

## #76 (THADDEUS JOHNSON)

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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:

A former police officer, Thaddeus Johnson is now an Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice and Criminology at Georgia State University, and a senior fellow at the Council on Criminal Justice. We discuss his career to date and his recent study where he and his colleagues examine the effects of unionization and collective bargaining on police use of force.

This is Reducing Crime and I'm your host, Jerry Ratcliffe. I'm going to get to my guest in a moment, but first I just wanted to let you know, the podcast passed a bit of a milestone recently. It took less than 75 episodes for this podcast to pass a quarter of a million plays and downloads, which almost left me speechless until I figured that really wasn't a very good trait for a podcast host, it's all down to the fantastic guests I have. And of course, your good selves, for putting up with my nonsense in between the smart bits where the guests shower you with pearls of wisdom. Thanks for listening, and especially those of you who contact me when one of my guests really resonates with you, I very much appreciate it and I know the guests do too.

Speaking of fabulous guests, Dr. Thaddeus Johnson is an expert in the area of policing, crime control and governance equity. A former police officer from Memphis, Tennessee, he's now an Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice and Criminology at the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies at Georgia State University. He's also a senior fellow at the Council on Criminal Justice. His research has addressed police lethality and coercion, street violence, recidivism and predictive bias. Among his many published works, he's also co-authored the 2019 book, *Deviance Amongst Physicians, Fraud Violence and the Power to Prescribe*. Johnson received his PhD in Criminal Justice and Criminology from Georgia State University and his master's in criminal justice from the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga.

We sat down for coffee at George Mason University and managed to grab a few minutes during their crime policy symposium organized by the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy. It's a one-day conference organized every couple of years, and if you're in the area, I really recommend it.

In fact, a small digression here. During the symposium, I was on a panel discussing the evidence around community impacts of stop, question and frisk with such luminaries as David Weisburd, Daniel Webster, Anthony Braga and Dan Nagin. Yeah, I was hanging with some serious company. We recently summarized that fascinating discussion across a couple of pages you can find in the fall edition of the magazine, *Translational Criminology*, which you can find for free on the Center's website. Just Google *Translational Criminology*, you'll find it.

Okay. It's finally time for Thaddeus, and as you join us, I'm explaining that he is the very first Thaddeus I've ever met.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And so when I read your name, I went, I just had this vision of you being one of these Appalachian preachers doing fire and brimstone kind of stuff, and then it's like, yay.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Yeah, Thaddeus Lateef Johnson. I appreciate it. I used to, because of Queen Latifah, the rapper, I didn't use my middle name coming up because everybody was like, "Oh, Latifah, so Lateef." So I just never used it, but I got older in academe and just I'm like, you know what? I like my name. So yeah, some people like to just say Thaddeus, like her family's Jamaican. They love Thaddeus.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Your lovely wife Natasha! Don't take this the wrong way, but you are fucking punching well above your weight.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Hey, give me some, I knew it. [laughter] I know it, but it's so funny. I get these awards and things and I always tell her and Bill Sabol, Rick Rosenfeld, Richard Wright, they are my guys and they really help. But those are the two I work with daily on things. So even when these awards came, I felt so awake. I'm like, this is about the teams.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

But you didn't start in academia?

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

No.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Where's the start? What's the story?

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

I flunked my first round in college.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I didn't even make it to college. I did so badly in high school that I couldn't make it into a university, so I joined a police department just before my 18th birthday. Yeah, I couldn't get to university.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Really?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Well, I couldn't pass through it so bad. The administrators were like, "When you grow up, come back," disciplinary stuff, academic stuff. That's when I became a police officer.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You were bouncing around university, getting problems in disciplinary stuff and so you joined the police department?

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Yes.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I'm sorry, but that's fantastic. [laughter]

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

And even on some work when it comes to the college education and police officers, even before I got into doing that line for my dissertation, I was very skeptical because you don't need a degree to do policing. You don't need these things.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And this was in Georgia?

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

This was in Memphis when I was a police officer. Memphis, Tennessee.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That's where you're from?

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Yeah, I'm from Memphis originally. Born and raised. Went to school in Chattanooga, university of Tennessee.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Got it.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Did policing, had no idea that I would do it, needed a job. I have a family that it wasn't a really popular decision. We don't have a great relationship with police. We respect them, but it's Memphis, it's Jim Crow, Dr. King was killed. So a lot of those things are there.

I remember stories of my dad telling me, we're working on this piece, they called me Uncle Tom talking about black officers going to black neighborhoods, and he was just saying how he felt about them and that really always had me interested, but I never thought that I would be a police officer and I definitely didn't want to be a policing scholar. I definitely wasn't doing race. I'm not going to be another black guy doing things with race. But it's funny how life takes you a certain way and it calls you when you see a need for it.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah. So you didn't do well at your first crack at university, so you joined the Memphis Police Department?

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

I worked in Memphis for right at 10 years. Started as patrolman, worked my way to lieutenant. I was actually an interim captain before I left. I didn't have the educational requirements to become a captain because you needed a bachelor's degree.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Really.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

So I was really stuck unless they changed the requirements or somebody died above me or retired, there wasn't an opportunity and so I was really stuck without a degree. That all happened that time where I didn't feel like I was making the change I wanted to make in policing because Memphis is predominantly black. I've never arrested anybody that was white. Everybody I arrested looks like me. The first arrest I made, the guy's address was the street behind my grandmother's street, that I am realizing, damn, these are not bad people, they screwed up and made some bad decisions. So, you have those characters out there, but these are people who are victims of circumstance just as much as anything else.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Right.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

And they didn't have the same parents. They didn't have the church upbringing, so they didn't have the things that I had and they ended up on the other side of the handcuffs.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah. But that's also a little bit testament to you making good decisions. I mean, you could have head down, if you're getting discipline problems at university and stuff like that, you could have easily have gone that road. So that says something about your decision-making and go, let's rein it in and find another path.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

And that's fair because one thing that I hate when we talk about disparities and talk about these things, vulnerable communities, we act as if they have no agency. It may be bounded, but they do have agency. So you're right, there are those decisions, but I would be remiss if I had to think about some of my friends and I think about, well, what's the difference? I had two parents in the household. I know some that screwed up that way. I know that and I also know that I just didn't get caught in a lot of things and they did.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Oh yeah.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

So perhaps I was a better criminal than they were, a better crook, but just amazing just to see the life trajectories and to feel like as an officer, I believe in patriotism. I believe in protecting and serving. I believe in social order, but I also believe that there's stuff beyond that and that I wasn't making a difference that I felt like I wanted to make.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I like to work with people who've got a few years in the job because it's nice to work with people who are like, they've got all of that early career stuff out of their system. They've driven fast cars. They've kicked in a few doors. They've gone through a door with a gun and had that adrenaline rush. They've done all of that shit. Now they're thinking, all right, I've got another 10, 15 years to go. Is this it? Is this all there is? And they're an interesting group to work with because either they go there and they, "Yeah, okay, I'm just going to bide my time and count the days." Or they go, "Okay," and you get them here at this conference. You get the good cops and go, "Let me find something that makes this more fulfilling." They're a great group of people to work with. Did you come back to academia with the idea of going back to policing? So you've done your time and you were going a different path?

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Yeah. I wanted nothing to do with policing. I was actually looking at research of the school to prison pipeline. I didn't want anything to do with policing.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Were you a little bitter about it, had enough of it?

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

I wasn't bitter about it. It's always a complex relationship.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Disenfranchised.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Disenfranchised is the word. I was trying to stay away from it, but that is the word. I mean, I'll give you a prime example. I remember as a young officer, raining outside, it was this woman could have been in her fifties, sixties, could have been my mom's age at the time, five o'clock rush hour, tire is flat, traffic is backed up. I pull over and I get out and I change the tire. I spend 45 minutes on a call-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Good for you.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

... to change the tire. I go back in to this lieutenant at night and he's like, "Johnson, what the hell are you doing on this call for 45 minutes?" I was like, "Yo, Lieutenant, this lady that could be my mom, she had a tire and she was so grateful. She was like, oh my God, there are good costs. She was just so grateful." And this is exact words, he said, "We don't pay you to change f-en tires. We pay you to lock people's asses up and to write tickets." And it was in that moment I said, "I'm going to take this job." I went to my administrator and I said, "What do I need to do to get on the path to leadership?"

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Having had those experiences and being in the leadership positions in the Memphis Police Department, when you see things like the murder of, the beating death of Tyre Nichols, is that a police department you recognize? Is that an aberration or is that something that you went, "I saw this coming."

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

I saw it coming, and this is the thing. Even growing up in Memphis, you were told you don't run from the Memphis Police or you're going to get tuned up. Even when I came on, I didn't see a chance to really see a lot of that. I had to step in a couple of times as young officers really because I was ignorant and didn't know about the culture and saw solidarity. I was just ignorant so that was a good thing. But it's very aggressive. Memphis is a grimy city, tough city, policing there is not as pretty as maybe other cities, but it still was heartbreaking to see what happened with Tyre Nichols because I didn't leave that force. It was running and gunning. It was balls to the wall. It was about protecting and serving and keeping the citizen first. It was victim forward-thinking in Memphis. What I saw wasn't that, that was beyond assertive and aggressive policing that was not even unconstitutional, was evil.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

When you bring that young gun mentality, you can't bring it into policing.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

That's who gets praised. Let's think about a football game. Who are the football players you remember? The ones who make the big hits and the same thing in policing. That's who gets promoted to those types of tactical units. Those

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officers are more productive, also the ones who are more complaint prone because they're very productive and active, but that also impacts how citizens views the rest of the police department because they don't know a Scorpion unit officer from a regular patrol officer.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

What was the plan when you came back to academia?

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Well, I got married and had a good woman on my side who was already educated.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You're only saying that because she's sitting right behind us.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

No, I owe her dearly.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I can see you making eye contact over my shoulders. You're throwing these in every now and again.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Yeah, I'm getting credit. No, but really, she really believed, and she was an educator, so she understood how to navigate higher ed and I had just given up. Look, I left with a 1.175 GPA.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Man, some universities, you could get that just by writing your name on the paper.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

I could have used a few more points. We were living in Jamaica when I did school online, my undergrad degree online. I finished up my bachelor's. And we only came back to the states because I said, "Well, I'm going to get my master's and I'm going to teach school online and go back to Jamaica." And I fell in love with research, started playing with data. These are people like, oh my God. So the care, the thoughtfulness, the responsibility, it was intoxicating. I have a tool. I could use research to impact policy. I could use research to help police departments. I can do all of these different things through research. I failed developmental math a myriad of times, and now I'm this quantitative researcher who does econometrics, sophisticated modeling.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I tell my students the same thing that I failed my Scottish Highs in math, and now I teach statistics and do multi-level modeling, and they're like, it's like, yes, it's okay, you'll get to it eventually.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

But it's the application and I think it's also the understanding of the data and it's a responsibility with it.

## Jerry Ratcliffe:

What you say is really important, and this is a complaint I often have about economists who download data sets doing a complicated analysis and then write a paper telling everybody what they should do. I try and make my students throw on a vest, go and sit in the back of a police car, go see a victim of crime who is standing on the street at two o'clock in the morning with all their possessions stolen, bawling their eyes out. That's one of your data points. It's a real person who has had everything taken away from them as well as their dignity. That is a line on your data sheet. Never forget that because this is a real person who's gone through the worst day of their life.

## Thaddeus Johnson:

And we're captured it and we're not treating it responsibly. That's the biggest heartache. I study everything race because I find out race is everything. Being a black guy, but also being a police officer and understanding what police officers deal with. I had one time a person asked me, they were like, "Oh, how do we remove racism from a journalist? How do we remove racism from policing?" I said, "Well, how do we remove racism from America? Because our systems are only a microcosm." And so we're thinking that we can fix the system by only focusing solely on the system, we're a rabbit or hamster in the wheel.

## Jerry Ratcliffe:

We were speaking earlier today, and a really good question is, is this a police problem or is this a problem that society is generally created through racism and everything from education, healthcare, banking, transport availability, job availability, people reading resumes and judging things by names. All that kind of racism that exists in society, but it's now manifesting at the point where it's a policing problem. Is this a police racism problem or is this a society racism problem but we're just seeing it in police data? And I think that's the big question to disentangle, but bear in mind, that's from a white guy who grew up in Scotland.

The only slightly non-white people are the people who went to Spain for their holidays. Do you know what I mean? That notion, that race permeates everything, even though you've tried to get away from it to some degree. I mean so many black police officers that I know and I've spoken to and I've gone drinking with, say it's different being a black police officer, especially after Ferguson, after George Floyd. You found that too?

## Thaddeus Johnson:

Yeah. Luckily, I got out before Mike Brown and George Floyd because policing has changed. I'm not sure if I have the stones to go back into policing.

## Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think everybody says that. It's brutal, isn't it?

## Thaddeus Johnson:

It's so brutal, and we have to have a diversified force, but what's most important is the race of the client, which are our citizens.



**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Memphis Police Department was, it's going to sound the weirdest phrase, but a pretty black department, right?

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

It's a pretty black department and a very black city. Some black officers are harder on black communities because they want to keep their communities safe. When you see another young black man out there acting up, and then you see me, I have to bridge that gap and not just among white people, among black folk and all other type of folk, and so you have to bridge that gap. All of us are also not immune to anti-black messaging. I'm six feet tall, I have dreads, man.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Man, you could live up to that Thaddeus name, right?

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Got to,... Viking helmet!

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

If you were like a hundred pound, soaking wet, it was like, Nope. Your name. And this picture does not.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Doesn't feel right. It doesn't fit.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Damn, you can carry this off.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

I appreciate it, man. I appreciate it. And I tell my students, I say, if I'm walking down the street, I see the Golden Girls, and that's my dirty little secret. I love the Golden Girls.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Oh my god wasn't expecting that. That's fantastic.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

That's our dirty little secrets on air. And so you want them to do better. And so a lot of black officers have to arouse with, I can't treat black men worse because I expect more or want more.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

This must be so incredibly challenging because you're not just second guessing yourself, you're third guessing yourself and fourth guessing yourself. Am I being too hard? Okay. Is my bias creeping into that? And oh, I can't imagine the decision-making just to go deal with a kid on the street.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

And that's why it's so important to have good research. Because even when I do research on police lethality and police killings, I'm not saying whether it's good or bad. We're just saying we want to have a less lethal police force, a less lethal society. And that's how we approach it. And I would never say to tell an officer to hesitate squeezing the trigger when it's life and death, but there's a balance about between that and being trigger-happy, so it's just a fine line. And you're thinking, is this a real threat or do I perceive this as a threat because of what this person looks like?

I never enjoy an arrest. I remember, I had a serial robber. He was very brutal. I see him, I'm like, "That's him, BOLO." And I said, "Hey, man," with my shotgun, "You need to get on the hood of this car." And I'm sitting there talking to this guy, I was like, he need help. I hate to go lock him up. He has to serve time and pay for his crime, but he needs more than this. Still, I'm talking about it, it still bothers me to this day because-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I can see that. Yeah.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

... the last thing he didn't need was to be incarcerated. He needed some help.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

He'd been failed by the system long before police ever came to his door. Everybody I've spoken to who served more than a couple of years in policing. There are always those few cases that stay with you forever, and you question whether you did the right thing. You think about the outcomes of it. It's interesting that there are always little cases that just stay with you, aren't they?

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Yeah. And it's impactful and they become part of your DNA because many people who are fans, we know that they've been victimized or traumatized throughout some time of their lives. And so you can't be callous toward them regardless of what they do. And that means if a personal society has these things like people, I call them kiddie fiddlers, who molest kids things, right?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Kiddie fiddler is a fairly universal term. I heard that in British policing.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

So good. So good, so good, so good.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

All the British listeners would be like, "Yeah, we know that term."

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

What a kiddy fiddler is, but they still are owed mercy. And at some point they paid their debts to society.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

When you were in policing, you had all these additional expectations, and so you moved into academia. Oh my God, let's move into something that's far less diverse than the police department, right?

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Academia is a really great place, and I ignorantly was hoping to escape from the bureaucracy of public service.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You are fucking joking, mate. Seriously? Oh, if universities were run as a business, we'd all go bankrupt in a nanosecond. Oh my goodness. No.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Yeah. And I ran into that. And with anything, there's the pros, there's the cons. But it is challenging because one thing, it's pervasive. It takes over your life. It becomes part of who you are. But in that, it's hard to get that balance in your life. It's hard to communicate with family. It's hard to communicate with friends. You become even, I think sometimes very cynical. The stuff that we're doing is much bigger than academia.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I have an evidence hierarchy for policymakers because the reality is that there is some research evidence that you shouldn't be making good decisions on. And I've caught shit endlessly from people who do studies at the lower level because they see it as a criticism of their work. And I'm like, I'm sorry, but it kind of is because what you produce isn't helpful to policymakers. And it's fine for academia, don't get me wrong. But if you want to change how the world is, don't be doing that stuff. And nobody needs an English git like me turning up, half English, half Scottish. Nobody needs a git like me turning up, telling them their work's not as good as I would like it to be. It's none of my business, but.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

It sounds nicer the way you say it.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

If I'd known how far I could have got with an English accent, I'd have moved to this country years ago.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

I would've developed one.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Especially in the relationship status.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

You can say anything, get away with it.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

This accent really works here. I got to tell you.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

I think he just caught me a, but he said it so politely.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So you came into this and you came into these rigorous standards and you're doing great work. Can I ask you one thing that surprised me though? You wrote a book on Deviance Among Physicians.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Yes.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

The full title is Deviance Among Physicians, Fraud, Violence, and the Power to Prescribe. That seems very different than the policing world. Did you take a sabbatical for a while and just decide to become an expert in another field for 20 minutes and then come back, what's going on?

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

It was supposed to be a book chapter for one of my mentors in the master's program who had a victimology background, and they were talking about the overprescribing of medical equipment for fraud. Well, they expanded as we read more and wrote more, started seeing all these other things that go unchecked in the medical field. And it just really piqued my interest and got us writing that. So that was an opportunity that came. That was supposed to be a chapter that came a book.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Because people criticise policing for the errors and the mistakes. And then I'm going, have you seen the medical field and how many people they kill every year?

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

It's scary. It's scary. And then even think about-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

We're talking orders of magnitude worse. And there's race involved in that as well too.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Yeah. Don't get me started talking about black women with the cesarean sections or painkillers because they think we can deal with more pain or because we may think they're less rare-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Fives times worse than the outcomes for white women in maternity outcomes.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

But race doesn't matter. Remember, we're in a post-racialized society.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And then the medical field want to tell policing how to do it.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Come on now. And that's the thing, when doctors mess up at this catastrophic level, nobody calls to defund the entire operation.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Right.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

But when it comes to policing, and I always tell people, I've never heard about making something better by disinvesting in it. I've never seen that before. And that just sounds like a real good business model.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Noam Chomsky had a quote that, and I'm going to paraphrase it slightly, said that, "Defunding is the path to privatization" because you defund something, you make it perform so badly. Eventually people get angry and complain about it. And you go, well, okay, obviously the government can't run it, we'll put it in the private sector. And so what you end up with is you privatize policing, and then the only people who have policing are wealthy people. And who gets screwed the most, the poorest.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Defund the police or all those things. I was asking, who the hell are they talking to? Because the black folk I talked to, the poles that I see, you look at Minneapolis and three quarters of the adult voters that were black said, "Defund the police. Hell no."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

They want better policing.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

They want better policing and to be treated fairly. We don't want less.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That's fair to ask, but they don't want less policing.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

You see these are vulnerable populations. They've been underserved. Well, the one service that we've been providing for is policing. It hasn't been perfect. Are you going to take that away from them?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

They may not be perfect, but they're the only fuckers that turn up.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

These are good men and women in uniform. And oftentimes it's the leadership, oftentimes it's the resources. It's the poor training. Don't get me started talking about fitness standards and all of these things that we moved away from in policing, which I hypothesize, the less fit you are, the more likely you are to go to the tools on your back belt, your utility belt. But they're doing the best that they can possibly do in a racialized and capitalist society that dictates where they're going to heavily put their police presence a.t

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Policing had all these additional expectations on you being black in policing, and now you're in academia, better, worse?

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

It's worse. One or 2% of the world has a doctorate, and then the smaller percentage of you work in academia. And there's a very small percentage of black folk who are in there, and particularly I'll say black men in that, even when you're on committees, it's like, yeah, no, it has the appearance of diversity and things. But if you're on the committee and it's two white guys and me, yeah, I had a voice, but my voice does not matter. So it's beyond tokenism. It feels as if you are a caricature. Being a junior scholar, it's difficult. And also with me, a lot of my work has been out of spite because they're getting it wrong. Oh, crime is going down. Yeah, it's going down in big cities because people are moving to suburbs and rural areas and story about recreation. So you're not getting it right.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

If you shift into our populations because they're scared getting shot every night, yeah, you're going to have crime going down, but that's because there's nobody left to shoot.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

And so it's like those simple things are left out. So I know I get caught up myth-busting a lot. Nobody talked about Rick Rosenfield's crime in America. Nobody talks about the code of the street. Nobody was talking about black gun culture, right in the mainstream, you hear them, they're missing entire points.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Well, there's a few white saviors kicking around with opinions.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

And that's another thing. We always heard this thing about the man, and particularly white men. In my education, I've had to wrestle with it because some of my best mentors and friends are now white guys, right?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

At some point you just wish you'd stayed in Jamaica. You hold an Omar from the wire and just stayed in Jamaica.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

That's what I wish. I really wish just that mangoes worked out, do my gardening. But I do feel like we were built for this, and I do feel like there was a void that we were actually able to easily slide into.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So black scholarship, I say again, I keep diving.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

No, this is great. These conversations are not had in public.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I'm so close to the third rail. I'm like a nanosecond away from getting canceled each and every day I talk about this, but I'm a little fascinated, especially as a foreigner, as an immigrant, coming in from outside just doing what you are doing because you care about victimization, you care about crime, you are also busting the myth of what black scholarship is because it's so easy to take the position of being critical of police, and you are critical in a very constructive way, but you're also supportive of there are a whole bunch of things that they're not doing wrong and need some support on. And that's almost a myth-busting role in itself.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

You know what? You're absolutely right. And I also came in thinking that we have used race as a crutch. And in my works, when I see a race finding, I work to make the finding disappear. And when in that work we're trying to remodel, remeasure, the findings get stronger, the more I try to disprove a race finding because I want to make sure if there's a race, finding that it's real. And so that's why I do econometric work. That's why I try to do high-level work. If it's interactions, your methods have to write the book or how things supposed to look. It's like a recipe.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So finding a race, finding for you isn't the end of analysis. It seems like it's almost the start-

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

It is the start.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

... of unpacking that and what it really means.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

It is a start. So on the facial recognition piece, we found that cities that deployed facial recognition technology arrested on average more black people and 55% fewer white people. And first people say, "Oh, the technology's flawed." No, if police operations are already inequitable, meaning that they're disproportionately deployed in certain neighborhoods because of systemic inequities that drive statistics that put them there, you put that on top of technology, on top of it's going to codify, exacerbate those things.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That's a great way to put it. It's codifying existing systemic racism that existed in society before any of this technology came along. Graduate students have asked me, are we including race? And we find it as a factor. I said, well, the starting point here is first of all, we're looking at crime so we're talking about victimisation. It doesn't say anything about the offenders. These are communities of people who are being victimised heavily. That's what you're finding. But also it's not a measure in itself. It's fundamentally a proxy measure for a hundred years of disproportionate outcomes in terms of healthcare and banking and housing opportunities and access to transport and employment. All those things manifest in what you are seeing as a variable that you pick up from the census.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

I love that. But that gets to us, our point is that crime is, it's not the disease, it is the offshoot or the symptom of the viral disease, which is those systemic inequities, the things that you talked about.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah. No, I feel for you because there's no expectation on me buying an old white guy to do race-related research. And here you are trying to do crime research, but it just permeates everything in America, doesn't it?

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

It does. And it's not just even race, but geography.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And so few people understand it.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

They don't understand it. But it's even things like geography in our racial disparity work. When they say looking imprisonment, a big reason why disparities decline was because the grip of mass incarceration left black folk, they started locking up more white folk. That ain't justice. Nobody asked for that. As much as I don't want to deal with race, somebody has to talk about it responsibly. In fact, you start looking at things by race and geography, you'll see that in places like rural areas, suburban areas and victimization, white folk struggling. But because it's so urban-centric and black-centric, we forget that it's still about justice. And justice has no race.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And this is why I wanted to speak to you, because I think guys like yourself and Rob Brunson are talking about this stuff really responsibly and helping people understand the nuance of it. And I have these discussions with police chiefs on the other side of it, which is they're going, okay, I get criticized by very kind of what I call naïve metrics, which is let's look at the whole city, but the whole city's, this population is white, this population is black, and your stops are disproportionate.



And I go, hold on a minute. Where is all the victimization? Where are the people, the victim of our crime? Do I not send the cops there? If I want to redress the balance of those stops, I just pull all the cops from the black areas and put them in the white areas. And who is that serving to underserving the community that needs the police the most?

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

And that's why I tell people, equity does not mean equal rates. Also, you mentioned a very, very important point. Maybe think about benchmarks. When we do work on police lethality, if we do population benchmarks, the disparity looks a whole lot worse. When we go and use arrestment marks or weapons arrestment marks, you see that disparity shrink, shrink and further shrink.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And nobody wants to hear that.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Nobody wants to talk about it.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And how much shit do you get for saying this?

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Oh.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Well, you're wearing a bulletproof vest right now too.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

I need to. But I've had things come out, things like Uncle Tom and a few emails about things that we respond. I get on other sides. I've been called a long-haired monkey and all those things on the other side too.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Jesus.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

I know. Welcome to America, right? But that to me that we struck a nerve. But you have to tell the truth.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

There speaks a true scientist.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Oh, thank you.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

But I mean so much of a criminology is leaning towards advocacy and ideology, but there speaks a scientist saying, this is what the data says. The data doesn't care what you think. This is what the data and the analysis says. I love that about that.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

And it's funny though. So people think, oh, who do you have problems from? The opponents or the advocates have problems with both sides.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Right? There you go. And this comes to the piece of work that you've done recently that I really love it's work that you did with your wife, Natasha and Megan Hartman, of course, David Snively, who's with IECF now. And you published this piece in police practice and research called *Collective Bargaining Police Pay and Racial Differences in Police Lethality Rates*.

And I'm just going to say before we dive into this, if listeners are interested in the paper, I'm going to make a link to it available on [reducingcrime.com/podcast](https://reducingcrime.com/podcast). If you come to the entry with Thaddeus, you can download a copy of the paper that we're about to discuss because man, this was fascinating. So you guys dug up the data from 282 local police departments. So we're talking about local municipal police departments of like a 13-year period. Just your findings are like, what? So what did you find?

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

So what we found was this. Now mind you, this was going along with, remember I said myth-busting, defying the police. I said, well, I wonder if increased police pay shows something.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And this is just even the idea of thinking does how much we pay the cops make a difference?

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Yes. But it made us wonder, should police officers make more or less the same than the people that they serve? And no one had really asked that question in that regard. Who determines pay? How is pay determined in police departments? It's usually through collective bargaining. Well, we have to understand union protections.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

But not every police department has the same level of union protection.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

And I think 41 states has union rights, some places has unions, some places has police benevolent associations. So there's different levels, you're right of representation. And so the treatment measure was collective bargaining authorization. They were authorized to do so.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Right, and so the union or responsible for the negotiations with the city and the administration for what police paying conditions are going to be like. So it's union controlled and it's often the fraternal order of police, the local branch, the fraternal order of police are negotiating for paying conditions for the officers in the police department.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Absolutely. And that's very well put. We created an index using state pay, local level pay, and other metrics if it contributed to fewer or more police killings of citizens.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So basically what you're linking here is if you have more pay, does that have an effect on police officer involved shootings and killings?

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Yeah, absolutely. And this, you would expect that higher pay signals, more professionalism signals and attracts a higher quality pool of officer. It also gives them incentive to not lose their well-paying positions. And so what we found was that as the pay levels went up, the levels of police killings of white people, black people, and overall declined. However, when we did an interaction to see if these levels responded and unionized agencies the same way they did in non-unionized agencies. And what we found was that those life-saving benefits only maintained for non-unionized agencies. And this is for black people.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So the first finding a loan would be enough for a journal article, I think. Do you know what I mean? If you pay cops more, they're generally going to be happier. They're going to be probably a bit more professional, attract a better pool of applicants, and they're going to shoot and kill people less. That alone would make a journal article.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

It's incomplete. The story is incomplete. You can't talk about pay without talking about unions or collective bargaining and policing.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Funny, a police officer walks in, if you want arrest Mo McGough, please do.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

We knew we had to look at unions, and so we were happy. Wow! Increased police pay decreases policing value among all races. However, we knew that that could not have been the full story.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Right, so that basic finding that improving pay holds for reduces shootings of white people and black people.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

White people, black people, and we include overall races as well. But in unionized agencies, the life-saving benefit did not extend to black people. So we saw fewer white people killed than unionized agencies with higher pay. But in black agencies that were unionized, as police pay went up, you saw that in fact, it slightly increased. Not only did it not diminish, it slightly increased and worked opposite than the white rate. And then what we also saw in non-unionized agencies, and we sat with that finding for so long because we were like, what the hell does it mean and how can we respond to be talking about, because-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

What is this relationship between a police department being unionized and there being only a benefit for white citizens and not black citizens? This is why it's a little fascinating.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

For the non-unionized agency in particular, you don't have certain job protections, you don't have representation and unionized agencies, right? If some collective bargaining agreements allow for you to seal certain disciplinary records, it allows you to delay interrogation. It allows you to see videotape and review evidence. Now, mind you, unions are not evil. I'm not saying that. I don't think these protections were put there so they can go out and just kill black people with impunity. I don't think that's the case.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

No.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

But what I do think that happens is police officers are mindful of race. They've seen George Floyd, they've seen these things. If anybody says that otherwise, they're lying. Right? Non-unionized agencies, they don't have those job protections in those agencies they take better care of. They have more foresight, they use better judgment. And what I mean are things like this. They're less likely to be involved in risky behaviors, i.e jumping in front of a fleeing vehicle or those types of things because they don't have certain job protections and they don't want to lose their job.

In the unions, the deterrence effect of discipline, things have been diminished because you don't have fear of repercussions of real issues and most shooters are justified. And let me say this real quickly, most shooters are justified less than 0.002% of all police contacts result in a citizen dying. However, when the citizen does die, it's way more likely it's going to be somebody who is black regardless of how you chop it up. So let me say that. And so it's a very smart power policing, but it has huge repercussions unlike any other police outcomes.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Unionization and the protection it provides speaks something to how officers exercise discretion.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

That's absolutely it. I argue that that never was what union representatives of our union was meant to do. We have to make sure our officers are protected, make sure that they're safe, they get fair pay and all of those things. But the one thing we have to do is make sure that we hold them accountable. And there's ways to do this without losing labor rights.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I think you're right that I don't think this was an intended consequence. I think what you're uncovering something here is absolutely fascinating as an unintended consequence of just providing people with better job security and yeah, it's fascinating. So how do you trade this off with the recruitment crisis and the fact that unions have been beneficial in many areas for better working conditions? I mean, people see some of the way that some unions are functioning and say they have too much power and too much this and the other. And then you see these small rural departments where if it wasn't for a union, they'd be getting screwed, left, right, and center, right? It is a typical of research, right? You do this interesting piece of research. Now it's throwing up like eight questions in my head.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

No, but that's absolutely great because no research answers all the questions. Good research leads to better questions. We solve that in unionized agencies. Assaults against officers also increased as pay went up, and it happened for both unionized and non-unionized, but the levels for unionized agencies were much higher than the non-union counterparts.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So officers in unionized agencies are getting assaulted at higher rates.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Yes.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So these protections are changing their employment of discretion and they're just taking more risks, and it's putting the community at risk and themselves.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Absolutely. And you ask, well, how do we translate that into real life? Well, there's a couple of things. First of all, we can make sure that serious disciplinary records are not obscured because now we can see a pattern of practice. Also, we need oversight. Census review boards have a bunch of them, but they don't have any real power.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

No, they don't.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

So what you need to do is remove restrictions and union contracts about the oversight that these places can have and be more transparent. We can understand the patterns and behaviors of these officers without attenuating any officer

labor rights, without officers losing any protections. And again, by doing so, we find that we can keep officers safer as well, and not just our citizens.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I love that. I think most reasonable cops kind of go, I would just like to feel if I made an honest mistake or I'm involved in a good shoot because I was under real threat that I would be looked at. I need that level of protection. But yeah, we can take it too far. Man, it's fascinating work. For the listeners, if you come to [reducingcrime.com/podcast](https://reducingcrime.com/podcast), I'll put a link up to a copy of the paper. Hey, Man, you're busting a lot of myths and it's important and it's cocktail hour, and you've got your lovely young lady across there to go take for a drink, I'm sure at some point.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Yes, absolutely.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I appreciate you spending some time with me. Thanks so much.

**Thaddeus Johnson:**

Thank you so much for having me. Thanks for what you do, and just this has been really fun.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It has been.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That was episode 76 of Reducing Crime recorded in Washington DC in June, 2024. If you want more episodes like this, subscribe to Reducing Crime at Spotify, SoundCloud Apple, or wherever you pod, because well, it doesn't cost a penny. Check out [ReducingCrime.com](https://ReducingCrime.com) for episode transcripts, and if you are an instructor and DM me, I can provide multiple choice questions for every episode.

Be safe and best of luck.