

#64 (DAVE COWAN)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

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

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Detective Superintendent Dave Cowan is the commanding officer of the Organized Crime Division for Australia's Victoria Police, or Vic Pol, and the president of the Australian & New Zealand Society of Evidence Based Policing. We talk about his journey into EBP, focused deterrence and other experiments that Vic Pol are currently engaged with.

I am Jerry Ratcliffe, and this is the Reducing Crime Podcast. Dave Cowan has been a police officer with Victoria Police in Australia for 33 years, recently in operational positions in Southern Melbourne, and very recently as the Detective Superintendent in charge of the Organized Crime Division. He has a Master's in Applied Criminology from Cambridge University, has completed the Senior Executives Program at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, and has been president of the Australian & New Zealand Society of Evidence Based Policing since 2019.

For his work in evidence-based policing, he was awarded the Distinguished Police Scientist Award from the Australian & New Zealand Society in 2019, and he is this year's recipient of the Australian Institute of Criminology's Gold Award for Crime and Violence Prevention. Dave's run numerous field trials including a focused deterrence experiment, a police legitimacy trial during COVID, an intelligence-led approach to hotspots and a trial using behavioral science to reduce failure to appear at court, some of which you'll hear about in this podcast.

He also recently completed a Winston Churchill Fellowship, investigating the implementation of evidence-based policing around the globe. This year's American Society of Evidence-Based Policing Conference was held in Las Vegas, and of course, I had to go... yeah, I'll take one for the team. And so, with a background of kids playing in a Vegas hotel swimming pool, Dave and I chatted poolside so he could bring to your ears both his wealth of knowledge and his Aussie accent. Is it data or data? I don't know...

Oh and the kids departed after we started, so please bear with us... the audio quality improves after a few minutes.

REDUCING CRIME PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Wait, that's not jet lag that, was it? That was you and Simon, you had a couple of beers last night.

Dave Cowan:

There was a couple. There was a couple there.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So, we'll blame it on the jet lag, shall we?

Dave Cowan:

Yeah, let's blame the jet lag, for sure. Oh, God.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You know what the rule is?

Dave Cowan:

Well, we are in Clark County. Okay? We are not in Las Vegas. If anyone asks.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I can see a great big hotel right across the road.

Dave Cowan:

Yeah. Well, walking up and down the strip, it's Disneyland, it's a cesspool, it's everything. It really is. It's amazing. It's a sight to see.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It is an overdose on the senses, isn't it?

Dave Cowan:

It is, yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But you've been here before, right?

Dave Cowan:

Yes, we've been here with the kids. We've been here on our honeymoon. I think Simon said it to me last night. He said, "It's probably a place you only probably need to come here a couple of times."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And we should say that you came here with Simon Williams who's the-

Dave Cowan:

Simon was the director for the Centre for Evidence-Based Policing in New Zealand. And now we're very fortunate he's come over to ANZPAA, which is the Australia New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Relatively new role for him, isn't it?

Dave Cowan:

Yeah, he's a good get for them because he brings a lot of policing experience from multiple jurisdictions.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

As you say, this isn't somewhere that you need to come to a lot.

Dave Cowan:

No. Small doses.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think it starts with \$22 cocktails and let's take in a show. But if at some point you're wandering around with a bucket load of quarters, you're heading towards your fifth trip to the all-you-can-eat buffet on a Tuesday morning at the Golden Nugget, you've probably been here a bit too often.

Dave Cowan:

A bit too often. And the glass sizes here are about three times what they are back home, the size.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. It is really expensive, but they are very generous measures.

Dave Cowan:

Generous, yes. Very generous, yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've got a few years in the job now, haven't you?

Dave Cowan:

Well, I've always thought of myself as the junior man.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, not anymore, mate.

Dave Cowan:

I'm not, and I-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The gray hair's the clue.

Dave Cowan:

I was recently working at a station where I was a trainee 33 years ago. I turned up to the front counter and it was surreal because I haven't been back there that often and the building hasn't changed.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, that's a bit of an indictment to the maintenance budget. Right?

Dave Cowan:

And everything came back to me and someone said to me, "You've gone from feather duster to rooster." They've flipped the saying. I thought that was quite good because I was a trainee, I was a feather duster, and I've come in as a superintendent. Well, I never spoke to a superintendent. If a superintendent came in, you stood to attention. But to come back as a superintendent, it was surreal. It really was.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you find that cops have changed though? Do you find they're much more comfortable speaking to superintendents?

Dave Cowan:

Absolutely. Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's a different group of folk in policing now, isn't it?

Dave Cowan:

It is. You walk through the muster room and they're just, "How are you boss?" And you have a good chat. I still think they don't get to speak to officers that often. It's a big organization. Vic Pol's 22,000 people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We should tell everybody that Vic Pol is the Australian shorthand for Victoria Police. Yeah?

Dave Cowan:

Sorry. Yes. It's a big organization and they don't get to speak to senior officers that often. And my first day in those divisional commander roles, the very first thing I do is I'm going to every police station over the next couple of days and meet the senior sergeants with no agenda, just to listen to them and talk to them. What's working, what isn't?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The role of sergeant in policing, I don't think you can underestimate its influence on frontline policing, for sure.

Dave Cowan:

They have so much influence. As you prepare for your shift, as you kit up and as you leave the station, the things that you will do are the things that the sergeant will tell you to do, "Guys, I want you to go here. I want you to get out." And so, they wield a lot of influence. The troops listen to them. They're there three shift today, and I think we need to support the sergeants and communicate with them a bit better than we probably do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In Vic Pol, if I get past the promotion tests and I become made up to a sergeant, what sort of training do I get for that role?

Dave Cowan:

In the lead up to being promoted you will have been upgraded to sergeant for probably in many instances a year or more.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Like an acting role?

Dave Cowan:

An acting role. Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But what training have you actually had?

Dave Cowan:

There's no specific training. That's the thing. It's not a job you can necessarily just get trained for and do. It's really a accumulation of your experience. Senior sergeants who sit over the sergeants, they are very good actually at working with them and making sure that they're buddied up with other sergeants.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I wonder if that's an interesting opportunity at that point to start introducing evidence-based policing?

Dave Cowan:

That's a good point. I mean, some people say we should introduce at the academy. I'm not sure, to be honest.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No.

Dave Cowan:

At the academy, I was focused on, how do I arrest someone? How do I do the brief and the legal process associated with that?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How do I not get jammed up, get myself in trouble?

Dave Cowan:

How do I not look stupid? How do I actually do this job?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. That's way too much to take on.

Dave Cowan:

Yeah, exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I prefer catching up with people when they've got about five years service.

Dave Cowan:

Yep.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They've driven fast cars, they've kicked a few doors in. They've got all of that out of their system. And I think at that point they're open to a few more ideas of, let's try something different. Let's learn a bit more about the job.

Dave Cowan:

Yeah. I recently presented to some inspectors on some of the trials I've been leading, and I thought, this would be interesting to see whether they engage with it. So, I didn't deliberately talk about the concepts of evidence-based policing. I think we sometimes talk too much about what it is.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We can make it sound academic.

Dave Cowan:

Yeah. It's more about, well, what does it mean in a practical sense? So, talking to them about some of the data and the trials I led afterwards. They weren't guys who would come up and tell me it was good if they didn't believe it, but they said, "We need to do this more." So, I think we need to be better at less talk about research methodologies and more talk about the practical application.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When was the transition in your service to better understanding evidence-based policing for you?

Dave Cowan:

I had a light bulb moment. Right? I saw this flyer and it was for the first Australia & New Zealand Evidence-Based Policing Conference.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When was it?

Dave Cowan:

This was about eight years ago. And it said, "Do you want to know more about what works? Do you want to test policing strategies to understand their effects? Do you want to understand what other agencies are doing and some of the innovations?" I thought, "I want to be a part of that." So, I went to the conference and that was it. It ticked something in me and it created probably a bit of a disorder. I don't know. But I wanted to know more. I wanted to learn more. I wanted to do more.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You were kind of fat, dumb and happy before that. Well, you're not fat. I mean, skinny as a rake. But you were fat, dumb, and happy before that and now it's like the whole world's flipped. Right?

Dave Cowan:

Exactly. And I do have moments where I think, "Why do you do this to yourself? You've got enough work to do without loading yourself up with all this discretionary effort." But anyway. I don't want to be the guy who retires having all their emails checked, right? And having the tray clear. I don't care about emails. Well, I do if they're my boss. Right?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, I know what you mean. Yeah.

Dave Cowan:

What I mean here is we have to leave policing in a better state than when we arrived, and we can't just keep responding on a daily basis without adding to the actual knowledge and understanding of policing and being a bit more rigorous. I'm not saying that policing needs to be completely transformed by evidence-based policing, but it should have a seat at the table of decision-making.

And I just think that evidence-based policing is one of those things that will add to the professionalism of policing. We've got some really impressive people that have great technical skills and knowledge and judgment in their fields, whether it's forensics or investigations or you name it. But when those type of particularly middle managers are exposed to the opportunities EBP presents, they often rise to the challenge.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Dave Cowan:

And one of the things that's really important is coming up with really good questions.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What are the key components of a good conference or some other mechanism that catches that light bulb moment for police officers who are not yet bought into evidence-based policing?

Dave Cowan:

The conferences are a fantastic opportunity to bring police together to open up the thinking. As I say, 50% of the conference is what is presented, and 50% are the connections that you make and the networks you create. And that's what happens.

And you leave the conference and then you can pick the phone up and say, "Jerry, I want to do this. How could I do it in a way where it's a bit more rigorous?" And what I've found is that the conferences not only connect people, but a lot of good comes from them. So, I suppose that's where my journey started.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So, you came to the first conference, and you got exposed to all of this stuff. What were the next steps for you then?

Dave Cowan:

It took a long time for me to come to terms with what it actually is, which is probably part of the issue with EBP.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, you've been in the job 20 years-plus. Suddenly there's these people saying, "There's a whole bunch of things that we don't know work." That introduces a lot of doubt, right? Doesn't it?

Dave Cowan:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Were you comfortable with that idea of doubt?

Dave Cowan:

Well, it's affirmed something that was a bit implicit that you knew, that no one really talked about and you went, "Hell yeah. We are flying by the seat of our pants too often. And we're going with-"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Don't tell the public. Don't tell the public or the politicians.

Dave Cowan:

"We are going with our best judgment, our intuition, our experience. And there's a lot of good people who make sound decisions, but there's some things that obviously we should be doing." Right? But there's other things, well, it could work or it could actually make the problem worse, but we don't actually know.

So, in the scheme of the whole busy nature of policing and the competing priorities, there has to be some small place to more rigorously test policing strategies for their effectiveness. I think in Australia we spend like \$12 billion of the public's money on policing. Surely, we need to be a little bit more rigorous around some of the strategies that we implement because we're talking about something important in here. We're talking about community safety. I'm not saying that we are careless with that. We are doing our best, but there is an opportunity to do more.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You hit on something that I think is underappreciated, which is it's not just whether it works or whether it doesn't. Is it making things worse? And that's one of the areas that is a real level of discomfort, I think, for a lot of people. And people in policing have such good intentions and there's often those good intentions manifest correctly and sometimes a few things probably don't work as well as we hope. But to introduce the notion that you could actually be inadvertently making things worse, puts people in a very uncomfortable position.

Dave Cowan:

Yeah, that's right. And I ran a trial recently around reducing serious public violence, and it was a focused deterrence trial.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When you're talking about public violence, what are you talking about?

Dave Cowan:

What I'm talking about is robbery, armed robbery, carjacking, aggravated home invasions crime.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Violent street crime.

Dave Cowan:

Violent street crime, yeah. Not residential crime, not family violence. And we looked at the best evidence. That is the first place you should go to, "Well, what does the evidence actually say?" And we don't actually do that as often as we should.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Dave Cowan:

And there's a body of work there around focused deterrence, which is delivering messages directly to offenders. And we ran this trial where we sent detectives and our youth specialist officers to offenders' homes. They weren't wanted, but they'd been involved in multiple incidents of serious public violence in the preceding three years.

And we used behavioral science. We left them with a letter. We engaged with them using the pillars of procedural justice, to be respectful and to engage their family members around them to say, "Look, you have been involved in a number of serious crimes. If you continue to re-offend, we have to tell you, you will get caught." That's the focused deterrence bit. They need to very clearly know that they're going to get caught. "But you need to make some decisions here because if you continue down this path, you are likely to go to jail if you commit more crimes. And if you go to jail in the state of Victoria, you have a 50% chance of returning to jail. So, you need to make some decisions about what you do."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What was the receptivity of the people that were approached?

Dave Cowan:

This was really interesting. I had a bit of pushback, right? From some of the detectives who were doing this.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, so before you even got this, you were starting to run into barriers within policing?

Dave Cowan:

"We've done this before. It doesn't work." And all the usual, "We're too busy." Hang on, police sit behind computers too much now. This is talking to offenders in a respectful way. And what we found was some of the detectives came back and said, "We were stuck at the door for 15 minutes and mum joined in and said, 'Yeah, why are you hanging around those dickheads? You need to wake up to yourself.'"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Good for mum.

Dave Cowan:

Yeah, exactly. And so, the detectives, some of them were like, "It was actually a good chat." I went out and did them and it was good that parents joined in, boyfriends, girlfriends. Some people politely told us to leave.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In the most polite way, as you can only expect.

Dave Cowan:

Yes. Exactly. But actually, we were surprised with the way in which these people engaged with us. What we learned, and this is put aside all the stats and it was a randomized trial and statistical significance and everything.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

[inaudible 00:15:35]. Calm down now. Calm down.

Dave Cowan:

And all that, put aside all that. What are the qualitative insights that we can learn from that?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. Yes.

Dave Cowan:

Let's get the people together afterwards and say to the uniformed officers and the detectives, "What'd you learn from this?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. This is why I love doing field work. People don't understand it's like set up your randomized trial, but especially for the academics, throw on a vest, go out, go with the people doing the work. It's amazing the insights you learn about the data points that you're gathering.

Dave Cowan:

Exactly. And what we found was that when you arrest someone, it's not a good day to engage with them after you've pulled them out of a stolen car and their face is in the pavement and the handcuffs are on them. They don't particularly like you. Right? It's not a good day to talk about them reforming. Right?

It's a crisis. Everything in their life, all the decisions they've made have been wrong. Drugs, alcohol, the networks have been hanging out in, the decisions they've made, and they've been dragged out of a stolen car, okay?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And it all comes to a head right then.

Dave Cowan:

Exactly. It's a crisis. But when you engage with them outside of time of crisis, but in a respectful way and showing trustworthy motives, that you actually want them to make the right decisions. They were more receptive to that conversation than most police expected. But that's the gold, I mean, it's not just about the data. It's those qualitative insights that we can draw as well.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So, if I just went with the qualitative evaluation, there's clearly a temptation here that would probably fall into the dare trap or the scared straight trap, which is everybody loved the program and thought it was fantastic because the detectives are finding it rewarding, and I'm sure if you went and spoke to a lot of the mums, they would be happy. But what are the actual results you were getting? Because that's where the rubber meets the road, isn't it? Does this actually reduce recidivism?

Dave Cowan:

We identified 1,000 offenders that met our criteria in committing these offenses. And I'm sitting down with this analyst, and gee, we've got good people in policing. I said to him, "Can you randomly put them into two groups?" And he's just silent for about five seconds. Tap, tap, tap, tap. "Yeah, I've done that." I said, "Do you know you might've just changed people's lives?" He's like, "Oh, wow, that's really cool."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There you go.

Dave Cowan:

So, we just randomly put them into two groups. Now, here's the thing. Why do people bang on about this randomization? What the hell are they talking about? Right? When you analyze the characteristics of the two groups, so we've got 500 in group one, which is say, the treatment group, and 500 in the control group that don't get anything or just get what they normally get. We found that the characteristics were near identical.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yep. Especially across 1,000.

Dave Cowan:

Exactly. 80% were male, 20% were female. The median age was 24. Half were under 24, half were over, et cetera. And here's the important one, the rate of recidivism was near identical.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Perfect.

Dave Cowan:

Okay?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There you go. Set it up nicely.

Dave Cowan:

So, that's the magic that it gives you. You end up with two groups that are the same, and you can say with a high degree of confidence, the only difference between the two groups is the intervention.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Dave Cowan:

And normally in policing, we just do a before and after test.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. And we cherry-pick. We cherry-pick the places that we think we're going to have most effect. Yeah.

Dave Cowan:

So, we get to 500 days post-implementation.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, you ran this for a while.

Dave Cowan:

So, we ran it, it took a couple of months to run it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, a couple of months to go and speak to everybody?

Dave Cowan:

Yep.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yep.

Dave Cowan:

Longer than we thought. And there was a bit of attrition there because people move on, et cetera. Because it's a trial that fundamentally is, does it reduce repeat offending? You have to give it time.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You have to give people time to offend.

Dave Cowan:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And get caught.

Dave Cowan:

Exactly. So, we get to about a year later and I said, "Oh, we must run those stats again." And then by the time we did it, it was 500 days. So, it was 500 offenders, 500 days later, which is very neat. And what we found was significant reductions in repeat offending in the treatment group. So, they repeated at a rate much lower than the group that didn't get the visits.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you know how much in numbers, rough percentage?

Dave Cowan:

So, we've got about a 15% reduction, and I'll take that every day of the week because these are victims that have been prevented from being harmed.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, and also it's not like the intervention was outrageously expensive. It's knocking on a door and speaking to people.

Dave Cowan:

And that's how I sold it to the detectives. "Hang on. We spend too much time behind our computers. This is just getting out there and talking to people. If you walked down the street to get a cup of coffee and you ran into an offender you'd charged, what would you do?" They said, "Oh, well, I'd talk to him." "Of course. We're sitting in cars and behind computers way too much. This is, you are driving past their front door. Stop the police car. It's going to take 10 minutes. I'm not giving you a whole investigation to do, get out and have a chat."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Dave Cowan:

And I didn't give them a prescriptive message, but you need to tell them that they're at risk of getting caught. You need to tell them that they need to actually make some deliberate decisions. Offer some referrals. We had 15 different pathways where we could, "If you need some help, we can make some referrals for you." And we left them with a letter which was in plain English, which we used Behavioral Insights Unit in Victoria to help us craft. "Read that with your folks."

And sometimes you would talk to the person at the door, they'd go inside, and I know as soon as that door shut, "Are you in trouble with the police again? What's going on? Give me that bit of paper. Let me have a read of it. Yeah, they're right. What are you going to do? We don't want you to go to prison. We don't want you to go on that merry-go-round."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, the nice thing about the letter is that when the cops show up at your door, it can all be a bit of a flurry of information and stuff, a lot to take in. And it gives people a chance to sit and digest and think a little bit more about what the message is.

Dave Cowan:

That's it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Were some people surprised that they'd made the shit list? For want of a phrase.

Dave Cowan:

Well, these guys have been charged multiple times. In fact, what we found was they weren't specialists in violence. They were actually generalists in their offending. They had more offenses for nonviolent crime, but they have a propensity for violence.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Makes sense.

Dave Cowan:

Yeah. Which makes a lot of sense. So, they know the difference between a detective and a uniform officer. And the detectives don't just come and visit you for no reason, okay? The detectives were coming here to tell you something important and you better listen. So, that resonated. But the other thing was, what we don't tend to do well is track things when we implement them. We tend to push people out there, do the job and...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, I mean, isn't that how we solve most problems? We start an initiative and we're great at coming up with the idea. We're terrible about implementing it and terrible about tracking it up. Can't believe the number of police departments I've been to where the solution has been to form a squad.

Dave Cowan:

That's right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You form a squad and then you never evaluate that squad ever.

Dave Cowan:

And we'll go, "Oh, how many did you get?" And we roughly collate the numbers and we try and pull together something that at least reflects that we did a reasonable job. But in this case, I wanted it to be easy, but I wanted to capture all the data. So, we got them to fill in a tick and flick sheet, I thought was the best thing. They could have done it on their mobile devices. No, just take the form, fill it in. Come out from the visit, they'd sit in their car and it would take them literally two minutes to tick all these boxes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, I have been, and I'm still in the middle of work with the transit police in Philadelphia, and we created a mobile app for the officers to easily enter the information. But of course, because I think it's important for us to go out and actually understand the implementation, pretty soon afterwards, we're doing field work, wandering around, and they said, "Is there any chance you can just give this on a paper form?" Because they have to fill in a paper log anyway.

Dave Cowan:

Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So, we just gave them instead, a form that was the same size and shape as their existing paper log that easily fitted in their notebook. But they could just write that in so much more quickly than entering the data into a mobile phone app.

Dave Cowan:

It sounds old-fashioned, but it works.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Dave Cowan:

It actually works. What I could do was every visit needed to be acquitted. I needed a return for every visit. And then what we could do is plug all that into Excel, and then we could analyze all the data. And that gave us some really good insights beyond just the recidivism rates, the receptivity of referrals, whether parents were involved in the discussions, how respectful they were in the interactions. I think 80% were rated as respectful interactions.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, okay.

Dave Cowan:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's better than I was expecting. I was going to go 50/50 fuck you and ... But, any chance that you can create a one-pager that people can download and learn a little bit more about this?

Dave Cowan:

No problem.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'll buy you a beer. Come on.

Dave Cowan:

Okay, I'll hold you to that. Police don't need a research paper, right?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No.

Dave Cowan:

We will do the research paper because that means it's recorded properly and it can be referenced, right?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Dave Cowan:

But we need to communicate with police in better ways. Research papers, God, they won't even get through reading the abstract. Their eyes will be rolling in their head.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I know how they feel.

Dave Cowan:

Exactly. I'm the same.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So, I'll hold you to this. You create a one-pager, and for listeners to the podcast, if you come to Dave Cowan's entry on reducingcrime.com/podcast, there'll be a link there to Dave's one-pager. And if it's not there, you can blame Dave.

Dave Cowan:

You can blame me.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, there you go.

Dave Cowan:

Exactly. Now, when I visited you, we caught up with one of your colleagues in the Delaware-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Kevin Thomas in Philadelphia Police.

Dave Cowan:

Kevin.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I just mainly remember us having beers. Well, Kevin doesn't join us for beers, but I remember us having beers.

Dave Cowan:

Yeah, there was some beers in there. You put a few police together, you share ideas. Kevin's grabbed that, and he's thinking about how he might apply it in his environment. And that's the contagious nature of EBP.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's how it works. Yeah. We're trying to make it work now.

Dave Cowan:

And look, to be honest, when I designed it, I don't think I fully understood how David Kennedy, who was the original academic who led this whole field ... Now, I've actually done something a little bit different to what he did, which is fine. I mean, it's all about replication and the situations that you need to apply your research to.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But what I think is important is that we have to understand that we can't rigidly sit with these things. It's a big planet. You've got to apply it for what works in your context, for your environment, for your offending community, what works within the police service. I don't have a problem with people adapting to local conditions. I think that's eminently sensible.

Dave Cowan:

Exactly. And Melbourne is not a city in America where gangs are shooting each other like they were confronted with there, but-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The weather's a lot more unpredictable, for one thing.

Dave Cowan:

The principles of the theory were really important. And look, while I've mentioned theory, I mean, criminological theory sounds really boring.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Sorry, what were you saying? I nodded off.

Dave Cowan:

Go with say, deterrence theory. Police are always talking about holding offenders to account, but we don't share with police or we don't teach police around the fundamental principles of deterrence. The theory that I've been exposed to, a lot of it, yeah, I'll put it that, "Oh, I can't understand that. No." But there's a lot of it that is really helpful to police.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. I'd say there's a small amount that's helpful to police.

Dave Cowan:

Okay.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

A lot of it's esoteric navel-gazing, and it's like, "Ah, no." But I think there are four or five that an understanding of how to apply those, for me at least it's, "Explain to me how it's going to work, what is the mechanism by which it works?" And I think once you start talking about the mechanism, that's when you get people interested in thinking about theory.

Dave Cowan:

And then they can start thinking about how they can apply it to their own challenges, and that's the important bit. For me, I mean, I have found some theory to be helpful in me understanding how I might approach some problems. But you're right, there's a lot of theory that God knows what it means and how we can apply it in policing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. I mean, I think rational choice is useful to know, routine activities, temporal constraint theory, if people want to read about that. I think these things help understand how offenders behave in time and space, which are where we need them to change the decision-making and reduce the opportunities. That's definitely a big part of it. Or, in your case, in the trial that you were just talking about, to understand that they're not anonymous. They're actually on the radar in a significant way, and there is the likelihood of real consequences coming to play.

Dave Cowan:

Offenders underestimate the risk of getting caught, and we need to tell them that they are on the radar. And yeah, they're not anonymously going into the world committing crime. They're so special, we've visited them to tell them that. Now, I mentioned that trial was a randomized trial.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You're running a few other trials right now, aren't you?

Dave Cowan:

I've run a few over the years. With EBP, there's a lot of talk about randomized trials, right? And a lot of people misquote how that fits into EBP.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They're an aspirational goal. They're complicated to set up, but if you can do them, they're worth their weight in gold.

Dave Cowan:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

However, they're not the only thing.

Dave Cowan:

Exactly. And give me an operationally relevant trial that is a lesser methodology any day of the week. And if I can do an RCT, great, but give me something at least with a bit more rigor than what we normally do, and that will be valuable.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Which is normally, "Hey, it worked, right? Didn't it?" "Yeah, sure it did. Why not?" Yeah.

Dave Cowan:

And the people that want to bang on about the problem of randomized trials, don't be worried about randomized trials. What you should be more concerned about is most of the policing strategies that you implemented haven't been evaluated with a lesser methodology. So, let's just be a little bit more rigorous in some of the things that we do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, most of the things we do have not been evaluated at all.

Dave Cowan:

Even the fundamental aspects of policing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

An example I use a lot is roll call. We have no idea how to do roll call. What's the best way to do roll call? We've had policing for nearly 200 years. We have no idea how to do roll call.

For me, I think it's worth pointing out that I think that the lowest level is some kind of a control group, some kind of a control area. It drives me nuts when people do something citywide and then say, "Did it work?" Well, yeah, I mean, we can use very complicated time series techniques and stuff like that, but it would've been a lot easier if you'd just done it in one part of the city and not in some other part of the city. That would've worked as a nice control. That for me is the minimum bar. I mean, the RCTs are at the top, but if you can at least have some kind of a control condition or a group of people who are not getting the treatment or a group of places that are not getting the treatment, that for me is, I think, the limit. Does that make sense?

Dave Cowan:

I think police get that, because when you say, "Look, the crime numbers have dropped in a before and after analysis." They'll go, "Yeah, that was winter. This was summer. That was COVID. This is pre-COVID." So, police get the limitations of just a before and after. They want more, but they haven't been trained in some of the techniques that might help them have greater confidence in the results.

I ran a trial as we were in COVID lockdown. In Victoria, we had one of the longest lockdowns in the world. We issued 50,000 fines, \$1,652.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Each?

Dave Cowan:

Each.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Wow.

Dave Cowan:

For not wearing a mask, being out. And we had-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Hold on a minute. 1,000 how much?

Dave Cowan:

\$652. What is it? 1,200-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

AUD and USD. Okay. So, that's basically 1,100 US dollars for breaching COVID. And follow up, 1,652 seems strangely specific.

Dave Cowan:

Yeah. Some bizarre way they calculate how we do fines, but all our fines are expensive in Australia, I think, relatively to the rest of the world.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. 1,100 US dollars for breaching COVID, for just going outside?

Dave Cowan:

Yeah. So, well, it was a really difficult time, and God, we don't want to go back to talking about COVID, but we had our operation where we were sending our police out to do our COVID compliance. And I was conscious that we wanted to do it in a way where we didn't erode confidence of the public. So, half the officers that were working this operation, we managed to train them in the principles of procedural justice. Which cops get when you explain it to them, "It sounds a bit serious, but it's being respectful, it's being neutral and allowing people to speak and ultimately showing trustworthy motives." When you walk away from that person, if that person says, "They actually cared for me." That's what we want to achieve.

So, "When you are interacting with the public, here's some ways that you can do it around COVID." And I picked up the phone, "How are we going to do this? What works? Once again, what does the evidence say?" Looked at the Campbell Collaboration, systematic review on procedural justice, police legitimacy. Picked up the phone and rang Professor Lorraine Mazerolle and Dr. Sarah Bennett, who are experts in this field. They come up with an acronym, PACT, purpose, acknowledgement, cooperation, and thanks. We gave the officers cards with a QR code and after every interaction with the public, whether it was just, "Can you please wear a mask?" Or what have you. "Can you do a community survey for us?"

So, both the officers that were trained and the officers that weren't trained doing this role had to give the surveys out. End result is, when we looked at the results from the survey, there was a series of questions. It was, "Did they treat me fairly? Did they respect me? Did they care for me?" All these indicators, and they were all rated at four and a half out of five. Really good results.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How did that compare to the officers that hadn't been trained?

Dave Cowan:

That is a very good question. The officers that weren't trained in the procedural justice, we didn't get any data on because they didn't give the tickets out. And that just says something. The officers that were trained in the police legitimacy, they got it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They got such a positive response, they didn't mind giving out the community surveys, but the other officers didn't want to give out the community surveys.

Dave Cowan:

And so, is that a failed experiment? Hell no.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It tells you a great deal.

Dave Cowan:

It tells you a lot. And was it a randomized trial? No, I couldn't randomize the officers into groups because they mix with other officers and you can't do it. So, I've just gone, "Okay, there's a limitation to this study, but it's still a good control group. It's still a good methodology."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Absolutely.

Dave Cowan:

And is it a good question, is it relevant to the policing environment?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's fantastic.

Dave Cowan:

Wow. It's an important question because it's not just about COVID. This is about fundamentally how police interact with citizens and it's really important.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What's been the receptivity of senior leadership in Vic Pol to you doing more and more of these studies? Was there initial reticence? Is that improved? What's been your experience over time now?

Dave Cowan:

I don't think anyone's actually been negative or blocking. Probably some indifference from some and some enthusiasm from others.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay.

Dave Cowan:

Our chief commissioner, Shane Patton, he recently opened up the Global Evidence-Based Policing Conference. So, when your chief says, "This is important, we need to do this a little bit more than we currently do." That says a lot. We've made progress. If I look back to the eight or nine years ago when I went to that first conference, there wasn't really much happening.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think there's a lot to be said for understanding that sometimes progress is a slow ... It's a marathon, it's not a sprint.

Dave Cowan:

And the other part of progress is I've got a saying, if there's no pushback, there's no change.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Dave Cowan:

Pushback is a symptom of people adapting to something new.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Some change. Yeah.

Dave Cowan:

And you need to support them through that process. So, I think we need to be a little bit kinder when we talk about EBP, not beat the police up because they're not doing it, and have some highbrow attitude that you're not running randomized trials. Well, it's not about that. It's actually just about improving police knowledge, improving police professionalism. And here's the big one, it's actually about innovation. It's about communicating research and using research in your operational strategies. And as Cynthia Lum says, "Does research even have a seat at the table?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Dave Cowan:

And I like that saying, because what it implies is there are many seats at the table, research is just one, it's not the most important thing, but there are occasions and situations where we can actually say, "Hey, guys, we might do this

in a more robust way and we might actually pick up the phone and get some help on this." Someone like Justin or yourself and just say, "Heck Jerry, or Justin, or Lorraine, how could we do this in a way where we actually test it? Because it's important."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What are some of the hurdles that people who are trying to push this forward are running into there?

Dave Cowan:

They're looking for the organizational structures to just solve the problem for them or a strategy to solve the problem for them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They want it nice and simple.

Dave Cowan:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But it can't be made that simple.

Dave Cowan:

Structures don't change culture. You actually need leadership. As a senior officer, you need to say, "Guys, have we ever actually engaged with anyone from academia who might be able to work with us on this? Whether it's family violence or street violence or whatever it is. How might we tackle these problems a little bit differently?"

I mean, you said it, policing has a fundamental lack of curiosity about policing. We talk about innovation, but often we're just tinkering around the edges. Why don't we put firetrucks in hotspots? Right? Get the fire department out there and create guardianship. Now that's a little bit innovative. Right?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, anything that gets them out of the damn station.

Dave Cowan:

Well, it's a strange environment, the fire department and police department relationships with community here. I'm trying to understand it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's true. Yeah, I wonder if once people have a little bit of rank, they get the sense that they're not allowed to not know anything. They're obliged to at least convey the sense that they have all the answers to all the questions. I mean, everybody in policing's an alpha male, and that's just the women.

Dave Cowan:

I think you nailed that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because everybody wants to be really super decisive, making a decision. You go into a CompStat meeting and I'm going, "Oh, we need to think about that problem more." And you just see some captain or some majors just reel off some plan with no fucking idea what they're going to do and whether it's going to work or not.

Dave Cowan:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We don't ponder.

Dave Cowan:

We don't ponder.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So, it's lunchtime, it's hot.

Dave Cowan:

It's hot.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The bar's open. We're at the pool at the American Society of Evidence-Based Policing Conference in Las Vegas. I feel that-

Dave Cowan:

I know where we're going.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, that seems to work for me.

Dave Cowan:

All right. You lead the way.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Cheers, mate.

Dave Cowan:

Thanks, mate.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was episode 64 of Reducing Crime Recorded in viva Las Vegas in May, 2023. Find me on Twitter @Jerry_Ratcliffe or @_ReducingCrime, and then DM me if you're an instructor and you want transcripts or spreadsheets of multiple-choice questions for any episode. And please follow, like and subscribe to Reducing Crime wherever you found this. Like this podcast, subscribing, or the odd like here and there costs absolutely nothing.

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