#75 (IAN ADAMS)

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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:

In an episode that—just a heads-up here—has swearing right from the very start…so don't listen with kids in the car…I talk to Dr. Ian Adams about his decade-plus career in policing, his transition to academia and his recent policy research paper titled, Fuck: The Police.

Audio soundtrack from The Wire:

Motherfuck. Fuckity, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. Motherfucker. Fucking A.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Hello, I'm Jerry Ratcliffe, this is Reducing Crime and hopefully you recognize that classic investigation scene from groundbreaking TV show "The Wire" in which detectives Bunk and McNulty find crucial evidence missed by one of their colleagues. Was that level of, shall we say, 'colorful articulation and emphasis' a breach of police department policy? Should it have been? If you go back and watch the scene, it was from season one, episode four, by the way, you can see there is a civilian present, though the language wasn't directed at him. So, if you were writing a police department policy on language, where would this incident fall? This is one of the challenging questions addressed in a recent scholarly journal article by my guest, Dr. Ian Adams.

Ian started his career as a police officer in Utah for a decade before becoming executive director for the State's Fraternal Order of Police, while simultaneously studying for his PhD at the University of Utah. In 2022, he graduated and joined the University of South Carolina where he is an assistant professor in the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice. He is a National Institute of Justice Leeds academic, has been a guest lecturer at the FBI's National Academy and has published prolifically with over 40 peer-reviewed journal articles and such respected journals as Criminology and Public Policy, Police Quarterly and the Journal of Experimental Criminology. We caught up for a quick morning coffee at the 2024 American Society of Evidence-based Policing conference in Spokane in beautiful Washington state.

Ian Adams:

You gave me a lot of good advice. You were the only one initially when I was on the job market, I was coming from outside criminology. I was coming in as a political scientist, unknown mostly. I mean people may have known some of my publications, but-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, I came in as a geographer.

Ian Adams:

Right, I think that's the best place to start with a conversation with you and I is just to note that you, whether you knew it or not, were an example for me as somebody when I first looked around and was like, "Oh shit, there's somebody who did the job almost exactly..." We were in the job the same length, made the transition and then came to policing criminology from a different field. Which is beat for beat the same sort of path that I followed that Scott followed into my co-op.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Leaving school, did you go to university?

Ian Adams:

Yeah, so I came from a family background where no higher education, right? So it wasn't really impressed upon me.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You from a cop service background?

Ian Adams:

I'm from a law enforcement family, just the wrong side of law enforcement [laughter]. The highest level of education in my family is like a 90-day sobriety coin [laughter].

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, right.

Ian Adams:

I took a year from high school, I did fine in high school, it was nothing special and then decided to go-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You survived it.

Ian Adams:

I survived. I went to college, didn't know what I was doing, switched around majors five or six times, took time off.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think when you're like 19, 20, ... The people who know what they want to do at that age scare me.

Ian Adams:

Well, it's so much family. I mean just so much expectations. And my own kids now that I've gone through a PhD, two of them are dead set, they just accept that they will do a PhD.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You're providing a role model, an expectation, and you've never had that.

Ian Adams:

I was born outside of Utah, grew up very poor, sort of through luck, managed to get adopted by the right woman in Utah, that's mom. Single mom, raising kids, doing the best she can. But college was never important, it was more get a job and so that's what I did. I ended up getting a business degree from the University of Utah.

Came out in the middle of that early-2000s recession. There was no jobs and so I ended up doing some blue-collar work, which was fine from where my background. That's what you did. Did that and then woke up one day I was traveling a lot to do blue-collar work between Las Vegas and Salt Lake. I was spending two weeks out of the month. I had a pregnant fiancé. I was quite young. I woke up one morning, I thought, "I wonder if cops have good health insurance."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. It's amazing the motivations.

Ian Adams:

Yeah, yeah. It wasn't anything I ever wanted to do. I just wanted good health insurance for a forthcoming baby. So made a phone call or two and figured out like, "Holy cow, they pay 11:14 an hour." And I was only making like nine-fifteen an hour, so this was huge. Plus you get healthcare while you're in the academy. So I was like, "Yeah, sign me up."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What department did you work for?

Ian Adams:

I started out with the Department of Corrections actually in adult probation and parole, but always enjoyed the street-level work more than the sort of court-based. So I had some friends out in a municipal department and put in with them and, "Sure, come on over." And did the rest of my career there. So I ended up doing about just under 13 years. I was involved in a shooting about 10 years in. That was during the hot summer of 2014 and I was capturing a body camera, the first wave of these things that's happening at that time, and it got me really interested in body cameras. I had worn one for several years as a test unit. This is a couple of weeks before Mike Brown gets killed in Missouri. The civil unrest that followed was addressed by then President Obama saying, "Hey, if we only had a body camera, we would've been able to avoid all this mess."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So did the body worn camera help exonerate you from the shooting?

Ian Adams:

Yeah. Yeah, it did. It was good evidence. I heard all these academics talking about body cameras as a solution to use of force and I just knew that's not true. And I thought, "Well, they must know something I don't."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, we've disabused you of that notion now, right?

Ian Adams:

Why would people believe this? So I decided to get a master's degree like, "Oh, I'll get a master's degree and figure out at least how to understand what they think."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If you ever figure that out, do let me know because-

Ian Adams:

Here I am 10 years later. So for my thesis was doing some body worn camera research and ended up kind of accidentally publishing it in police Quarterly of all places.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I don't think anybody accidentally publishes in police Quarterly. Well done.

Ian Adams:

I caught the bug at that point. I had a really good advisor who was not a criminologist, not a policing scholar. She was labor economist, turned public administration scholar.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But good scholars and good advisors can transcend disciplines.

Ian Adams:

Oh, absolutely.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because the principles, the core principles of how to encourage a.

Ian Adams:

Nd mentor people are there. I wouldn't be where I am today without a couple mentors chief among them, Sharon Mastracchi, Sharon did not care what I studied, she just wanted me to be a good scholar. She was the first to raise the idea of a PhD with me, and I honestly thought this was sort of the upsell at the car market. Like, "Oh, I just paid for this

expensive master's degree, now they're trying to get more money out of me." So I totally blew her off like, "No, I'm not interested. I'm just a cop."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You were still serving right now?

Ian Adams:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Ian Adams:

Yeah. And she kind of figured out my objection was price, and she's like, "Oh, sweetheart, you know that people get paid to do a PhD." Again, I came from this background, I had no idea. That was a light bulb moment for me and I was like, "Oh, I could go do a PhD, not pay tuition and you'll pay me even?' It's a stipend, it's not that much money.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But it helps stave off debt. And getting your tuition covered is huge because American College is damn expensive.

Ian Adams:

I had four kids. I had a house. I had two dogs to support. And so I kind of figured like, okay, I don't think I can be a street cop and do this right now. The hours were not conducive. I was a nightwalker, right, I just worked graveyards my entire career. That's when I took a job while I did my PhD as the executive director for the state labor organization for police.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. You were executive [director] for the Utah Fraternal Order of Police, weren't you?

Ian Adams:

Correct. Yeah, did my PhD. Met my best friend Scott Murgos who's now Dr. Scott Murgos, an assistant professor with us at South Carolina. So we started publishing together very quickly and have continued.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, it's been a very good partnership.

Ian Adams:

Never wanted to be a professor. That wasn't part of the plan even until late, late, late in my PhD program. I just wanted to go back and be a cop.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you think there's a place for people with PhDs in policing?

Ian Adams:

Oh, absolutely. A lot of them are here at this conference. This is sort of the preeminent collection of really sharp police, many of whom have advanced degrees.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I remember Chief Constable in the UK called Sarah Thornton at a conference saying, "Policing is one of the few fields where being called clever isn't a compliment." There's still an anti-intellectualism that floats around in policing because it's still seen as that street craft. Academics can't teach us anything.

Ian Adams:

Depending on what table I'm sitting at, I'm either the too smart liberal cop or the not smart enough conservative-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Knuckle-dragger.

Ian Adams:

... knuckle-dragger. I think that if you're going to do this path that you've done and that know Clinger's done, Mike White's done, there's a host of these guys who've done that work. You just have to be prepared for that, that's never going to really go away.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You're also at the whims of where academia is in its politics, right? At the moment, we're going through a stage where criminology is lurched post the murder of George Floyd considerably to the left, and a lot of that is being focused on policing scholars.

Ian Adams:

It has, and I certainly had my run-ins with that. I came out on the job market in a particularly difficult year, right, 2021, the fall of 2021.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Very much so.

Ian Adams:

I was very, very lucky to meet my other big mentor in my life who's Jeff Alpert, and that was a turning point for me because I wasn't ever really sold on being a professor. I was always kind of like, "Okay, hey man, if academia isn't going to take me, there's lots of heat. There's 18,000 agencies in the country, many of them want somebody who can run quantitative data. I'm sure I'll be fine."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And increasingly they need that More and more.

Ian Adams:

I try and tell my students, my PhD students and even my master's students, unless you're really committed to this academic wheel of publishing and getting the juice sort of from, "Oh, I have an interesting question and there's nobody to tell me. I can't track down the answer." That's got to be really forefront for you as a motivation. If it's not, you can make more money with more leisure time and a better lifestyle working for one of the top largest agencies in the country.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Absolutely, and I think increasingly I tell my students that the people who are going to get really good jobs in the 21st century are the people who can take large volumes of data and turn it into better decision making. We used to be what I call information poor. We're now information rich, but we're knowledge poor. If you can turn that volumes of data into something, then that's gold. Nowadays,

Ian Adams:

American policing institutions have an incredible amount of data. Continually, the sharpest people that I meet in the field are actually at the agency level, right? It's Loren Atherley at Seattle.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh my goodness. Yeah, his presentation yesterday is fantastic.

Ian Adams:

He's a genius. I sometimes poke fun at my academic friends by saying the most sophisticated policing lab in the world is not a university campus, right? You go to NYPD, you go to Miami, you go to Seattle, San Diego. I mean, a lot of these agencies have very sophisticated approaches to data and analysis.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. And the people who are driving that, people like Graham Campbell in Baltimore, Kevin Thomas in Philadelphia who are just trying to manage this volume of data and figure out how to use it to better the organization and move public safety forward. It's an incredibly challenging but fascinating role.

Ian Adams:

If you go to those people and ask, "Hey, could you use a talented student that doesn't want the academic path?" 100%, please send them to my door. We'll have a space for them. So it's a wide open job market on that side. While the academic job markets, I think are... We're doing better in criminology and criminal justice than some fields. It's still not great.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You can look at whole states across the United States where there really aren't recognized policing scholars.

Ian Adams:

Well, the reason I'm a political science PhD and so is Scott, is because we both independently said, "I want a criminology PhD, criminal justice policing-focused PhD, and there wasn't one available in the entire state." So where did we go? We ended up in as close as we sort of could get, which we felt was like political science policy sort of PhD.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So with that in mind, there is a great deal of flexibility to do a whole range of research, and I'm interested, you've really focused on a whole range of things, you publish all over the place, but executive decision-making in particular. Does some of that stem from your experiences working with the FOP?

Ian Adams:

Oh, for sure.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

For outside the US listeners, that's essentially the police union in the US.

Ian Adams:

But I would just nuance that a little bit and say in the US, there are contract cities, bargaining places, and there's non-bargaining places. Whole states where there is no contract, you're not doing collective bargaining, sometimes I call it collective begging. It's a much more political sort of approach, political meaning gathering favor and friends and favors as much as you can. So that was my role. And yes, that informed it quite a bit and over the years, my partnership with Scott Murgos has been really-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, because he ended up being a deputy chief or assistant chief?

Ian Adams:

Deputy chief of Salt Lake City, PD. He managed to go through the full career, the full gamut, and he came from a very... He's an police executive, and I was a police labor guy, and so we have different approaches to the same issue, and it's been very valuable knowing that. But there's a credible read of the literature over the last 50 years that goes something like, we became extraordinarily focused on two ways of understanding policing. One was the street-level bureaucracies, we're going to understand how individual officers exercise discretion. There's another sort of tradition around the institutionalist perspective-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And that's where that street cops versus management cop starts to come in.

Ian Adams:

It starts to come in, and yet still somehow mysteriously skips over the actual police executive themself. And so remembering that I come from a political science background, I sort of started to think about this in political science

ways as a metaphor. What if I told a political scientist that we know a ton about congressional staffers, but nothing about members of Congress? And if you told that to a political scientist, they'd say, "No, no, no. It's opposite. We know a ton about members of Congress and not enough about staff members."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There is scholarship around leaders in policing, executives and policing, but it tends to be very sort of qualitative. It tends to be very war stories. Tell me about your leadership in the career. Very unstructured.

Ian Adams:

Yeah. There's this tradition of leadership studies.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes. Just tell us how you got where you did. It's very confirmation bias driven.

Ian Adams:

Yeah. And there's books that'll come out as sort of memoirs of my time as the police chief of big agency.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There's always tend to be rather self-aggrandizing and a little bit rose tinted glasses.

Ian Adams:

I love listening to them, don't get me wrong, I love a good war story. But my methodological point would be you can learn a lot about line officer discretion and its effects. But I'm sort of a cynic on, "Here's another survey about what officers believe about this new technology or this policy."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You can look at CAD records and exactly when the officer was contacted and you could look at the AVL data, where they were, what route they drove to the call, what time they turned up, you can look at the body worn camera footage of the whole incident, and then you can read all the reports afterwards. But we have no idea how the executives made decisions about where to send those offices in the first place.

Ian Adams:

Right. And we don't have any idea of even really the scope of their discretion. If you roll back the clock 50 years, the first steps on here was defining what is the scope of discretion. And then we sort of stepped into, how do officers use that discretion? What are the outcomes of it? How can we pull policy levers to affect that discretion, constrain it? So if we kind of apply that lens to the police executive, the police executive is the person who makes ultimately hiring, firing, discipline, promotion, and policy decisions for their agency. That's a tremendous scope of discretion. How they exercise it, why they exercise it the way they do is really, really fascinating to me, and I think a huge opportunity for emerging scholars to kind of take a look at these policing issues that are cropping up over time.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Did you find that in your role with the FOP, you were often trying to navigate that gulf between the front line and the executive branch?

Ian Adams:

Oh yeah. That was a very difficult role to hold for six years. Competing labor interests. You have your officer interests. You have very powerful chief and sheriff organizations. You have legislators trying to get educated on the topics to one degree of success or another. And then there's also just crisis after crisis after crisis. I'm including 2020, right, that was over my sort of period there.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That must've been a joy.

Ian Adams:

It was a difficult period. I was very happy to set that job down, honestly. Not because I didn't love the job, didn't love the service, but because I was trying to do a PhD at the same time. And so that moment where I was like, "Oh, I only have one job. I'm just assistant professor Ian Adams at the University of South Carolina." That was a real relief.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. Suddenly all the plates that are spinning, you can actually had a few of them just crash to the ground and focus on a couple of the rods.

Ian Adams:

I've done my time. I'm about a month away from my entrance into law enforcement 20 years ago. It's hard to believe, but I've done 20 years in different roles

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I'm going to use this word, fuck you, because I'm about a month away from 40 years when I joined Policing.

Ian Adams:

40. Yeah. I look forward to that day. As you can tell, looking at me, I'm only about 25 years old, so...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'll be posting a picture so that the listeners can make their own decision on that.

Ian Adams:

That way they can judge their self.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's not the age mate it, it's the mileage half the time.

Ian Adams:

Yeah. We just keep getting better I think. I actually do think that every year I look back and I'm like, "Man, this was the best year. I can't wait for the next one." Despite the challenges, I look up and I look at my kids and they're getting older and growing and survived, and I look at my career and man, I get to fly to places like Spokane. I like Spokane.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No, I do too, but I love the way you said that with nearly a strafe. You know what? It is been an interesting town. I've never been to Spokane before. It's kind of a combination of really cute bars and random wandering meth heads.

Ian Adams:

Really good meth, some of the best meth.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You heard it first folks, Spokane, it's American society, evidence-based policing. We recommend Spokane for the quality of the meth.

Ian Adams:

Just crystal clear. It's so beautiful. They got that river running through the middle, it's incredible. I wish all towns had that sort of flavor. Now I've lived in the south, the true south now for two years, so getting into some non-humidity, cool air is always welcome.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Part of this work had you ending out, and you are giving a presentation here later today-

Ian Adams:

No, tomorrow.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

... on this fantastic paper with the best title of a paper probably since the 1970s and Van Maenen's fantastic paper, The Asshole

Ian Adams:

Well, he gave me a lot of inspiration for it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, it's Fuck: The Police.

Ian Adams:

Fuck:

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And that's the stress that we have to put on that, which is Fuck:-

Ian Adams:

The colon is super important.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

... the police, which is absolutely marvelous.

Ian Adams:

Thank you.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Published in Police Quarterly?

Ian Adams:

Yep. Many thanks to the editor there, John Worrell, who when I approached him, it was ASC last year, and I said, "Hey, John, I got this paper." He was like, "I don't know about that title." And luckily I came from receipts, from Sage, his publisher, and said, "Hey, here's six times they've used that word in a title. It'll be fine. Just trust me. Give me a chance with the reviewers." And he liked the paper a lot, he was very supportive. But at the end of the day, it's a very serious policy paper. I was in the car listening to John McWhorter, who's a great linguist, and he was talking about just the varied uses of the word fuck. And I was talking to my partner in the car. We were on the way to Costco and it just came to me. I just said, "I wonder if I could write paper."

This was the classical, the title came before the paper, right? If I wrote the paper called Fuck: The Police. I could do a survey experiment amongst police executives and HR executives. I could talk to line officers. I could talk to chiefs. I could figure out the scope of the discretion here. How is policy being used? When is it being used? Why should it be used? And I can just write that paper. And she said, "Oh, well then just do it." And so I did. There's not going to be many shocks in this paper for police officers themselves. It turns out that police use the word fuck extraordinarily creatively. So table one in the paper is originally titled 50 fucks Given. I was just calling police officers and saying, "Hey, can you tell me about how this word gets used?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I've been around a bit, but there's even a couple in there I was like, "Oh, this is imaginative, this stuff." Fucknado.

Ian Adams:

Fucknado is a good one.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Which is?

Ian Adams:

A situation that is so fucked that it appears that a fucknado came through and kind of ruined everything?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And then you've got somebody who makes things worse, which I think was a fucksultant?

Ian Adams:

A fucksultant.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Where did that come from? There were the classics in there like fubar and-

Ian Adams:

Motherfucker, butt fucker, rat fucker. The one that really got me was fuckonomics, which this officer explained is the method by which city councils determine what to pay police. So what I found was swearing in police has been studied and it's been studied well. There's a great study from Hunter Martindale and Pete Blair and their crew down at Texas State that finds yeah, with profanity during a use of force incident does make it so that the public views that as a less reasonable use of force. Good experimental method. I also think that's a limited view of how profanity is being used in policing. First of all, force is a kind of small percentage of the job anyway.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, tiny. It's a far, far smaller part of the job than people think outside of policing.

Ian Adams:

And it's also profanity as a subsection of that tiny portion is like, "Why are we designing all this policy around these blanket bans?" When you look at policing policy, there's two main ways to govern profanity. Either remain completely absent on it and just leave it to conduct unbecoming sort of decisions from-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Which is horribly vague and gives a lot of latitude... Certainly from a policy or a union perspective, gives huge amounts of latitude to determining that.

Ian Adams:

And it also, you're going to see vast swings in its application as soon as the next chief is in, the next chief is in, the next chief is in.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And that leaves the frontline officers roiling from, "Where do I stand on this now?"

Ian Adams:

Exactly or so there's sort of like the policy is absent version of this, and then there's the just blanket bans. If you have been a human being for any period of time and dealt with other human beings, you know everybody uses profanity. It's not unusual.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Context is obviously important. But also, there's regional and national traits. I was drinking with some police officer friends in Australia and the opening as I walked in and said, "Good day, mate, how the fuck are you?" That's a greeting. It's a term of endearment.

Ian Adams:

Well, and it is for police here too, right? That's what the takeaway shot from that initial more qualitative work was Police have an almost unending creativity for using just the single word fuck. Let alone, as one of my people I talked to, he said he didn't even believe was really an insult. He said, "Fuck is flavor, bitch is an insult." And so this should remind you of the early days of discussing line officer discretion. The use of it is so varied that policy really doesn't have a hope of spelling out all the ways in which you shouldn't swear.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But we also inherently understand when it's used in a benign or arguably positive way. And in a negative way, it's like the discussion that a judge said in the 1960s says, "I cannot hope to be able to articulate the different ways in which art changes from pornography. I can't define it, but I know it when I see it."

Ian Adams:

Correct. I was sort of at this stage in the paper giving up on anything interesting coming out of it. Because I sort of hit that moment like, "If every could be good, bad, or indifferent, what's the point of policy? We're just going to have to leave it out to that sort of ungreat unknown of conduct on becoming." But then I sort of had an insight as I talked to more police chiefs, as I talked to more line guys, there are actually some rules to this that I was able to sort of think through in a classic academic way, putting together a little theory, a little two by three.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You did your best to suck the fun out of it.

Ian Adams:

Yeah. But if you think about it, there's three targets that we might think about of that profanity. There's me, myself, and I. I might swear at myself like, "Ah, fuck you dumbass. You shouldn't have done that." Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I have cause to do that most days.

Ian Adams:

Or swearing at the weather, sort of the situation type thing. Then there's your colleagues, which are often the target of profanity, and then there's the public. And I think instinctively what we're trying to do is regulate that piece, the public piece, but maybe the colleagues too. But then you don't just have targets, you sort of have intent. And it's very simple, is it positive, negative, or neutral? As you start to think your way through the intersections of each of those, positive profanity with a colleague is probably qualitatively different in terms of its impact on the public's trust, it's professionalism, it's worthiness for any sort of discipline compared to walking up on the traffic stop and saying, "Give me your fucking license." We all sort of instinctively know that's probably not okay. On the other hand, stumbling on the way up and tripping and falling and saying, "Fuck." is not probably worth discipline.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Human nature. Also, it's contingent on what is going on because police officers deal with stuff that is real time. It's not, "Oh, I need to think about this email for a while before I go, 'Fuck you and the ship you rode in on.'" I was in Central London many, many, many years ago in uniform when there was a provisional IRA attack on Downing Street and there was an almighty bang heard across London. It's not unreasonable for everybody to go, "What the fuck was that?"

Ian Adams:

Yeah, I can imagine. I always try to avoid anything that goes boom on the job.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes.

Ian Adams:

In fact, if you send me on a call with a sort of suspicious package, you'll find me 50 feet away throwing rocks at it until I'm sure that it's not going to blow up. So doctors swear, lawyers swear, politicians swear, academics swear. I have an example of the Pope swearing, Pope Francis stumbles and swears.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. But it must sound better coming from him.

Ian Adams:

It did. It was an Italian. It's beautiful.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's classy.

Ian Adams:

But in a world where even the Pope swears, it's kind weird to expect police to have the saintliest mouths among us, right? Especially given the context in which they're operating. Their work lives are not saintly, why would their language be?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The context changes a lot. I was in the army for a few years and one of my instructors at Santa's was explaining the difference between fuck you fire and fuck me fire. And it's like when there's some guy in the hilltop two miles away and he's trying to shoot at you and he can't hit anything, it's nowhere near you. It's like, fuck you. But when he is 200 yards away and three rounds smack into the wall next to your head, it's like, fuck me. And that context can change in a nanosecond.

Ian Adams:

Absolutely. And I should say in this particular study, I deliberately avoid the sort of use of force profanity. I think it's been done well. I'm talking to more about just the work lives of police officers as they go through their days. What sort of profanity should be regulated? What should we all agree as a nationally accepted standard is probably okay? Because cops are just people and people are going to swear there's a time and a place for it. I don't think any reasonable officer would disagree. Certainly no chief would disagree. So let's figure that out. Let's figure out where we're actually really concerned about the image of the officer, the image of the agency, the image of the profession. Its impact on public trust. Let's figure that out and let's drive policy at that particular problem.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've got this range of targets between thinking about-

Ian Adams:

The target and the intent.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The target and the intent. Yeah.

Ian Adams:

There's other ways to think about it for sure, and I lay those out. I just don't think they're as definable in policy. For example, some scholars think about the form of profanity, so motherfuck versus motherfucker versus motherfucked. I don't think it matters that much in terms of a policy approach to this problem. So I sort of ran a big experiment to police chiefs and sheriffs across the United States.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. You've got nearly 1500 people responding.

Ian Adams:

It turns out that there's a pretty strong national consensus here. Police chiefs and sheriffs are very reasonable people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The reality is that police officers are drawn from the community and the community says fuck a lot.

Ian Adams:

A lot.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Ian Adams:

A lot. Believe it or not, there are linguists who spend whole careers around profanity. There's a scholar named his last name Jay, and he writes a lot about this. But there's been studies where people just count the swear words versus other words that any random human uses during the day. And in the English language it's somewhere between like 0.5 to 0.7% of your language ends up being curse words or taboo words of some sort.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, there's also a wonderful scene from-

Ian Adams:

The Wire.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

... the Wire where it's about seven minutes of the Bunk and McNulty doing a crime scene investigation that's been screwed up by one of their colleagues, and the whole thing is just variations and matching to variations on the use of the word fuck. It's a classic scene for the show.

Ian Adams:

I considered the show just opening my talk tomorrow on the paper with just that. I think it sends a clear message. There is a creative juice that flows in policing that fuck can communicate everything from surprise to anger to joy, camaraderie

Jerry Ratcliffe:

For a lecturer, it's a wonderful juxtaposition if your paper plus that scene from The Wire.

Ian Adams:

To be fair, I've now gotten great feedback on this paper from officers. I was sort of like, "Uh-oh." It ties in to this the police, which I got to say I haven't had a single negative comment from a police officer yet. I get emails, I get DMs in Twitter, I get all kinds of things and it's always, "Number one, that's hilarious. Number two, I'm glad somebody finally did something there." Because I think they see the truth in it. A lot of what drove me into academia in the first place is the scholarship I was reading as a sort of street cop had two problems. It didn't ring true necessarily to what I was experiencing. And also, but some of it definitely didn't have any respect to it. It seemed like the writer just simply didn't respect or care much for police officers. So I try to make sure that I don't want anything I ever do to be read that way.

Even when I have to be critical about something. I don't want it to be read as a lack of respect for the people doing the job.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Obviously when I'm reading it, a very imaginative paper. But I just don't think that somebody could have come up with it if they didn't have an extensive background in policing.

... solid paper.

Ian Adams:

It's such an exciting field. When I'm teaching a graduate level policing course, my students have to go spend time with the police. Their choice has to be two different agencies, two different levels of whether it be command and line or sergeant and detective, whatever, they're going to have to do two different types. Because I firmly believe we are in so desperate need of good evidence. And if you spend 10 minutes in a patrol car, you spend 10 minutes at the sergeants desk or you spend 10 minutes in the chief's office, there will be five to six research questions that should be popping into your head. I'm not the guy that's like, "We'll ever be able to have all the evidence for every decision police make." But we can certainly build more evidence, we can do better, and we're going to need people who go into those situations in those contexts and come back out with good research questions to then start pinning down over time.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, I just made the point at a conference recently. If you look at things like clinical trials that registers studies and experiments. In the medical field within the US, they have about nearly 40,000 a year. And Peter Nehru, who was a previous guest on the podcast, it's said that maybe in the whole history of policing worldwide, we've had a thousand maybe and yet in the medical field they're churning out 40,000 studies a year. So we are a long way behind. There's huge volumes or areas of policing we know nothing about.

Ian Adams:

I have an unending whiteboard in my head that will not shut up. I think police are the most creative people I've come across on a consistent basis. If you think about what their job is, a talented officer, call him up at 2:00 in the morning and say, "Unknown problem over at this address." And he will take the call and without worry know that, "Okay, I'm going to go take this problem. I'll advise."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I have no idea what I'm going into, but I will roll up there on my own and I will do my best to unfuck it.

Ian Adams:

Yeah, exactly, unfuck the situation.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But I think the challenge becomes then when they rise through the ranks, become management. Because at that point, because we know so little about what works and what doesn't in terms of policy, we actually want them to start having

more doubt. To start kind of going, "Okay, let's explore whether this policy works or not. Let's look at the evidence. Let's look at the data." Because that's important for the whole agency. It's not just that one office. It's an incredibly challenging thing. Do you miss it?

Ian Adams:

Oh yeah. I'm a nerd so I put together a spreadsheet once a couple years ago to sort of set down exactly what I missed in a day. So I sort of creating a retrospective diary of a given day. And I realized I missed like 5% of it, but I missed that 5% hard.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes.

Ian Adams:

The other 95% I did not miss and I sort of realized like, "Hey man, I kind like this academic lifestyle." This is when I was trying to figure out...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The hours are better and nobody shoots at you.

Ian Adams:

Yeah, I haven't gotten punched in the face in years. On balance, I think I really do enjoy the academic lifestyle, but I wouldn't have enjoyed it as a fresh out 24-year-old.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I get very rose-tinted glasses when I look back at policing, and they're a bits I definitely miss, but then there's the for:00 in the morning, freezing cold walking down the road market in the east end of London for no good reason, snow on the ground and can't feel my toes, and having very questionable leadership decisions and thinking, "No, I don't miss any of that at all."

Ian Adams:

I remember my toes not unfreezing between shifts. My feet would never get warm, and I don't miss that at all. I don't miss the sacrifices you had to make and that job for family for birthdays and Christmases and all that kind of stuff. But I also think it's just such an incredible career.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When you're blue lighting through traffic to something where you have no idea what's going on.

Ian Adams:

Yeah, there's something else about that job. I wouldn't do it today as a 45-year-old at this point in my life. I also think it's such an incredible opportunity for people to do when they are younger. It's such an incredible career.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What's next for you? Other than the fact we got to head off to the conference in a minute.

Ian Adams:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Though I will say, bloody hell, we've had two social events and we've only done half a day of the conference. I'm not sure I can last the place here.

Ian Adams:

Yeah, this is my favorite conference of the year, for sure.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Likewise.

Ian Adams:

And I will leave here to go watch, I think Nancy Levine's giving a keynote. I do try to stay very busy on the research side. I think there's a lot to do on this sort of executive discretion. We have a couple forthcoming papers, so look for those this year. And into the sort of time to come, I think we'll continue to produce interesting stuff here.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Good stuff. Well, let's grab a coffee and go and see what Nancy has to say.

Ian Adams:

Let's do it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Thanks for sitting down with me.

Ian Adams:

Of course. Thanks for having me.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was episode 75 and a fucking good one too. Recorded in Spokane in May 2024. The paper we discussed is available at reducingcrime.com/podcast where you can also find transcripts for every episode. Subscribe to Reducing Crime at Spotify, SoundCloud, Apple, or just about anywhere.

Be safe and best of luck.