

#11 (ROB BRINER)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Jerry Ratcliffe here with Reducing Crime, a podcast featuring influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers. Rob Briner is an organizational psychology professor and a guru in the area of evidence based management. I learned from him what lessons policing can glean from the evidence-based policy movements in other fields. Find out more in this podcast, at reducingcrime.com and on Twitter @_reducingcrime.

Even if you don't know Rob Briner, you will likely know his ideas because the work of him and his colleagues at the center for evidence based management has been hugely influential to evidence based policing practitioners on both sides of the Atlantic. He's a professor of organizational psychology at Queen Mary University of London, where he studies organizational psychology and work and wellbeing. He's also the scientific director of the center for evidence-based management, which through its teaching training and easily accessible materials aims to help managers make better decisions by adopting the principles of evidence based practice. Dr. Briner is regularly invited as a keynote speaker to discuss evidence-based management. And his work in this area has led to him being named in 2015 the second most influential HR thinker by HR magazine. In 2014, he was awarded the British psychology society division of occupational psychology academic contribution to practice award.

We chat about the vital role of accountability in pushing evidence-based practice, the appeal of apparent simplicity in good intentions that can actually trap people in harmful responses, and the idea of watchful waiting.

Rob Briner:

Because academics like to be... Promote their own research, of course, in their own fields themselves. [crosstalk 00:00:01:55] It's not about that. So it's sort of difficult to go. Things like MBA programs or the kind of business management programs that, that doesn't seem too much of an appetite, the teaching evidence-based stuff.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's weird because-

Rob Briner:

Yeah, I think it's a bit weird. Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It feels weird to listen to you running into those sorts of problems, because I think having sort of read your blog and looked to the website and watched your videos, I come away with the impression that evidence based practice seems to be so much better in organizational psychology and management than HR. That kind of feels like we're beginners at it.

But what you're saying is actually the hurdles are still the same-

Rob Briner:

I think they are. I think they're the same across different fields. Difference in medicine, I suppose, is that you have the NHS-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The National Health Service. Yeah.

Rob Briner:

And the insurance companies [inaudible 00:02:35] help in terms of sort of trying to corral that evidence at least, or at least try and get it together. But even in medical school, understanding is evidence based practice. It's not always taught or not taught very well.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So that's interesting. I mean, if police departments actually had to carry insurance, do you think that would actually help advance evidence based practice?

Rob Briner:

It would in terms of if you screw up or don't help or yeah...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And certainly around things like officer safety.

Rob Briner:

Yeah, I think it would, in the sense of that part of it's about accountability. My limited experience, if you go to sectors may be like, you know, oil and gas or the airline industry, those sectors, they're a bit more relaxed about evidence based management. They're very used to accountability. Like if we screw up, everyone's going to know, we're going to have to explain ourselves. And they're more used to using data. So thinking those kinds of contexts is more- Yeah. So I think if they give you any mechanism increasing accountability, including maybe insurance could help people be more... Yeah, let's do this in an evidence based way. That's okay. Whereas the people don't have much accountability and nothing in the very few actions they take have any real consequences and will be scrutinized and people going why would I do that?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well in policing we have, especially if you look at senior management, there are a lot of consequences, but that doesn't necessarily mean there's accountability. I mean, you've got police chiefs across the United States, for example here, who went to the police academy 30 years ago, where they didn't teach anything to do with anything other than criminal evidence, which is not what we're talking about. And they've hardly had any education since, and they're a police chief with their knowledge was minimal to begin with. And it's 30 years out of date.

Rob Briner:

Yeah. That's partly why I started in medicine for exactly the same reason. Do you get consulted like a consultant surgeon who basically hasn't been, had any training for 20 years, hasn't read any journal articles, any science sense, but they are the top of their career. So it's partly done because I think more junior, you know, medical practice are getting really pissed off with the people at the top who had all the power and resources because they were actually some of the people that were really worst at this, but they had the most power.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And how... So, how do the medical field, if you don't mind talking about the medical, how did the medical field overcome that? Because that deference to rank and experience in policing is huge and it's incredibly difficult to overcome.

Rob Briner:

I don't think they have overcome it or completely overcome it by any stretch of the imagination. But I think what they have been doing is trying to make sure that when people get into those roles, that they are actually become kind of champions of evidence based practice and actually understand what it means and how to do it, and actually support others in doing it as well, by being maybe more transparent about the decisions and what they do and the way they use all kinds of data as well. So I think if you can't overcome some of the stuff that comes from rank and hierarchy, but if those people in higher positions are modeling what it is you're supposed to do in evidence based practices, then I think it becomes a bit easier.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Like what Max Plank, the physicist said, you know, science advances one funeral at a time. So we here at the American society of evidence based policing conference in Cincinnati. And there are 250, 300 people here. We'll move forward in about 10 years when all of these people reach a rank where they can actually kind of drive the whole organization.

Rob Briner:

Yeah, and that was a view also has been expressed in the context of evidence based management, the people who are senior now in organizations, as managers, chief executives, et cetera. They're probably not going to change the way they do things because they're actually quite successful.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And they were successful under the old regime.

Rob Briner:

That's right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And where would it get them? They were successful under the old way of doing things.

Rob Briner:

Yeah. Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So the most we can hope is they just get out the way to allow people with more of an innovative practice and thought to come through.

Rob Briner:

Yeah, and some of them indeed... And some of them indeed may do that, I think. It's not the case that no senior people get it and they think it's important, but yeah, most because they got there, as you said, under another system.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So policing in some regards is more similar to many of the other fields that you've worked in and worked with than I was expecting.

Rob Briner:

Yeah. I see... Looking across evidence-based practice across you know, from medicine to social work, to education, to policing, I actually see more and more similarities both in terms of how you do it. And I think there's pretty strong agreement, more or less about the process and about certain principles, but also see more and more similarities in terms of barriers and where I'm personally at now with this stuff is, I think it's important to explain to people what evidence based practice is, but what is most striking is the barriers. The things that get in the way. And I think those barriers are incredibly similar. Of course, all these different professions.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Such as?

Rob Briner:

Such as, for example, not having adequate training.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In policing, the first budget to go is the training budget. We all support the number of bodies, but there's, we don't care about whether they're trained enough. We just, it's about how many police officers you have, regardless of whether there's any budget available for training or education. That's always the first budget that gets cut.

Rob Briner:

Yeah. Training is one, I think incentives is another. So I didn't talk about it today, but sometimes I discuss the sorts of explicit goals of any professional... And actually the implicit goal. So as a manager, the explicit goals might be to do what's really effective and help the organization. The implicit goal is to do whatever will get you promoted. And often they're not the same thing. So we put people in position where we sort of say, we would like you to do X, Y, and Z, but actually reward them for A, B and C. So I think that's quite a common barrier. You find that people, sort of managers and other people I talk to around this would say to me, evidence based practice is great, but there's no point in me doing it because actually that won't help me in my career.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is there ways that you've identified that policing is unique? I mean, you're saying a lot of similarities, but there are other ways that policing is to some degree unique?

Rob Briner:

Yeah, I think it's unique in that, for example, in the UK, and I think in the US and other countries a bit, there's more institutions are being set up to actually try and pull together scientific evidence and to maybe run trials and those kinds of things, which we certainly haven't seen in management. You don't see it that much in education. You do see this in medicine, of course. There seems to be a bit more infrastructure around it, but it doesn't mean that infrastructure is always working as effectively as one would like. And also I think the other, it's not a unique, but then the thing about that marks it out a bit is that the, as a professional discipline is one of the earliest to say, we're going to try and do evidence based practice. It's about Lauren Sherman, 1998, and actually what he was writing four years before that. So it was quite an early adopter, I think, compared to the disciplines.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's funny. I think a lot of people have the impression that we're very late in adopting because we look at the medical field and they've run their first randomized trials in the 1840s. And we kind of think, wow, we are so far behind. But what you're actually saying is compared to a number of fields that we're in the middle of the pack.

Rob Briner:

Yeah, I think so.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So the speed in which it's being adopted, or when you're embedded in evidence based policing, as many of us are, it feels painfully slow to move forward. And I can't decide- When you talked about the UK, so in the UK, you've got 43

police services. One in Scotland, one in Northern Ireland, you've got a college of policing. Like you have a college of medicine and college of surgery. Is that something that would be necessary here in the US? We have 18, maybe 18,000 police departments. We don't really know, maybe a bit more than 800,000 police officers. Again, we don't really know, but no sort of coherent group or organization like a college of policing to pull it all together.

Rob Briner:

I mean, I think it would help. My understanding in the US is the jurisdictions are so different. The law that applies can change quite a lot-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And they overlap.

Rob Briner:

Yeah. And it's in some sense is much closer to local politics than maybe it is in the UK. So I think all those things mean you both need some overarching organizing system, but also it means it's much harder to do. So I think it certainly helps to have those kinds of systems in place, but equally I think it is a way of if you're like getting more individuals, more groups and teams, I think it is happening in the US interested in it. And they go off and sort of spread the work and work and all that in specific organizations that can help as well.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And which we have with members of the American society of evidence-based policing.

Rob Briner:

That's right. And I think so some of it's also about informal connections and we've heard lots of stories today, and I hear them a lot around management and other fields of people quite informally coming to evidence based practice, sort of almost on their own, but they've just been thinking about their work and their job. And then they come across evidence based practice and they go, yeah, that's, that's what I do. That's how I like to think that's what, how I would like to practice. So I think it happens anyway, but certainly supporting, having a more formal structural systems around it. I think it's quite important.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There is some research that suggests that mentorship is really important in terms of helping people embrace practice. But that's the hardest thing to get going when you have 18,000 departments, you know, if we have a few hundred people here, which means if you are looking for a mentor, it's probably going to be somebody in another department in another city or another town in the UK. So there's the college of policing and they're doing more training and education. Here we have the national Institute of Justice, the federal government, the Bureau of Justice Administration, but they seem to be doing less on the training. They're are websites that are places where we can access information and data and

the latest research on policing, but there's less available in terms of training, I think to some degree. It feels that way anyway. Is training a gap, is that the next gap that we have to fill or are there other more pressing concerns?

Rob Briner:

Yeah. I think it depends- Because I don't know what you mean by training? So I think supporting people, doing it in their everyday practice is very important. And one thing like any training I'd be concerned about, if it takes people away from their everyday work, it teaches them stuff. And then they go back into their everyday job and carry on behaving in the way they always have. Not their fault, but because it's hard to transfer. So I think for me, it's probably about as much about development as training, but also I think really encouraging a lot of practice with some sort of support either from other individuals or from groups or teams. And it's like any skill. I think you just need to keep doing it, to learn how to do it better. And what I suspect is happening in evidence based policing that happens in other fields as well is people can have a go to once they try it a bit, maybe it doesn't work exactly as they would hope, or maybe they give up a bit and go back to the way they did it before.

So I think finding ways to say no, it's okay. That's all right. It wasn't perfect. It's not trying to be perfect. You're trying to make a better informed decision here. And you did, that's fine. Do it next time. Do it next time. So I think developing those habits of working and choosing when to try and do it when not to do it are probably equally important in terms of developing it then sort of more formal training. I think that's an important starting point. Then the question is how can that transfer into real organizations, into real practice? And that's where it gets a bit trickier.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We sometimes run into people saying, well, there was this one study, therefore that's what we should do. An unwillingness to try replication or to embrace the idea that what works somewhere may not work exactly the same here. Or we might be able to tweak that original plan and find better ways to do it that actually improve that level. There's a reluctance to embrace experimentation of replication, if that makes sense.

Rob Briner:

Yes. I think the reason, I think there's often a reluctance to embrace uncertainty as well.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes.

Rob Briner:

So here's a study or here's three studies. It seemed to work here, but you know what? It might not work here and that's okay. But let's try and understand. Let's try to find out whether we think it will, whether we think it won't, what's the basis for that judgment? And it may turn out that actually we think, no, we can't do that even though we were very excited about the study. So I think it's, again, going through that same process, whether it's around replication or adopting a particular practice or looking at one particular study that in and of itself, that just isn't enough.

You need to sort of embed it and contextualize it with those other sources of evidence as well. I think that's one of the most difficult things because people often get asked the question, well, you know, what's the in management ratio, where is the most evidence? I'm going why are you asking me that question? Why is that relevant? I mean, what's the problem?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Rob Briner:

We don't start with, oh, there's lots of evidence for X, Y, or Z. We start with, what is the question or issue or problem. Because people I think are used to, or more inclined to thinking my job is to find solutions and I'm not sure it is our job.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I often get asked, should we do this, that or the other? And the question I, like you said, the question I always have is what is the problem you're trying to fix? Tell me what the problem is. And that's often the hardest thing for people to articulate and conceptualize.

Rob Briner:

It is very difficult. And I think I've sort of thought about why it is that people like solutions implementing it. And they really don't like doing problem stuff. And in fact, sometimes when we're doing training at the center, we will work with managers and other groups will say, okay, so in the morning, we're just going to work on a particular problem for you or your organization. We're just going to think about the problem. We'll look across multiple sources of evidence. We'll critically appraise it. And we're just going to focus this morning just on the problem and people within 10 minutes, people are onto the solution.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. Yeah.

Rob Briner:

Just because I think thinking about what the problem might be, it's just harder work in terms of people's emotions or affect is a bit more negative because it's puzzling, it's confusing, it's ambiguous, it's difficult. Whereas thinking about solution and rolling things out and implementing stuff is sort of more fun. It feels like you're doing something. So, and again, this is not just [inaudible 00:00:15:08], thinking about stuff is not seen as activity.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I often thought that perhaps that was unique to policing because leadership and policing is very much about being decisive.

Rob Briner:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's a unique field in some regards because what you take is the least experienced people with the least training and you put them out on the streets, making executive decisions about how to resolve incidents and deal with calls and make arrests or exercise discretion. I mean, you'd never get that in the military. You would never allow your least experienced soldiers to essentially go out on their own. But in policing we do and you have your inexperienced people. And so what good police officers learn, and then they often become supervisors and leaders, is to be decisive and make decisions on their own in the field. And then that translates into their leadership role when they're in charge. And that's why they have this whole issue around being unwilling to embrace uncertainty, but also wanting to rush straight to the decision making, the solving problem. And so while that's disheartening, it's also, I suppose, in some regards reassuring to hear that it's not just policing, it seems to be human nature.

Rob Briner:

It's human something. I don't know if it's nature, but broadly I think doing stuff that's tangible and observable is seen to be very important. And if you're not doing stuff that's tangible and observable right now, then what are you doing?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's a sign of weakness almost.

Rob Briner:

Yeah. And I think often not doing things is a great sign of actually great strength and knowledge. I just don't do something. And it's because it's hard to resist it just because you're not people kind of observe you thinking it doesn't mean you're not doing something incredibly important. So for some reason, yes, I think we do place way too high emphasis on people doing stuff and reward systems reflect that. Normally it's just how much stuff have you done? And people, CVS resumes get full of stuff they have done. Tons of research and science. It's exactly the same thing. Scientists and researchers are under the same sorts of pressures as probably police and managers in that they have to do stuff and make stuff happen.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Rob Briner:

So you have to publish X number of papers a year. As you know, you have to be seen to be doing things you have to apply for grants. Do you get performance targets?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Bonus pay?

Rob Briner:

Bonus pay.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If you do things.

Rob Briner:

Yeah. Is this improving science? Probably not. Is it actually helping you improve your career? Probably.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The mortgage has got to be paid somehow.

Rob Briner:

Exactly. And this is true. So I think there's often more similarities between people in different kinds of professions and the extent to which they can be evidence based. And more often than not, I think, than people often realize when I got into evidence based practice, it was specifically around organizational psychology. And I think at the time I was doing lots of teaching with very mature students and I'd be teaching them about whatever it was. And I said, look, here's a really good Metro analysis. And then I meet them, you know, the next year and say, how's it going? And do you ever use any of this stuff? And oh, I'm working on this. Did you use that? No. And like, what's wrong with you? Why didn't you use it? And the kind of, there's that sense in which I was saying, you need to be using this stuff because we are pure and we're scientists and we can tell you, that this stuff's really important.

And you got to think as time has gone on, I'm not so sure about that anymore.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've tempered that.

Rob Briner:

Yeah. Part of it's because it's about other sources of evidence and also part of it's because to say it's because if you look at the way scientists work themselves work, they're under similar kinds of pressures and which create biases as people in other disciplines as well. So it's not that it isn't any good. It's just that you have to understand things like publication bias, where people tend to only publish positive results. Certainly in my field, right? Many replications that you can publish.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Same in policing.

Rob Briner:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What's interesting about this is that in policing, we have management meetings, like you may have heard of them called com stat meetings or equivalent where you get people in a room for once a week or once a month. And they throw a map of crime up on the wall and the police chiefs kind of saying, okay, you're in charge of this area. What are you doing about things? And for years, I was really hoping- I attend a lot of these as a guest, a lot of the time, and many departments, and for years, I think I was hoping that I would, I just wanted one person to have them say, look, I'm not doing anything right now, but I'm putting something in place that will solve this problem in the long term. It won't kick in for three or four months because it's taking a long slow build to get there, but it will solve the problem.

You know, I went into the foreseeable future after that and I never saw it. And of course the reality is that's entirely unrealistic. So the organizational way that policing works where you can't not do something you have to, as you're saying, you have to be seen to do something. Even though a lot of the time, what we just do is smoke and mirrors. That probably has very little impact whatsoever, but we solve the crime problem half the time because it just regresses to the mean-

Rob Briner:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

... Francis Gordon discovered over 100 years ago, but the reality is that we probably haven't put much analysis and thought into it. We did something and we got lucky, but that's the organizational situation. You can't turn around to the police chief and say, I'm not doing anything about that. And I don't plan to do anything about that. Because that's career suicide. And equally, the chiefs under the pressure because they can't say that to the mayor. And they can't say that to the city manager. And you also, in some parts, in some jurisdictions, the sheriffs are elected. So they can't turn around and not be doing something. But the problem is it reinforces that sense of doing small things is enough.

Rob Briner:

I think my understanding is in medicine is where the concept of watchful waiting came from the, the obviously medical, [crosstalk 00:20:14] watchful waiting is a medical practitioners are saying like police, like managers, like I could, you know, many of us have a tendency to over intervene. So is there a problem or issue rather than saying, well, let's just see, let's just not do anything. Let's see what happens. Since we know we've got to do something and got to do something really quickly, do it kind of now. So with watchful waiting, the idea is, okay. So patients presented with certain symptoms that may be pretty serious, but don't just intervene unless there's some like immediate sort of crisis, just wait and see what happens because there's things like regression to the mean or spontaneous recovery or something else might be going on, just watch, wait, and see what happens. That idea of doing that is to try and remind

people that maybe intervening and trying to fiddle and interfere with stuff all the time is not actually maybe going to help.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What are the risk mechanisms for people who indulge in that though? Because the accountability mechanisms, especially in policing, public accountability, you know, if things go wrong or you don't inform the public about threats, you know, we have issues around sex offenders and we have issues around serial offenders. There's a lot of pressure to inform the public. And a lot of problems have occurred in police departments that don't provide enough early warning to the public about potential threats. Does the medical field share those types of risks, that level of accountability? Watchful waiting sounds great, but it seems to be, have an element of risk associated.

Rob Briner:

Yeah. I think there is an element of risk, but again, I think it comes down to like in any context, it's about being clear and explicit about the basis on which we're making those decisions. So if you can say, I did not intervene and this is why I didn't intervene based on this information evidence, then I think there is more accountability. If it looks like, well, I don't know. We don't know why you didn't do anything. Why didn't you do something? If you can't explain that, can't give an account of that then, yeah, there isn't much accountability there. But if you can actually say, this is why I did it and show that the waiting was watchful, as in yes, I kept measuring this thing every half hour or I kept checking this. I asked around and I kept watching, looking, checking. And if this went out to this parameter or this changed that way, then yes, I would have done something, but actually keeping it in these bounds for good reason.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What makes that interesting is that's something I think we need more of in policing, which is better articulation of decision making processes, because I think with more articulation, having to actually document why we made certain decisions would probably make people think about using different types of evidence to support that process. But so often it just happens in an ad hoc meeting, but never gets revisited. Even if somebody is taking meeting notes, nobody ever goes back and revisits them. Because the next crisis is just around the corner.

Rob Briner:

Exactly. One of the things that we sometimes do in the training is, and it can be quite enlightening, is to do something called like a decision post-mortem. So we've got people to think about a policy or practice. They introduced, you know, a fairly big thing that was going to cost a lot of money and take some time and resources and we can get them to say, okay, so what was the problem that triggered this activity? What was the actual problem? Think about the different source of evidence.

Once you've done that, then think about why you chose this intervention rather than as what was the basis for that? And typically again, unless it's an emergency kind of situation or the military, or, you know, plane crash or something, typically people never done that before in their entire career. They've never thought about the way they made a decision. So even something as basic as that, but it seems like an after action review in some sorts of context

as well, but certainly for managers and particularly senior managers, you know, I might say to them, or you know, how much of your time do you spend making poor decisions?

It's like 60, 70%. Okay. How many of you have ever analyzed the decision you made? And it's almost nobody.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's fascinating.

Rob Briner:

So the very thing that's seen as a crucial skill, which is why we put people in those positions of responsibility, that idea that you look back on your decisions, it's just routine as you might, if you bake a cake, you check it. If you do other things you check, you know, that's the skill we're exercising. The same, I guess in policing, in other concepts, people getting together and making decisions, but they don't revisit them. And we don't like going back. And I think it comes back to it's like downloading the problem. There's some things we don't seem to like doing, because going back seems a bit sort of negative, move on the next thing, looking forward, going ahead, all those kinds of expressions, not well hold on. What did we do in the past?

And I think even some of those quite simple things could help quite- so if it was built into our processes, every time we make a reasonable decision, we're also going to look back on it again in a month's, time a year's, let's just go and revisit it. Not to blame anybody, but so we get better at doing this and it's not recognized as a skill, I think.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There's a related thing that I've heard about. I'm not sure I should talk about this on the podcast. Oh yeah. We'll give it a go because I'm trying to flex my few random brain cells. There's a related thing I've heard about called a pre mortem, which is just as we're about to make a decision, let's project ourselves six months down the line and anticipate that it's gone wrong. And then to actually think about how might it have gone wrong and what were the implications as a way to kind of make it a more defensible approach to implement this new strategy.

Rob Briner:

And I think that's another way of doing it. So some of those techniques to help people focus on the way in which they're thinking about a problem, a solution like a pre mortem is another way of doing it. Any technique that gives people space and time to reflect on decisions in a nonjudgmental way, then I think that's going to help with the whole process of evidence based practice. Because it won't seem so weird to then make a decision on the basis of evidence. You'll seem like of course we do, because it's how we think about stuff. It's not weird and getting, I think evidence based practice from being anomalous and strange to just ordinary is also quite important. I don't how you do that, but-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. But it also feels a bit negative as well. That's the challenge too. And you know, we like to think everything that we do is positive. The idea, I think for a lot of police managers to introduce the idea that something works is fine, that something might not work, they're okay conceptually with that notion. But to introduce the idea that we might have

the best intentions, but actually be harmful, like some programs have been evaluated and found to be actually harmful. It is still, I think, a bridge too far for many people to get their head around it. That just feels too negative. I love the idea of a pre mortem because we spend a lot of time thinking about the substance of problems that we're addressing and not about how we're actually analyzing the problem.

Rob Briner:

Yeah. And also I think it's not just true. Policing is certainly true because it's areas of organizational psychology and HR management, and when people think about interventions, they tend to think of it in a scale of zero, it does nothing, to 100. It does, has great benefit.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It was awesome.

Rob Briner:

Yeah. And then he's saying, well, where's the harm dimension? Where's the harm dimension? Because if you only think about positive effect of going from zero to 100, then you're not even going to pay attention to the harm. I think that, yeah, the pre-mortem way of thinking about law, but it seems to be any intervention that has active effects also has the potential to do harm as well as benefit. And I can't see any intervention that could in principle also do harm because it's doing something. And part of that something could be harmful. So you need to always weigh these things up again. Think about the negatives too.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And that's varied, for a very kind of proactive, you know, let's go out there, let's fix the problem. That's very active kind of feel that embraces and rewards being more active than be more reflective. Policing is not necessarily a particularly reflective business.

Rob Briner:

No. And I think part of that is also that, and this, I think it's true in management too, that some problems and issues are... They're fairly straightforward as in there is a problem. You can understand it quite well. You can diagnose it quite well. There is a sort of solution that works and you do it and it is effective. And I think-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And then you couple that with an inability for us to actually properly assess the outcomes of what we do, there's a tendency I think that we do enough outputs, we've been successful.

Rob Briner:

Yeah. Yeah. And everything gets for, everything can get framed. It's one of those very simple kinds of problems, but it doesn't mean everything you do is like that. Some things, the problem is very uncertain. Potential solutions are very

unclear. There's a lot of harms per suppose, potential benefits, but we tend to always apply the simple laws of physics. If we do this, then that will happen because that is the case sometimes. But there's many cases that isn't the case. So we, but we apply the same kind of model, the same simple causal logic.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And we imbue it with our own intentions. And because we have good intentions, the idea that we might do harm is not something we're prepared to think of.

Rob Briner:

Yes. Yeah. And that, yes. And again, go parallel with management. That's true in areas such as well, being at work or diversity and inclusion where people just feel, this is the right thing to do. And because they believe it is so much, have such good intentions. Yes. The impetus to just take action and just to do stuff and not see it as a tall harmful really, or as a cloud judgment.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Dare, scared straight, critical incident, stress debriefing, all of these things have potential and some of them have been demonstrated to actually be more harmful than to be helpful.

Rob Briner:

Yeah. Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you've really got a handle on policing. Because I know you've been working with the society of evidence based policing in the UK and here with the American side of evidence based policing here in Cincinnati. Do you have any thoughts on one or two things that if you were in charge of policing, you are prioritized as the next steps forward to move evidence based practice?

Rob Briner:

In relation to police, the one thing why I like working with policing organizations is because they seem, and I may be completely deluded about this, but they seem to be relatively open at least to the idea.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think just about half my podcast listeners are nodding going yep, you're totally deluded on that one.

Rob Briner:

Totally. But it's okay. That's fine. Thank you for letting me know.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm probably just being glass half empty at this point.

Rob Briner:

I suppose I'm comparing to other professions I've had interactions with. And I think one of the reasons is-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There is, I think there are a good core of people who really get it because they want to move the policing field forward.

Rob Briner:

Yeah. And I think also because it's in the context of policing, people can see harms, they see danger. And I think also fundamental, I think my sense is the police organizations, they see what they do is important for society and for people. And they think that it's sort of self, almost self-evident, it is. So for that reason, if you say, do you want to do this better? They're a bit more open to then maybe in other professions, they're not even quite sure whether what they do is important or not. And there are professions like that too. So I think this is sort of relatively, then there's a kind of, some openness to it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think people in policing get very frustrated, but I doubt you'll find many people that doubt that it has some vital role in society.

Rob Briner:

And I think... It's very hard for me to give specific advice to any profession, but I would say that from what I've picked up, I think my sense is that the early training given to police officers could incorporate a bit more of this stuff. So my sense is certainly the UK, and I think for the US as well, that early training is not really about the way in which you make decisions. So I would say, for example, the idea of introducing what conative biases are, what some of the things you can try and do to overcome, I don't mean implicit or unconscious bias, but just kind of conscious bias more so, is really important because it's saying you're going to have to make a lot of decisions. Some of those could be very important, actually affect people's lives. So the first thing you should know is a bit more about how you do that. How does your brain work to do that stuff?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So one of the critiques [crosstalk 00:31:03] right. So one of the critiques of evidence based policing, however, is that it currently it lacks relevance for frontline policing, which is dealing with individual cases, individual calls for service.

Rob Briner:

Yeah. That is a reasonable critique if it's presented as here's my huge Metro analysis, here's my [inaudible 00:31:21] 300 studies. Because people go, but you're not, you're not on the street. I'm dealing with a person in a context on a Sunday afternoon. And I think that's probably a mistake of the way we pushed the evidence onto people. So rather than

say, okay, yeah, there is all kinds of evidence. Let's talk about you and that person on that Sunday afternoon. Let's talk about that. What do you need to know to do whatever it is better? What would help you do it better? So start there and then say, you know, and actually there might be the system after you that will help you make a better decision at that point.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So it's an articulation issue as much as a thinking about- Also thinking about the future of the research that we want to do.

Rob Briner:

Yes, it's articulation this year. And I think also going back to initial training is putting, I think police officers and other people who make those kinds of decisions into frame of mind thinking, yes, you are, you are responsible. You are using your faculties, various kinds. You're using information of various kinds. You are doing that. You're not not doing it, you're doing it. So how, you know, how can we do that better? How can you reflect on the way that is done?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Rob Briner:

So people see that as a really important skill they have to bring to bear.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And we can enhance their experience by bringing some of the [inaudible 00:32:27] it's not a replacement for their experience. It's a way to enhance and improve their-

Rob Briner:

Yeah, absolutely. The thing that that's, what's so important about this idea of multiple sources, again, in the sense of one of the stakeholders is that the member of the public you're interacting with as well as maybe their family and onlookers and bystanders or whatever else it is, but understanding that stakeholder on what they want and don't want, and what's important to them again, it's another part of that, the evidence picture. So as well as the scientific evidence and their experience, and it says about one kind of [inaudible 00:32:58] contextualize in the other, that's very important.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And what can we do at the other end? So one of the things I enjoyed about your presentation here in Cincinnati was that you mentioned the hardest three words for a manager or a leader to say-

Rob Briner:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Which is, I don't know.

Rob Briner:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How do we generate an environment where it becomes more acceptable for leaders in policing, which is a very kind of hierarchical, rank structured organization where people at the top are supposed to know all the answers. And I think they feel they're supposed to know all the answers to say, you know what, I don't know. And for that to be a safer environment for people to say that, because that's going to help us move forward as well.

Rob Briner:

I don't know. I don't know the answer to that, but I think trying to encourage sometimes a bit more humility about what we know and don't know, [crosstalk 00:33:45]-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Have you met some senior police officers?

Rob Briner:

No, I haven't. But yes, [crosstalk 00:33:50] yeah, the opposite of what qualities they may possess. But I think all of it is, as you mentioned, [inaudible 00:33:55] is not going to happen overnight, but it may be the humility asking questions, being aware of what you know and don't know becomes a basis on which people are rewarded and recruited and promoted into those kinds of positions. So it's a bit chicken and egg because I don't really know how you would do it. But I think certainly the idea of it being okay to say you don't know and not being sure, but having a means for finding out seems to be pretty crucial.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I actually admire people. I'm impressed with their confidence. I admire them more for when they actually step up and say, I don't know.

Rob Briner:

Yes. I mean, me too. An example I often give is you know, you're at home, and you've got a problem with the plumbing or something electric or whatever, that people come around and go, yeah, I know what it is. I can fix it now. Versus people come around and say, actually could be this. It could be that. I'm not sure I need to do this. I go yeah, okay. I trust the second person.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes.

Rob Briner:

Well, because it appears as [inaudible 00:34:41] thinking. Now, the first person may be right. And, but at least the second person, it appears they're going through a process of understanding, trying to fix it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I almost want to see their diagnosis take place so I can get the feel that they're going through a process rather than just leaping to a conclusion.

Rob Briner:

Yeah. I would say in the context of those maybe leaders who don't do that, that don't have that humility, nobody for a moment can blame them as individuals. They've been promoted through a system which has awarded certain kinds of behaviors and punished other kinds of behaviors. So in a sense, we get the leaders we create, you know, so it's not all about them. It's about the systems that have created that. So in anything it's about changing, trying to change all those systems and structures rather than the individuals that happen to be in those positions.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And it biases a certain type of person which doesn't necessarily help in terms of policing.

Rob Briner:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, this has been fascinating, Rob Briner, thanks ever so much for your time.

Rob Briner:

You're welcome. Thank you.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've been listening to episode 11 of Reducing Crime, recorded at the American society of evidence based policing conference in Cincinnati in May, 2019. You can find more episodes@reducingcrime.com or the usual podcasty places. New episodes are announced on Twitter @_reducingcrime. Don't forget the underscore. Be safe and best of luck.