings and said, "We're here to solve problems." They got a dump of a lot of problems. And if their response had been, "Well, that's not a police problem." Well, those people wouldn't come back next time.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There's a lot of discussion right now about contracting the police role. But if you think about that period of time, that's actually an expansion of the role of police into areas that have very little to do with crime. It's very much disorder in neighborhood, day to day neighborhood crap for want of a technical term.

Wes Skogan:

It's exactly the case. In my book, I call it the expansion of the police mandate. In Chicago it was helped because the mayor hooked community policing to city services. So one of the reasons to come to a beat meeting was they had a pile of forms and an officer in the back. And if you had a problem, you fill out a form. And every night the districts faxed the forms downtown, where they were distributed to the appropriate city agencies by a team in City Hall who then kept track to make sure that they got reacted to. So the expansion of the mandate came with an expansion of resources and it came with an expansion of expertise. Chicago coppers couldn't solve few problems as rats in the alley, but there were certainly agencies that could solve the rats in the alley problem. It just had to get immobilize. One of the geniuses of Mayor Daley's contribution to the program was to link it to city service.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Doesn't that put the evaluation of community policing in the hands of these other agencies? In other words, people are going to assess the success of community policing. Because I came to the neighborhood copper, I filled out the form, but if these other city services don't step up, I'm going to judge policing on the strength of that, not the people who deal with the rats and the refuse.

Wes Skogan:

That's exactly right. And I remember being at a big meeting of sergeants where it was announced that the Department of Streets and Sanitation was going to be responding to these request forms.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

As they laughed at? Yeah.

Wes Skogan:

The sergeants laughed. The sergeants laughed. They didn't believe this was going to happen, but they didn't understand the attention to detail and the powers of the mayor of Chicago who was deeply committed to this. I'd say that one of the big reasons that community policing was a success for a long time in Chicago was not the police department's program, it was the city's program and had the attention of all the city agencies and the top city managers and increasingly the city council because it was so darn popular with the public, where hundreds of people were turning out every night for meetings all over the city, made the alderman a little nervous until they figured out that they could get involved. So pretty soon, the alderman were sending staff members to the beat meetings and they would stand up and make comments about what the alderman was doing about these problems.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Did all of this surprise you?

Wes Skogan:

The successful linking of the program to city services was an enormous surprise.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This is not how I imagined Chicago working.

Wes Skogan:

It was not in any of the blueprints for community policing that were floating around.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If community policing is kind of whatever you want it to be in your place, it becomes harder to actually articulate what community policing is then?

Wes Skogan:

Oh, sure. If you see community policing as a check box of activities, that's not a good way to think about it. You need to think about it as a few kind of strategic feature, but how these things play themselves out will differ from place to place.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But I've often wondered if this lack of clarity around what the blueprint for community policing is, has been one of the most difficult things to sort of really latch a measure of success onto it. So I think about CompStat for a moment, regardless of the pros or cons of CompStat, it's really clear what CompStat is. And community policing is much more the sort of amorphous, less clearly specified kind of series of general principles that you want to adhere to but then you tweak it considerably for your location.

Wes Skogan:

That's right, because in the end, it's about officers and members of the community doing face to face stuff. And how that's going to work is just going to vary by resources, the layout of the city, whether it's a walking or driving place, the demographic composition of in different neighborhoods, different styles of working with the police will become apparent. So for example, African Americans who came to the beat meetings in Chicago were much more positive about the police than were their neighbors. Whereas, whites who came to community policing meetings in Chicago were much more skeptical than their neighbors about the police.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I suspect that's still the case to this day, that notion of public perception of the police is also work that you've done, the ratio of, once you have a negative contact with the police, how many positive contacts you have to do to essentially reset the clock on that one?

Wes Skogan:

Yes. That's indeed the case.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It feels like the cards are stacked against policing in that regard.

Wes Skogan:

Right. Well, I wrote an article on the impact of having an experience with the police on people's attitudes. I quoted the second police chief in Chicago that I worked with for a long time, Terry Hillard and his quote was something to the line of, "It takes 10 positive contacts with the police to overcome the bad effects of one negative contact." Terry was not a data analyst guy, but turns out he was not wrong terms of his numbers, depending on which places and which kind of context. It was often the case that the impact of having a bad encounter with the police vastly overshadowed any other experiences that you had or that other people around you had.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's often the case. That's the worry because a lot of people's negative experience with the police is vicarious through people they have conversations with.

Wes Skogan:

It's vicarious and they also linger. I remember once talking with an African American couple, an elderly couple after a community meeting, and they described to me this terrible experience that they had had with the police when they were sitting in their front stoop. And then their discussion became apparent to me that they were describing something that had happened more than 20 years ago. Still, when they had a chance to talk with somebody about it, that's what they talked about.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How do you deal with that if you're the police chief, how can you overcome that sense of you're paying a price for what somebody did... Some bullshit done by some asshole cop 20 years ago?

Wes Skogan:

Well, probably not much you can do about 20 years ago, but one of the more recent discussions of policing reform, two things really, trying to fix the quality of the relationships between the police and the public when they do have occasion to meet. One way to work on that, is to have more of the kinds of contacts that are positive and community policing, that's what that's about. That's about standing in the back of a public meeting and talking to the sergeant about this landlord who can't control his building and people are air mailing their garbage out the back, and it's terrible. That can turn into a very positive contact. So loading up on positive police community contacts, which is what it's all about, is one solution to that problem.

Wes Skogan:

Another is to try to train officers and how to better handle encounters with the public and the predominant model among academics these days is procedural justice, which is a theory about how the authorities can relate to the citizens in ways that produce positive outcomes. In my experience, every police chief in America has heard of

procedural justice and pondered about what it is that they could do with the guys and girls who work with them, training and supervision are of course the two keys.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, it's funny, you were talking about speaking to the sergeants, I think the sergeant is one of the most pivotal and important roles in policing, absolutely anywhere. Because they're the conduit between the message from the chief's office to the troops. But also they're the first line supervisors that really have so much influence over the people that are engaged in these public police contacts.

Wes Skogan:

I believe that's exactly right. I mean, I remember the first time I asked to come to a meeting of the Sergeant's Union to tell them about community policing, they were sort of getting out of their own to try to get some views of it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The union actually invited an academic to speak to them. This is unheard of!

Wes Skogan:

I came to a big union meeting at a big union hall that had a bar on the back and I gave my little talk, but I started by making your point. I used the analogy of the automobile, that sergeants were the transmission. They've connected the motor to the wheels. If your transmission dropped out of the car, you weren't going anywhere. I agreed with them that they were the most important people in the organization when it came to it actually functioning. And they liked that message just fine. There was never a collision between the union and community policing in Chicago. The program was carefully crafted it to fit within the framework of the contract. Charles Ramsey was always a big supporter of police officers and having their days off and having a life. Early on, the leaders of the union thought this was another of these crazy things that management wants to do but this falls within management prerogative still later, because several members of the board of directors of the union got very interested in it. They had community policing committee of the FOP and they were showing up at national conferences. That was also quite extraordinary.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes, this is very un-FOP like behavior.

Wes Skogan:

Well, those were the days when they had... One half of the end the FOP was his daughter, was a student of mine at Northwestern. And I mean, these were bread and butter contract guys. Culture wars, the police culture was alive and well but it wasn't a war and it wasn't a war on things that management was doing that was kind of working okay.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And they weren't dragging in outside politics outside of policing to taint everything? [crosstalk 00:26:59].

Wes Skogan:

There was no outside politics. The role for civilians was crafted as very supportive, and there weren't civilians telling them what to do except the mayor and they understood that. So it worked for them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is it time for community policing to make a resurgence?

Wes Skogan:

Well, we live in an era now in 2021 where we have lots of problems in our agenda, but police legitimacy is a huge one. And community policing was always the way in which the city was going to build legitimacy, there's ways in which a combination of procedural justice and community-oriented activities that would load up more of these positive contacts are two of the principal vehicles that departments could try to use.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Does it matter much that there's been some meta-analysis by Charlotte Gill and David Weisberg that found that there is very limited evidence that community policing is actually linked to measurable crime reduction?

Wes Skogan:

I never met a police chief who thought that's what they were doing. I think they knew that they were fulfilling, what I'm going to come to call in a good sense, the political agenda, that is they had restive populations. They had bad stuff happening and at the end of the 1980 and early 1990s, which was a peak time for crime in this country, there was lots of bad stuff happening and not having a resurgence of the riots that had shattered cities in earlier decades, and was about to do it again in Los Angeles with the Rodney King episode, that dealing with a restive public in a way that was meaningful was an important part of their job description.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's not just all about reducing crime, even though that's a great name for a podcast?

Wes Skogan:

Yeah. Right, right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Your work since then, you are one of the first people to be looking at violence interrupters. How did you get into that?

Wes Skogan:

Can I tell the truth?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do it.

Wes Skogan:

Okay.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You heard it here folks.

Wes Skogan:

The George Bush White House was looking for projects for the First Lady. So they gave a contract to somebody who we both know to find promising projects for the First Lady.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The Laura Bush Memorial, keep the First Lady occupied.

Wes Skogan:

Something like that. But in any event, this person who was very cagey also had a view of what might be interesting and identified Chicago's, what was then called ceasefire as a promising project. And then because was a promising project, NIJ funded an evaluation, hoping for some quick results, which of course, in evaluation work you never get that would support enthusiasm from the First Lady. This is an untold story but time has passed.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And so how did that work out? Did you get to meet the First Lady?

Wes Skogan:

Laura Bush indeed came to Chicago several times and appeared at things which was very helpful for the fundraising of Ceasefire Chicago and got them in the media and on television. I was really interested in this because it was a non-police alternative, unlike other things called ceasefire that were happening around the country at that time, importantly, involved identifying bad guys and going out and arresting them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We don't do that anymore.

Wes Skogan:

They would reject that as a description of what they were doing, but that's what they were doing. This was a non-police alternative and I was really interested in what a serious non-criminal justice, non-law enforcement approach could accomplish.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And what did you find?

Wes Skogan:

The way the Chicago program was structured, it was subcontracted to local organizations that ran it in their catchment areas. So each manifestation of Ceasefire Chicago took on some different features because it reflects the decentralization of the city's neighborhoods, depending on whether they were African American neighborhoods or Hispanic neighborhoods or even a gentrifying neighborhood.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, that can help with an evaluation because you get to see different iterations.

Wes Skogan:

Absolutely. It didn't help with the evaluation, but what it meant was in fact, we actually didn't evaluate a program, we evaluated 11 programs. Each of which you had a different constituency, a different clientele.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This is starting to sound like community policing all over again.

Wes Skogan:

In a different catchment area. It's what happens when it's a really big city with a history of decentralization and of active community organizations who, if they didn't get a contract as a host, would make trouble. So having them as a host was better than having them on your bad side.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Think about the lessons that you learned from that. If you were designing a violence... Well, first of all, would you include a violence interrupter program as part of your city's violence reduction strategy?

Wes Skogan:

If I was to form something that I thought could be effective, I would pick the ceasefire model of that period, which was a combination of street interrupters and case workers. The case workers themselves did very traditional street case work. In the 1950s, YMCA street workers were doing the case work in Chicago there, the responsibility was maintaining an inventory of 12 or 13, really high-risk young men and keeping after them on a whole broad front, including talking to the prosecutor, appearing before the judge, getting them into GED programs, getting them into the job readiness programs. Our survey of clients, which we did found that after their parent typically singular, the case worker was nominated as a single most important adult in their life.

So that was an important part of the program. The street interrupters got the media, the street interrupters were the ones who were in conflict with the police and made a lot of troubles on the ground, street interrupters were the ones who did interesting and flashy things. But it was the combination of the case work and the street interrupters. There was an events orientation and people orientation and they worked in combination.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I've heard some of the things from people I know who work with violence interrupters in Philadelphia. So there's only a narrow set of people that they can work with. There are some people that just a wee bit too crazy for them to work with, but for that group that they can work with, they can help to manage some of the disputes but a whole chunk of it is, "Can we get this guy job? Can we get this guy an education and a job which gets him out of this environment, where he's just going to be in these local neighborhood bullshit beefs."

Wes Skogan:

That's exactly right. But if they're a street interrupter and their job is to work from 9:00 until 2:00 in the morning, their ability to visit with the prosecutor is limited. While the Chicago's violence interrupter were a wonderful, but rough and tumble group and I love them a lot, but they took a lot of management. The case workers often had... They were social workers, often informal training, or certainly in predisposition. So they had a different skillset. They knew how to deal with bureaucracies, which often violence interrupters came from a background where bureaucracies were one of problems and not a solution to their problems.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. I mean, they've spent most of their life working outside the kind of organized system of government where we can call it vaguely organized.

Wes Skogan:

Unfortunately, what happened in Chicago was that the governor took a dislike to ceasefire. So he cut it out of the state budget. They immediately had to scramble to try to keep anything going and they chose to stick with the violence interrupters and the case work part of the project disappeared.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And it failed as a result of that?

Wes Skogan:

My evaluation took place only during that wonderful period when there was both case work and violence interrupters working in tandem, all reporting to the same management people, with those who were concerned with finding and nurturing good staff monitoring both of them. The case workers were monitored from the headquarters to ensure that they actually were working with high-risk youth and not the sort of easy people that you can find who are cooperative and will show up for everything, that these were indeed kids who were troubled. And that was a manager that was managed to make sure that they did that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've got a new piece of work coming out, which is depressing around the collapse of community policing. And I think learning how things fail is important about learning how things succeed. What's the thesis there?

Wes Skogan:

Title of my article is Prospects for Reform? The Collapse of Community Policing in Chicago. I thought that a dash of cold water-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's what we need in policing now. A bit more depression, because everything's otherwise rosy. Yeah, great.

Wes Skogan:

I was asked to give a presentation on community policing to President Obama's task force on 21 Century Policing. And that had led me to call around and spend a lot of time on websites, trying to figure out what had been happening around the country. And it was clear that distinctive community policing programs had been largely disappearing from American cities. The agenda had moved on to other things.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I can't say for sure I know what those other things are. Everybody seems a bit lost right now.

Wes Skogan:

Okay. Well, I'll tell you what they were in Chicago. The big effect of course, was the great recession which started to hit city finances in 2010, the result was retrenchment. All city agencies were cut, the police didn't have to take it personally, but because they were 40% of the municipal budget, they were hit hard. But what happened was retrenchment withdrew lots of the activities that had been taking place under the umbrella of community policing in Chicago, the beat meetings, the public meetings tended by police officers, giving feedback, hearing reports, the beat meetings largely disappeared. The CIO office disappeared from the budget, it was gone.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

CIO?

Wes Skogan:

CAPS Implementation Office. So the infrastructure, the offices, the Sergeant that used to be in charge of an appreciable number of officers in the district, staff of the community policing office, that disappeared.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So pretty much all collapsed?

Wes Skogan:

So it pretty much... Structurally, it collapsed.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, they do say, don't they? If you want to know what an organization cares about look at their budget.

Wes Skogan:

Right. Well, I'm not going to poo-poo the fiscal crisis because it clobbered the city. It clobbered the city in desperate ways in many other aspects besides the police department. The second was that the mayor was getting tired. He's been in office since 1987, putting less into it. His energies were being distracted by other problems, including the fiscal crisis.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, I mean the mayor's not interested, that sends the signal too?

Wes Skogan:

He sold one of our expressways that was owned by the city, the Skyway, there was also a change in police leadership as a result of a mini fear of crime scare, which was created by a local newspaper, the Chicago Tribune, which actually didn't exist. In fact, he had picked a new police chief from the ranks of the detectives, but he was not really interested and it faded into CompStat.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you've seen the decline of community policing, it's 2021, we're in the post George Floyd murder world. And I think there's general agreement that many cities, Baltimore, Philadelphia and Chicago all have to rethink about re-engaging with community policing and police legitimacy. If you could recommend to people one or two things that they should focus on and concentrate on. Because there's so things, pieces to community policing, you could cherry pick all bits and pieces. But what are the core, couple of things that you think are the most important thing based on your experience?

Wes Skogan:

Okay. I'm going to mention two things and that's face time and meaningful involvement. Face time, I've been going to these community conversations that we've been having as part of the Chicago's response to the consent decree and what you hear a time after time from everybody is they want to know Chicago police officers, and they want police officers to know them. They want to meet with them, they want to speak with them. They want be recognized by them, they want to have a personal contact.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is that realistic with the kind of how many people are in a police district and how many cops are in that district?

Wes Skogan:

Well, realistic, depends upon your resources and how you structure it. But you can do this through these public calling community conversations. Community conversations can be run at the district level and that's related to the second thing that they have now done, which is that every police district now creates a yearly plan, say a six-monthly plan approved and staffed by police headquarters. And this plan involves citizen involvement. September through November, every police district has had an initial community conversation where they have breakout groups. Now we're doing it on Zoom, but before the COVID, it was being done in person with lots of people coming, they would have

breakout groups to discuss particular problems. Often, the things that are of concern to their district and to come up with ideas and priorities and solutions. And then two months later, the district with its commander come back with a proposed plan. People discuss the elements of the plan and what they think about the district's plan and all this is in response to the Federal Consent Decree.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Those really are what a core program should always focus on those areas.

Wes Skogan:

So turning people up for a discussion about what the priorities should be, and then coming back and hear about what the priorities are going to be and then getting reports on how it goes, has been the cities attempt to involve them in something meaningful. So it's involving the public in face time things in sort of meaningful discussion about priorities and specific named people who will be in charge of it. Everybody knows the name of the guy, right? Who's in charge of liquor stores that are selling to young people, that's his job.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You get that level of transparency and accountability? You got one person to say, "Hey, that was your job. What did you do with it?"

Wes Skogan:

When you're at these community conversations, you sit around tables. The last one in the 12th district that was in person, there were about 20 tables. There was a police officer co-leading the meeting and there was another police officer who was taking notes sitting at the table, so it's meaningful conversation about resource allocation and priorities.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If I can remember you've got a birthday next month and you're going to be 79?

Wes Skogan:

79, right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And you've retired from academia just in the last year or two, but I don't get the sense that you're slowing down in any fashion whatsoever. So what's next for you?

Wes Skogan:

Oh, I am slowing down because I've stopped doing the things did not want to do, which is always the best reason to retire.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There you go.

Wes Skogan:

So you can still do the things you do want to do and have a little time left over to have a life.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I've known some people who are retired, who say, they're way too busy to go back to work.

Wes Skogan:

Right. And unfortunately the COVID has stolen most of this retirement so far.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And you have another book coming out soon?

Wes Skogan:

I have a book that just came out, Policing in France, was co-edited with Jacques de Maillard and he's a policing specialist and it's appeared in English from Rutledge and it's appearing from Sciences Po Press in French this next February.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I'm assuming that to write this, you had to go over and collaborate and-

Wes Skogan:

There were a great deal of collaboration-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, that was so good of you.

Wes Skogan:

... was called for. And then during COVID times, when I was sitting at home in my sweatpants, like large numbers of Americans-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But a lot of people were not even wearing pants, but that's-

Wes Skogan:

Oh, yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You can do a Zoom meeting from the chest up.

Wes Skogan:

Yes you could, absolutely. I completed something that had been in my mind for quite a while, which was a book on stop and frisk in Chicago, which-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But it may be something we're coming back and visit in a future podcast. Because I get no sense that you are stopping anytime soon.

Wes Skogan:

When it's on the shelf in your favorite bookstore, I'll be happy to reappear on the podcast.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, Wes, you've been a massive name in the field, made a huge contribution and continue to do so. So thanks ever so much for spending some time with us.

Wes Skogan:

Thanks a lot, Jerry, for this.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was episode 46 of Reducing Crime recorded in Chicago, November, 2021. Follow @_reducingcrime or @jerry_ratcliffe on twitter to get a heads up on new episodes and mosey on over to reducingcrime.com/podcast for transcripts of this and every episode.

Be safe and best of luck.