

#80 (CLIFF STOTT)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

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

Professor Cliff Stott is a distinguished social psychologist specializing in crowd behavior, group identity, and public order policing. We chat about riots, football, and the Elaborated Social Identity Model as an alternative to the outdated mob psychology theory of crowd behavior.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I am Jerry Ratcliffe. This is Reducing Crime. And this episode is going to be a riot. Or not, if Cliff has his way. As I said in the intro, Cliff Stott is a social psychologist specializing in crowd behavior, group identity, and public order policing. Armed with a PhD from the University of Exeter, he's been at a number of institutions, and is currently at Keele University in the UK, where he is professor of social psychology, and director of the Keele Policing Academic Collaboration. Cliff has been studying riots, public disorder, and football, or soccer, hooliganism for 35 years.

This work has taken him amongst other places to Portugal, Sweden, Denmark, Australia, and the US. In 2014, he was awarded the Economic and Social Research Council's Celebrating Impact First Prize. And in 2015, Cliff's work on policing crowds was acknowledged by the ESRC as one of its top 50 achievements across its 50-year history. He was appointed a member of the Order of the British Empire in 2021.

We caught up and had a chat in Columbus, Ohio, where we were kindly hosted by the Columbus Division of Police. And my thanks to them for their wonderful hospitality. One quick thing to note before we get into it. The episode was recorded just before the 2024 presidential election, so bear that in mind when you hear us discussing the January 6th 2021 attack on the US Congress. The potential for a repeat fixture was very much on everybody's mind at the time.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It is a funny thing though, to come all the way to Columbus, Ohio, and to run into a lad from Luton.

Cliff Stott:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So, when you were growing up in Luton, did you ever think you'd end up here doing this?

Cliff Stott:

Absolutely not. No. I mean, as I mentioned to many people, I had a troubled youth. I dropped out of school.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, this is the 70s, right?

Cliff Stott:

Yeah, 70s, early 80s.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Did anybody not have trouble? When I finished high school, I didn't have enough qualifications to get to university. I joined the police. What did you do?

Cliff Stott:

I dropped out of school, got into trouble with the law, and really didn't discover being intellectual until I was around about 17, 18, something like that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm looking forward to the day I discover being intellectual.

Cliff Stott:

Yeah, yeah. I got excited by psychology. And it was back in the day when you were able to sign on and study at the same time. So, I went back to college, and I did two A-levels in a year, just scraped through with enough UCAS points to get myself to Plymouth Polytechnic.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, my. This is going to end up being so complicated with acronyms for an international audience, but so you were claiming unemployment benefit at the same time as studying?

Cliff Stott:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What a civilized country it is back in those days, right?

Cliff Stott:

It was, it was. Back in the day, yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And if I remember correctly, you told me of a drink working in your dad's pub.

Cliff Stott:

That's right, yes. Mum and dad, we lived in a pub.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is it still there?

Cliff Stott:

Yeah, yeah, it's called... Well, it's changed names. It used to be called the Live and Let Live, but now it's something like The View or something. It's in Little Village called Pegston, which sits between Hitchin and Luton.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Was that Hertfordshire way?

Cliff Stott:

It's right on the border. Right on the border of Hertfordshire.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Nice.

Cliff Stott:

I lived there for eight or nine years.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Nice village?

Cliff Stott:

It's a bit grandiose to call it a village. It was a hamlet. It was really isolated, and that was partly how I ended up getting into trouble kind of thing, because I used to stay out with my friends, my school friends in Hitchin, and we cause problems, and all that sort of thing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You were a tad rambunctious.

Cliff Stott:

Yeah, that sort of thing. It was back in the day of skinheads, and most of my friends were black. The skinheads didn't like me because I hung out with black people. We used to get into fights and various things like that. So, there was all sorts of things going on, and difficulties in life and stuff like that. And I just wasn't interested in education. And in part when I think back I was kind of rebelling against education. I was rebelling against authority, and I was almost sacrificing my own education, in part to say-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Fuck you to the system.

Cliff Stott:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You were listening to too many of those Buzzcocks records.

Cliff Stott:

Yeah. Just to try and gain a bit of credibility and status, because when we were kids there was no credibility in being clever.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No.

Cliff Stott:

It was more about who's the most capable fighter, who was the coolest. And I wanted to be in the cool gang, and that was kind of my childhood. And I didn't really change until 17, 18. In part that was my dad, because my dad put me to work in the pub.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's funny though, because you rebelled in that direction. I think I clearly got teenage rebelling completely wrong, because I ran away from home when I was 17, but I ended up joining the police. I screwed that one up.

Cliff Stott:

Yeah.

Well, I didn't like the police when I was young.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, no, that makes sense, right?

Cliff Stott:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But isn't that cool too? I mean, you're not supposed to like the police when you were young, right?

Cliff Stott:

That's right. It was a part and parcel of that particular culture and so on so forth. So that was my youth.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But if you got interested in psychology, then working in a pub's got to be one of the great places to actually sit in what's at least one part of human nature unfold.

Cliff Stott:

Yeah, in part. A people watcher. And that's always been a fascinating thing for me, is kind of observation of people and why people do what they do. And I find that just stuff intrinsically interesting, and once I got that interest and pursued that agenda, I started to study psychology. Didn't really like a lot of psychology, but I really liked the stuff in social psychology, and I really liked the stuff in social psychology most of all. And it was about the 1980s riots. So we were just two, three years after the 1980 riots by that point. And it was still really politically interesting to me.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Early 1980s, there were race riots in Brixton in South London, and then you got further problems later on. I mean, I remember being a young officer in Riot Shields going up to Tottenham, to the Broadwater farm. There you had these repeated social flashpoints taking place the way through the 80s into the early 90s.

Cliff Stott:

Well, the 80s really was a decade of disorders. Don't forget, it's also Hillsborough, the miners strike. The 80s in the UK, the disorder was everywhere.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It was race, it was politics, football was a mess. The terraces were a war zone. And football, for anybody listening from America, we're talking soccer, the real football, not the one where you pick the ball up and run, throw it.

Cliff Stott:

Play with your feet, right? Yeah. Racism was endemic as well. Don't forget that. And the national front BNP, all those kinds of things. So, during this period of time, while I was still kind of discovering my academic interest, I was also intensely interested in politics, particularly anti-racist politics. So, I used to go along to a lot of these demonstrations. And there was often quite high levels of violence, fascist, anti-fascist confrontations. One of the things that sticks in my mind was there was a big anti-racism demonstration in Trafalgar Square, and I can remember to this day the police

wading into that crowd, and there was just massive, violent confrontation going on everywhere. It was that experience that I think really, about racism, about protest, about policing, that started to grip me in terms of interest. And that was the work I came across through a guy called Steve Reicher, who's now based at St. Andrews University.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yep, in the UK, yeah.

Cliff Stott:

And he was one of the main social psychologists driving a revision of crowd theory, and crowd psychology. And I just found that work absolutely fascinating.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, I mean, they were incredibly tumultuous times. When I remember student worker party demonstrations on Westminster Bridge, policing those, and I remember seeing a troop of metropolitan police horses coming across the bridge. And we split the line, and they came through, and essentially the crowd disappeared. But before they turned up, I remember standing, I mean, we joke about it, a thin blue line, there was just a thin line of cops holding back a very large demonstration. But on one side it was fine, and there were cops chatting to the people at the front of the demonstration. We're not talking about the length of Westminster Bridge, I'm talking about the width of it. Going on the other side, you've got a fight breaking out. Was that the sort of stuff you were seeing?

Cliff Stott:

Yeah, absolutely. And also they started to form the early empirical work. Steve Reicher built his theories off of a study of the first of the summer riots of 1881. And this was the St. Paul's riot in Bristol. And that was the first riot.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, I remember it.

Cliff Stott:

And then the late 80s, early 90s, and that's when I started doing my PhD with Steve Reicher. And one of the first studies was the one that you're describing there, we call it the Battle of Westminster.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So, I was right in the middle of the Battle of Westminster.

Cliff Stott:

You were, yeah. So I'll send you the paper so you can read it. But that was an important study. And then the next one, which was the anti-poll tax riot, which was in March 31st, 1990. Just two months later, I found myself in Sardinia, in Italy, at the World Cup Finals, watching rioting involving English soccer fans. It's those kinds of three episodes of

collective violence that form the basis of our development of what we now call the Elaborated Social Identity Model of Crowd Behavior.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay. So now you've introduced the fancy term. You're going to have to explain it.

Cliff Stott:

Okay. Well, this is where I guess difficult. Our theory is built around debunking the myths that still people hold about how crowd psychology works. And that myth is primarily that when people get into crowds, they become anonymous. That anonymity leads to some sort of dysfunction of their normal psychology, they lose behavioral control, and their behavior comes to be dominated by emotions, anti-social impulses.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I don't need to be in a crowd for that to work for me.

Cliff Stott:

No, absolutely. But this is the assumption. And this loss of rationality is also then assumed to leave crowds open to exploitation by nefarious minorities.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Radical units within the crowd.

Cliff Stott:

Yeah, and sort of hijack crowds. So that notion of crowd psychology is born in the late 19th century, but it still pervades today with terms like mob psychology. We see it in the newspapers, on the TV when there's riots, we hear politicians talking about it. And indeed it's even trained to police agencies all over the United States of America.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So, are you saying it's not the case, or are you saying it's only one part of the story?

Cliff Stott:

Well, it's fundamentally not the case that people lose the conscious or meaningful control of their behavior.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay. So a little bit of some of this moral filter is still kicking around in there as PO Wikström might argue.

Cliff Stott:

Yeah, call it moral, call it value, call it norms. But what we argue, it's not that people lose their identity in a crowd, it's that their identity shifts from being individual to social. That people are acting in terms of a group-level identity, and

that social identity has sets of values, norms, morals, if you like, that guide behavior, that help people to understand what it is that they should be doing acting in terms of that identity.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay. And not having read much of this stuff, would I be right in saying that if I'd go and join a demonstration with like-minded people with whom I agree with their politics, their view, or whatever they're demonstrating about, there's probably a reasonable chance, at least initially, that we're going to have a lot of those shared values. We probably see the world similarly?

Cliff Stott:

Not necessarily. I mean, if you think about the anti-poll tax demonstration, right? I mean, so this is a demonstration, it's a big demonstration against the imposition of a new local taxation system in the UK. And this was in March 1990 by the Thatcher, the then-Thatcher conservative government. There was widespread opposition to this new legislation. And it culminated in a big demonstration, one of the largest of the 20th century, that took place in London in March 19th, 1990. Now, on that demonstration, there's all sorts of different political groups. You've got people from anarchists-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Very much a faction-oriented thing-

Cliff Stott:

... to conservatives. Now, politically and ideologically, those people are never going to agree, but they will agree about their opposition to the poll tax. Now what that shared opposition enables is an identity that both enables but also constrains what they can do together. So they can act peacefully to demonstrate against the poll tax, but they're not going to be able to act collectively to oppose the police, or to oppose other things, because they're not ideologically aligned.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And they're not going for a drink afterwards.

Cliff Stott:

Exactly. But they are united around that particular issue. As they go through the crowd event, we end up in a situation where there's a sit-down protest and the police make a decision to start dispersing the crowd as a whole. Now, that action by the police then changes the social context for those people. Previously, they were defining themselves in terms of opposition, shared opposition to the government, and its abstract entity, the legislation. But now they're in a situation where they're defining themselves in common opposition to what the police are doing, because they can't see any reason why the police are acting in this way.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

"Hey, so we can't agree on anything, but we hate the cops."

Cliff Stott:

At that particular point in time, because of the intervention of the police. The nature of the intervention of the police is such that it creates an identity that wasn't there before. So the police are creating the very context that is enabling the behavior that they're actually trying to avoid.

Now, that's not to blame the police, and this is so often the case, that the first reaction to that message, "Oh, God, here we are another liberal academic blaming in the police." But it's not about that, it's about moving beyond blame. It's not that anybody came into that situation intending violence, it's not that there are people in the crowd who came to be violent against the police.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But what if you have a few people that deliberately agitate towards violence within a crowd? Are they just going to be able to carry the crowd with them?

Cliff Stott:

No, that's the key point. So, they might still be able to shout hostilities, they might throw missiles at the police or whatever, but there's still just four or five of them. But in that context of the police then to try and get to that minority, start interacting with the crowd as a whole, all of the people around them who haven't done anything, then that can create a unity between those people and the minority that unites them in opposition to the police.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay. So what you can end up doing, you get a couple of bricks thrown out of the middle of the crowd in your direction, and then everybody dons riot gear as a health and safety kind of feature. You're actually changing the tenor of the whole crowd.

Cliff Stott:

Yeah, you can do. Now, if they understand why the police are doing it, then it's less of an issue. But if they just see the police kicking up and they haven't seen any missiles, because remember, these are often big crowds, not everybody in the crowd can see what's going on. The police have got information, they've got a picture, they understand why they're behaving in that way, but the crowd has a different psychology. And it's important, as a police commander, as a police force, to understand crowd psychology.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And this is one of the things that I like about your work, which is what made me want to come and speak to you, especially in our troubled times, there are really clear practical benefits to this.

Cliff Stott:

That's the key part of it, is that nothing is so practical as a good theory, yeah. So the central realization that this theory, this perspective gives us, is that conflict is embedded in interaction.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Hold on, let me unpack that for a moment. "Conflict is embedded in interaction."

Cliff Stott:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But doesn't that argue for reduce the level of interaction?

Cliff Stott:

Yeah. Well, manage it better. That's the issue. Interaction in crowd events is inevitable, but the issue is that there are lots of different groups in crowds. Physical crowds are not unified psychological crowds. There's lots of different psychological groups in crowds. Some of them will be more, and some less inclined towards confrontation ideologically. And what we need to do is to understand how to manage the interactions between the police and the crowd in ways that function to marginalize those who are seeking disorder.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Are there ways to sort of anticipate which components of a crowd are going to become more agitated?

Cliff Stott:

Absolutely.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Can you actually see signs that suggest, "All right, we're going to need to be prepared to do with that lot over there, but the rest of these people over here are fine"?

Cliff Stott:

Yeah, exactly. That's exactly the information that you need.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What sort of signs do you need? What do you look for?

Cliff Stott:

First thing you need to be able to do is put police officers in the crowd interacting with people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's going to surprise a lot of cops listening to that. It's like, "Hold a minute, I've got to be right in the crowd just wandering around."

Cliff Stott:

Yeah, absolutely. But therein lies the issue of crowd psychology and assumptions that we make about it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Why wouldn't you want to go in a crowd?

Cliff Stott:

Well, because the assumption is that crowds are hostile. They're inherently irrational. And if you send a police officer into a crowd, you're sending them into danger. So you can't go into a crowd on your own, you have to go in mob handed, and you have to go in aggressively, because if you don't, then you are going to suffer from the inevitable and inherent irrational violence of the crowd. And we need to reject that view. That's not how crowds behave.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I remember going to a lot of demonstrations where it should be marches through central London. And if you were sort of assigned to March alongside people, it was so much easier and nicer if you started chatting to people around you. And even if they didn't like the police, by the end of it, if you just kept talking at them, and eventually they became kind of mates by the end of it, or at least tolerant, if you'd have conversations as you're walking along. It made for a much more entertaining-

Cliff Stott:

Absolutely. But it's also, interaction with people is a really good risk assessment tool. If you've got officers and their task is to go around crowd situations, engaging with people, going back to your question about how can you tell, well, if you go up to somebody and say, "All right, mate, how are you going? You're here for a football match? You're going to the game. Do you know where you're going?" "Yeah. Oh, yeah, I'm having a good time, mate." And then another person goes, "Fuck off." That's a really good way of telling whether they're going to be a problem or not.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It must've been something about eye police. That's the only response I ever got.

Cliff Stott:

Just position that question in relationship to policing more generally. How do you know somebody's going to be a criminal or not? How do you know somebody is up to something dodgy? What are they wearing? What are they doing? How's their eyes?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How do you know if they're going to kick off? Yeah.

Cliff Stott:

Exactly. It's obvious. And anybody who knows these environments and is familiar with them can read crowds like a book. Go back to the theory. And what we're arguing is ultimately that indiscriminate use of force by the police is one of the primary dynamics through which crowd events can change and escalate into violent confrontation. Now, move away from the moral side of that, and just look at it at a technical level. At a technical level, then what we know to try to do is to avoid the circumstances where we are reliant on the use of indiscriminate force to deal with a crowd. Now, it might be that we have to at some point, but if we can avoid it, it's a really good idea.

So it begs the question, how do we avoid it? Particularly in circumstances, we've got elements in the crowd who do require some exercise of police power. But the thing that we have to do is determine who those people are, and develop what we call dynamic risk assessments that feed into command decision-making.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is there a kind of working ratio of police officers in crowd, a certain number per whatever, or any of that kind of stuff? Or is that still being developed?

Cliff Stott:

It's less about that and more about the overall tactical formation. What we recognize social-psychologically what's going on in crowds is that when you get this indiscriminate use of force, it's what we might think of as disproportionate, because people who've not done anything wrong are getting affected by that tactical intervention.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And now they're getting their back up.

Cliff Stott:

Psychologically, that getting the back up is best understood as perceptions of illegitimacy. So if they fear, they judge that the policing is illegitimate, they're more likely to oppose the policing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you've got a few people want to kick off, the worst thing you can do is come in a bit heavy, and then you actually turn more people who weren't going to kick off to join that team.

Cliff Stott:

Absolutely. And this is what we started to see in the football context. Now, most of this early work went on in managing the English disease.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is that obesity now, is it?

Cliff Stott:

Well, let's go back historically and start thinking about what the social and political kind of issues were. In the late 90s, we get a whole series of stadium disasters, and we get a lot of football or soccer violence at major international tournaments in Europe.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Now, back in those days, because I used to police a lot of football games, it was all stands, where people would just stand around in open spaces. There were no all-seater stadiums, there were very few. I think there was one in Clydebank up in Glasgow, in Scotland, was about the only all-seater stadium. And so there was a lot of space to mill about and kind of throng and move around in crowds. That's how every stadium was designed.

Cliff Stott:

Yeah. And we had a major stadium disaster in the UK that we refer to as Hillsborough. And that led to the modernization of soccer stadiums across the next decade. But we still had major problems, where English club sides and the English national side, when they played on the European continent, were regularly involved in serious rioting. And this was a major political embarrassment.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But didn't soccer then, and football, get a reputation for being a place you went to if you wanted to engage in it? So you're kind of almost free ordained to be an agitator if you went? Because that's what a lot of people were looking for.

Cliff Stott:

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And in many ways it's the expectation all English fans were hooligans that was leading to policing practices that were creating the violence. So again, it came for us, well, how do we change the policing? How do we move this forward? And what we've been doing pretty much since 2004 onwards is working with police forces internationally to design better ways of policing those crowd events. Those policing models that work are front-ended by what we have come to understand as dialogue officers, police officers who are embedded in the crowd, who engage in communication, conversation, build trust and confidence with people in the crowd, that then kind of starts to deliver up much richer information picture for public order commanders, who make better decisions about how to intervene, who to intervene against and so on.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This is all structured around this elaborated social identity model, which is working for crowds. What's been the receptivity of police commanders? Because you're basically coming in saying, "You are part of the reason, your decision-making-"

Cliff Stott:

"You're part of the problem."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. And I'm sure the 19-year-old you would be happy with this, but now here you are playing for the other team. You're basically saying, "Your decisions could be sparking some of the problems you're actually trying to avoid." Has that been an easy sell?

Cliff Stott:

No, not at all. No. I mean, it's got easier over the years because we've got now the evidence to sustain and support the validity of this position, with decades of police forces using this theory to do a better job. But yeah, obviously initially it was a hard sell.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, especially when you're using words like, "Elaborated social identity."

Cliff Stott:

Yeah, it's a difficult set of concepts. And the reality is that, what we do, what I've been able to do, is to put together an explanation of the reality of police officers experience. So, I met a guy the other day who's from the NTOA, National Tactical Officers Association in the United States. It's one of the most highly experienced public order police officers in America. And he gets where I'm coming from, not because he understands the theory, but he's seen it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, he's got common sense and he's seen. He's got a lot of experience.

Cliff Stott:

He's seen what works. And he knows that what I'm talking about helps him to make sense of his own experience. And that's really what's going on here, is that our theory is valid.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. That is a good sign, a sign of a good theory when you've got practical frontline police officers go, "Yeah, that matches my experience."

Cliff Stott:

And in many ways it's just been a hard sell, but I'm a good salesman.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've got an opinion or two, there's something wrong with that.

Cliff Stott:

And you've got to be forceful, you've got to understand policing culture, you've got to respect policing culture. And I think as well for me it's a model of what academia is in its relationship to policing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, that's what it should be.

Cliff Stott:

What it should be. And I think what it shouldn't be is ivory tower bullshit, where we sit as if we are the experts selling to our clients who somehow have a knowledge deficit. It's not like that at all. What it is a situation of knowledge co-production, where we treat them with an understanding where they have an expertise to bring to the table as well. And we sit down and we relate to the challenges that they're faced with and work out solutions together based on academic understanding, an experiential understanding.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Nah, that's not the model.

Cliff Stott:

Yeah, you reckon?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Of course it is. But you just see so often people just seem so much more comfortable sitting in the university, shouting from the outside, telling the cops how they're getting it all wrong. But nobody actually wants to do the hard work of working with the police to make it better.

Cliff Stott:

That's right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And that's the big picture goal, isn't it, really?

Cliff Stott:

Yeah. That was the challenge for me in my early career. So, got my PhD, got my early lectureship, then I got my first permanent lectureship at the University of Abertay-Dundee. Would you believe?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Where men are men and sheep are scared, yeah.

Cliff Stott:

Through that I then moved to the University of Liverpool and built a relationship with the police academy of the Netherlands, and we started to work towards the planning for Euro 2004. And that would basically involve me going to pubs, getting mindlessly drunk, going along to football, and watching things kick off.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I've heard of worst jobs.

Cliff Stott:

On a regular basis. But then I'm coming back and thinking, "Oh, my God, what am I doing to my career?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because I'd be more worried about what you're doing to your liver, mate.

Cliff Stott:

How can I translate this stuff into the kind of publications that my peers were putting into these highbrow academic journals? And I'm thinking, "What am I doing this for? Am I doing this just to build understanding, or am I actually doing it to try to address the problem that I'm trying to study?" And I absolutely fell down on that latter side. My job basically became about embedding my theory into driving change, so you can actually try to stop this violence from happening.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If I recall correctly, you had quite a bit of success when you brought some of this work to Portugal. And now, how do they organize policing in Portugal?

Cliff Stott:

There's two major police forces. So all of the big urban environments are policed by the PSP, or the Public Security Police, and that's a kind of civic police force. And then you've got a Gendarmerie, or the GNR, that police all of the small towns in the countryside, when they were hosting the 2004 European Championships. Now, the previous European Championships in the Netherlands and Belgium, there'd been major riots involving English fans who'd gone along to the competition. Something like 950 of them have been deported from the country. So, everybody was trying to do everything that they could to stop violence happening at 2004, and that was really where the relationship came from.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And you worked with mainly the urban police, because that's where all the football capitals, that's where all the football stadiums are. You had some successes with some and some failures with others.

Cliff Stott:

This was the first time we'd had a situation where a police force had started to implement a policing model based on our theory.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, you had receptivity.

Cliff Stott:

That was the amazing thing, going around all of these different cities and seeing this model being implemented effectively everywhere we went.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And it worked.

Cliff Stott:

Yeah, it worked tremendously well. There was no major disorder in any of the matched cities, in any of the areas controlled by the PSP. There was two nights of consecutive rioting in an area in the south of Portugal called Alba-Ferra, where lots of England fans were staying, but the place where it was happening was controlled by the GNR. And they had their old school methods.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So they came in hard and heavy and it all kicked up.

Cliff Stott:

And they got two consecutive nights of rioting.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It feels like a quite a good natural experiment there.

Cliff Stott:

It was a natural experiment, and it was a tremendously powerful study. Now, the policy impact went in two directions. One was that there are strong international treaties and agreements in the European Union about how to police football matches with an international dimension. So, it started to change the policy environment there. But then in 2009, in London, in the context of a G-20 demonstration, the Metropolitan police were dispersing a protest. And in that moment, a newspaper seller, a member of the public, on his way home from work, died as a function of police use of force. His name was Ian Tomlinson. And that created a political crisis in the UK. And the police oversight body were looking at the football work and said, "Hang on a minute, this is quite meaningful." And then they commissioned me to write a report on them about the relationship between crowd psychology and policing, that then flowed into sets of recommendations in the UK more generally.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So, this early work was all around football. If you've got two different groups of football fans, that's fine, kicking off one against the other, or people demonstrating about some government policy. What about if they're demonstrating about the police themselves?

Cliff Stott:

Obviously, the core issue at work here is public perceptions of police legitimacy. Now, if they're protesting about the legitimacy of policing, then you are on tricky territory. You've got to be super careful about how you manage these dynamics. And this would be the eye-opener in a sense in the US context. And 2020 was an absolute crisis for American society, because these protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd were spreading all over the country. There were in fact 2,400 identified protests that took place in this wave of protests following the death of George Floyd.

Now, what's interesting about that is that our mind is focused on those places that became some of the most serious civil disorder in American history. Places like Portland, Seattle, even here in Columbus, where we are today, there was nearly a month of rioting. But in actual fact, of those 2,400, there were only 220 that became violent and confrontational. Yes, under 10% that became violent and confrontational. So the question is, well, what was going on in all of those areas where it didn't become violent?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. And probably there wasn't a lot going on except for a protest. I mean, to quote a mate of mine, Peter Moscos, "Good policing is boring."

Cliff Stott:

Yeah, absolutely. One thing that we've been able to do is to dive down into some of the case studies, some of the cities that did become violent. And we find consistent patterns. And those patterns are, one, the policing model is heavily reliant on indiscriminate use of force and lacks a capacity for dialogue. And secondly, that that policing and its training is underpinned by outdated mob psychology.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We're coming up to an election here in the United States. And last time round things went just swimmingly well. And January 6th, that really kicked off in Washington, D.C. Are there things that we can do to offset the potential for violence? I suppose what I'm asking is, if we went to January 6th and had a do-over, what could we do differently?

Cliff Stott:

I would just flip it around and really draw on one of your concepts, Jerry, and say, well, what we need to do is evidence-based policing. We need evidence-based policing in crowd management as much as we need it everywhere else. And what we know works is what we call graded tactical intervention. What we mean by that is, look, everybody has got it nailed down when it comes to use of force. Police have got munitions, they've got capability, they've got organization.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh yeah, once the petrol bombs start flying, everybody's on safe territory. They know what they're doing.

Cliff Stott:

Absolutely no problem there. The deficit is on the front end of that, to say, well, okay, what are you doing before that to manage the dynamics of crowds in ways that maximize the opportunity to de-escalate and to problem-solve, so that you don't have to deploy these more forceful capabilities.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Their thoughts on ways to actually manage the crowd before they even turn up to the events?

Cliff Stott:

Again, a key part of this is a communication strategy, in many ways. What we're trying to do is to get the police to think like social psychologists.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So, especially in things like football, then we see officers engaging at the train stations before we ever get near the stadium, and on the walk to the stadiums. Finding these early intervention points to start assessing the temperature of the crowd, measuring the temperature crowd, but also monitoring what's going on, and perhaps subtly influencing it?

Cliff Stott:

Yeah, subtly influencing it. We call it problem-solving, we call it de-escalation, setting limits, for example. So say ,for example, you've got a group of rowdy soccer fans. And you've been engaging with them for quite some time. And then they start to push the boundary a little bit too much. And by that time, you've already kind of engaged with the group, you've understood who's influential in it, and then you just walk up to the most influential person and say, "Look, guys, we'll give you so much, but really you do need to keep a lid on it. And you kind of start to define the limits of what's acceptable." And simply by doing that creates a shared environment, where everybody understands where the limit is. Now, once we understand where the limit is, we're not going to go over it. We'll go up to it, but we're not going to go over it. Okay, fair enough. This is our-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Setting boundaries.

Cliff Stott:

... no surprises approach to how we're going to police you today. And it's just those little things, because without that limit, they're just going to carry on pushing. And then you're going to get into a situation where you have to engage. And by that point you have to engage much more forcefully and you've got a dynamic of escalation. So the work that we're doing in the UK for example, in soccer policing, is very much about developing specialist units of what we call operational football officers. And these specialist units have an advanced understanding of soccer culture, so they can read those crowds much more accurately than your standard police officer. Now, what we're finding is, by the

deployment of these specialist and skilled officers, we are saving for some police forces up to 75% of their public order budget.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What would radical 18, 19-year-old Cliff say looking at you now?

Cliff Stott:

God knows. I think he'd be slightly surprised and bemused about the way I've gone over to the other side, I suppose. But in many ways, I'm going to say he'd probably be quite proud of me really for the way that I've been able to structure my career in a manner that's made such a difference, that has really impacted on the way crowds are policed. And for me, it's a fundamental of the society that we live in. Being in a democracy is about the right to assemble and to express. And I think that the more that we can create forms of policing that facilitate that and avoid circumstances where those who do want to create violence, have a platform to exercise it, that we're in a good place.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And it's not an abrogation of any political desires on our parts whatsoever, it's just about keeping everybody who wants to demonstrate and wants to complain about stuff, a chance to do it safely for police and everybody else involved.

Cliff Stott:

Where is my politics? I want to defend democracy. And I think defending democracy is a political act, and I want to stand up to try to achieve that. So yeah, it's political. I'm not doing this to create an environment where we've got totalitarian forms of policing. I'm not working for Russia on this one. It is very much about western democracy, the First Amendment in America, the European Convention of Human Rights in the UK. Those are the things I'm interested in designing policing around. And they just happen to correspond with the dynamics of crowd psychology, because they revolve around perceptions of legitimacy and facilitation and so on.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Defending democracy. It's a rare one these days, but I'm with it.

Cliff Stott:

I hope so.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Cheers, mate. Thanks for spending so much time with me. I appreciate it.

Cliff Stott:

It's been an absolute pleasure to talk with you. And thanks for the opportunity for doing the podcast

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was episode 80 of Reducing Crime Recorded in Columbus, Ohio, in October 2024. Like and subscribe at Spotify, SoundCloud, Apple, or wherever you pod, because it sustains my fragile ego.

Check out reducingcrime.com for episode transcripts. And if you're an instructor and DM me, I will send multiple choice questions for every episode.

Be safe. And best of luck.