#91 (PETER MOSKOS)

This transcription was provided by a transcription service that uses artificial intelligence. While their advertising claims accuracy for clear audio transcriptions, Reducing Crime LLC and Jerry Ratcliffe have not checked the transcription and make no warranties or representations of any sort, implied or expressed about the reliability, availability or accuracy of services, products, information or transcriptions contained on our website or in this document for any purpose. We make no claim that this transcription is verbatim. Any reliance that you place on the information contained within this document is strictly at your own risk.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

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

Peter Moskos is a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City, a former Baltimore City police officer and current director of John Jay's NYPD Executive Master's Leadership Program. We talk about a whole bunch of things, including his new book "Back from the Brink".

I am Jerry Ratcliffe and this is Reducing Crime. Okay, I guess it must be new book time. I've just released a third edition of my book Intelligence Led Policing. You can get it on Amazon or from Routledge and I've been waiting to do this episode for a while because I wanted to hold off until Peter Moskos new book was published. Now look, many people comment on policing, but few are capable of speaking as eloquently as Peter from both an objective and informed perspective.

Part of his insight comes from his research methodology, which involves, no, not downloading data sets and running econometric models, but actually talking to cops as you'll hear, to undertake his sociology PhD at Harvard University. He joined the Baltimore Police Department as a sworn officer and since graduating he's authored four books. His first one, “Cop in the Hood” is a splendid read and I highly recommend it. While his latest “Back from the Brink” chronicles policing in the NYPD, the emergence of CompStat and the crime drop in New York in the 1990s, I had a chance to read an advance copy and it really brings that period alive through the words of the people that made it happen. Peter's day job involves teaching in the department of Law, Police Science and Criminal Justice Administration - and they have got to get a shorter department name than that - at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, where, as I said, he runs the NYPD's Executive Master's Leadership Program. He's also a senior fellow of the Yale Urban Ethnography Project. We chatted after a meeting held at the offices of the excellent publication and organization, vital City, hosted by Liz Glazer, who kindly offered space for us to chat. Thanks, Liz. As you join us, we were just discussing the rather nice life academia has afforded us. Yeah, I know. Hashtag first world problems.

Peter Moskos:

Part of me wants to quit my job simply because you only live once and the last 20 years have gone pretty fast. The problem is I kind of like my job. Good benefits.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Isn't that the curse actually liking your job?

Peter Moskos:

It is a bit. It is.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What do you like about it?

Peter Moskos:

I like the winter break and the summer break. I like the students. I like the fact the actual required hours of me being somewhere very few and flexible. Some hours they have to be there, but they're not that many and the rest of their work is flexible and that's great.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, and you're also teaching a police master's degree, so you've got NYPD officers in a program and that must be rewarding.

Peter Moskos:

Yeah, I mean it's such a different class than undergraduate New York City kids. It's the way I keep my ear to the ground. Yeah, I mean I've been running that program for seven, eight years and it's fabulous and of course it's the original masters leadership program for police.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Sorry, we're not Ivy League. Well, we are the first Ivy League dedicated.

Peter Moskos:

It's funny because as a Princeton Harvard grad, sometimes I forget that

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes, you are, and I'll come back to that in a minute, but it's bizarre. I think this is the first dedicated policing degree at any level, undergraduate or graduate at any Ivy League. I don't think there has been. Fuck the Ivy League, that aside, it maybe says something about the slow creep of policing as a legitimate field of study, research, training, education. If the very stayed and very slow to move and change, Ivy Leagues are, or at least one of them is coming on board

Peter Moskos:

And I don't even think it's ideology. I don't think the Ivy League is as progressive as anti-police as a lot of other places, but they're very disconnected from the blue-collar world of policing that I don't think they'd even think of that. I mean, when I did my PhD research as a Harvard grad student and I wasn't planning on becoming a cop in Baltimore and I sort of had to continue my research, but I'll never forget the email I got from my advisor, which he said, we are not in the habit of educating police officers.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, your experience in the Ivy Leagues is significant. You started as an undergraduate at Princeton doing sociology.

Peter Moskos:

Yeah, doing sociology, following in my father's footsteps.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, I mean your father was quite a famous sociologist, wasn't he?

Peter Moskos:

And a military sociologist, which seems very adjacent to basically police sociology, though I'm not in the sociology department anymore and I had enough of it and I'm kind of down on sociology. Theory is

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Overrated, especially when it's a lot of it's bad theory having seen a lot of, not a lot, but enough sociology presentations, half of it. It's about you as the sociologist and not about the subject to study, and it feels like that's a shift that seems unnecessary.

Peter Moskos:

Is it called autoethnography self eth? It's not a good field, but the flip side is the rest of it's very quantitative and aping economists, and I don't think that necessarily is productive either. I mean, there's a big qualitative quantitative split and sociology, but they're not talking to the people that they're doing research of and economists will never take sociologists seriously anyway.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. Your PhD then was at Harvard. I mean, as you talk about pitching that the big leagues well played.

Peter Moskos:

It looks good on paper, right?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, no, I mean it, it's serious, but I'm a little skeptical about many qualitative PhD dissertations these days. They're leaning towards, well, I interviewed 15 people for an hour or two, and here's my dissertation. You went a little bit farther than that,

Peter Moskos:

And I think my advisor thought I was maybe pulling the bait and switch and my original plan was to sneak off to Baltimore and become a cop, which wasn't the case. My research was disapproved by the new acting commissioner when I got there and I was called out of the police academy as a participant observer on day one and told to pack my bags and go home and I sort of for mercy and Got it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You actually joined the Baltimore Police Department as a sworn officer and worked the streets, and that was part of your PhD research. I mean, there's

Peter Moskos:

Book research as well, but I'm the only cop I believe in history to be hired while they're in the academy to stay with that class. I had to be hired before we used live ammo at the gun range,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you wanted to just go through the academy and study them from an outsider's perspective, and that was Nix, and so they said, if you're going to do this, you've actually got to sign up.

Peter Moskos:

I was going to replicate John Van Mannen study of when he went through the Seattle Police Academy in the late sixties,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

John Van Mannen and the author of the classic article, the Asshole?

Peter Moskos:

Yes, and a very nice guy, and he's still alive and well when I speak to him every now and then, but he was at MIT at the time, and I started grad school in 95, just as the great crime drop is happening and all the experts in the field are saying it's impossible because we know that police don't affect crime and now we have to do all the root causes bullshit, and until we fix poverty and racism and unemployment, meanwhile Giuliani's cutting social programs in New York City, poverty is increasing and murders are cut in half in a matter of two or three years, and I go, whoa, if the whole field is wrong, obviously something is happening and I wanted to study something urban and in sociology that's usually gration or education, but I thought this looks like a fun little field and it's ready for a scientific revolution in the Ian sense of the word, which never happened by the way, but I thought I'd go to Baltimore and why Baltimore?

Because they're one of the only two departments that said I could do research there, and the other one was Knoxville where my uncle had been the editor of the newspaper there, but I thought Baltimore was actually a more fun place to live for a year and easier to get back to Boston. So when I got to Baltimore, that commissioner was gone and the new one just said, this is crazy. I mean, he said, whoever approved this is insane, and he might even right about that, by the way, but just for legal reasons, we can't let you go out on the street. As of researcher, I figured the research wouldn't be useful if I stayed, if it was only about the Academy.

And he said, why don't you want to become a cop for real? And I said, well, who's going to hire me knowing I'm going to quit after a year though I stayed a bit longer and write a book about it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, if I remember you did 14 months or something,

Peter Moskos:

20 altogether. I was six in the academy and 14 on the street, 14 months I quit when I got civil service protection. I don't know. I was thinking, if I stay then what? Do I stay five years divest? Then if you stay five, you want to stay 20? When do I make my out? And it's interesting, I was there at the same time that Cynthia alum was and she stayed longer than I was, but she was more in the policing for the policing part. Also, I realized the cops I worked with said, you got to go back. I mean, I learned to appreciate that Ivy League. I disparage a lot more as a Baltimore cop because there's so many smart cops out there who never had the chance. They just weren't tracked into that. I mean, my parents were both teachers. My mom a high school teacher, my dad a professor, sort of only natural that I'd go to college and then go to grad school

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Coming as a foreigner from the overseas. The Ivy League is really sort of perceived as that sort of Oxford, Cambridge kind of level of education, and I've got officers in the masters in Applied Criminology and police leadership at Penn now kind of going, I never thought I would be in an Ivy League university, so it really does

Peter Moskos:

Carry that, especially Baltimore does not have a college

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Requirement, especially from a policing background where it's so much of a blue collar job in the us.

Peter Moskos:

Yeah, I mean luckily my advisor, Orlando Patterson was sympathetic to qualitative research and also was encouraging that my dissertation could be easily turned into a book

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I have to say, and this is not just a blow smoke up, it is a fantastic book for folks who have not read it. Copy in the Hood is a fantastic read. I use it in my undergraduate classes because it's just a lovely mix of accessible research with real practical experiences. It's a great piece of work. Well done on that.

Peter Moskos:

Well, thanks, Jerry. I mean, I banked my career on

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That, so I know it's mentioned in the book and I want to talk about Back from the Brink really more than Cop in the Hood, but there's a section in Cop in the Hood where you actually talk about being open and upfront with the guys on your shift. The fact that you were there to do research, you're going to be researching on them with them. What was that reception?

Peter Moskos:

I think I may have overstated the opposition in Cop in the Hood because of IRB requirements. The first day of the academy, they go around the room and say, why do you want to become a cop? It was not an easy moment when I was like, I'm actually just this Harvard grad student who is going to be studying stuff and I don't quite know what, but thank God I had to do that because it would've been very easy not to say anything. And then when do you become friends with people then? I wasn't trying to be covert, but I couldn't be, and so everyone knew what I was up to and I mean, my academy class was incredibly supportive of me getting hired and staying in the class. I mean, certainly people were suspicious. I mean, cops are naturally suspicious and they want to know who is this guy?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, I think nowadays research is creeping more into policing than it over the last 20 years. I think the reception probably be easier now, but it's great to hear that they were supportive and start,

Peter Moskos:

I mean, I felt that everyone in a way had their own house, solar ambitions. Some wanted to get promoted, some wanted to join the FBI, some wanted to go back to school or whatever, and I was trying to get a PhD at Harvard. I think there are three qualities that you're sort of judged on, which is can you do the job? Are you a nice person and do you go out drinking after work? And I always say, if you can do two or three, it doesn't matter which two, you'll be accepted. And I kind of did all three, I think. So at some point you're just there in the grind, punch in the clock, clearing the drug corners day after day, so it didn't really matter at that point.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You joined at a time when certainly back here in New York, crime was starting to drop and it had been dropping for a few years, since about 1994,

Peter Moskos:

Right?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Giuliani was here in New York. Bill Bratton was here in New York, you were down in Baltimore, but were you keeping an eye on what was happening in New York?

Peter Moskos:

Yeah, I mean, I've always wanted to move to New York and I ended up moving here in 2002. I thought the point of my dissertation, I mean nominally, it was the socialization of cops, what John Van Manon did, but I really thought it was going to be on the great Baltimore crime drop. I wanted to have a front row seat and it didn't happen. Crime did go down a little, actually got a medal or bringing murders under 300 in the year 2000. We all kind of roll our eyes out because everybody got one, but I can say I'm a metal police officer because of that, despite my brief tenure,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We don't exactly know what everybody did, but everybody gets a medal. Exactly. A very participation trophy.

Peter Moskos:

It was a participation medal, but it didn't happen there. And we got our New York commissioner and Ed Norris. So my book is not about the great crime drop of Baltimore. Blessedly seems finally to be happening now. So Baltimore always 25, 30 years behind the time

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's worth restating just how significant the crime drop has been in the last 30 years here in New York because that's the subject of your latest book Back from the Brink.

Peter Moskos:

Yeah, I had a copy, and I should mention that we're here at a Vital City event, which was excellent, but I gave my copy away, but there were 2,260 murders in 1990. That's really when things fell off the table. That's when they started counting how many people were shot in New York. We still don't know how many people were shot in New York City in 1990 because nobody was counting it. That's unbelievable. Crazy. Yes, there was a lot of low hanging fruit, but the first of, they just had to care. I mean, Jack Maple, who was a lowly transit police lieutenant becomes basically the number two man in the police department is Bratton's right hand man and says, well, how many people were shot last year? I mean, they had the forms just no one was counting it. And so he said, well, let's figure out, and so shooting data in New York City goes back to 1993, but probably 7,000 people were shot in 1990 and this year it'll be roughly a thousand,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Which in itself is a significant number. Let's not minimalize that It's still a thousand people. It's still a thousand people, but one seven what it

Peter Moskos:

Was. That's right. And the city's a lot bigger now, and guns are more powerful now, so they cut crime in half in a matter of years. I look at murders and shootings because I trust the numbers more, but all the other crimes dropped in

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Sync

Peter Moskos:

To lesser or greater degrees,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And of course it was completely related to reducing poverty and improving education and reducing unemployment, that sort. That's what did it, right?

Peter Moskos:

Yeah, of course.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And of course I'm being sarcastic there.

Peter Moskos:

I just assume you're always sarcastic. Well,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Peter Moskos:

It's funny because the academic world first denied it was happening, and then they say, well, it's complicated. Maybe it's not that complicated.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, because it's poverty changed.

Peter Moskos:

I poverty increased in New York City during the decade,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I don't think unemployment drastically improved.

Peter Moskos:

I wonder about the unemployment rate, but now I do know that poverty and inequality increased, and those are important. I don't mean to say those don't matter, but they're not crime reduction strategies. Yes, that's the important thing. Crime reduction strategies involve policing and focusing on the repeat, violent and offenders in that sense. It's not rocket science, but you have to care. You have to have political support, and I don't give Giuliani that much credit, but he did appoint Brad. Mind you, he fired him very quickly too. But there was a political support to bring down crime. I mean, ultimately the story is one of organizational change. How do you change the culture and focus of this organization that has with civilians, 50,000 employees when crime goes down, all the naysayers, and you still see this today, it's always anything but police. Here's a violence interrupter group, but they've been there for 20 years. What did they do in these past six months? That's so special,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right?

Peter Moskos:

Sure, other things matter, but it's not getting rid of lead, it's not legalized abortion, it's not the weather. It's policing

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In the book. You've done extensive number of interviews with just a ton of people who are involved, which is great because so often we fail to capture that institutional knowledge before people retire and frankly die and pass on. What do you think was sort of summarizing the key organizational changes that really took place that shifted the NYPD?

Peter Moskos:

It was a mission statement at its core that Bratton came in and said, we're going to reduce crime, reduce fear of crime and public disorder. And then he promised to reduce crime by 15% in the first year were double digits, I think, and it went down 15% and it was unheard of for a police commissioner to come in a job and say, I'm going to bring down crime that just wasn't done. Why would you put yourself in that position? And the recipe wasn't that complicated. One of the ways other naysayers say, well, it wasn't NY. Nothing special happened here because crime went down everywhere. Well, yes and no. It started first here. It actually started earlier in the subway in 1991, which an interesting natural experiment because if robberies go down in the subway and not above ground in New York City, I think there's some variable that's changing in the subway

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And it's not one of those big macro sociological variables. It's something direct and unique to the subway system.

Peter Moskos:

Yeah, and that was 91 when Bratton became transit chief, which at that time was a separate police department focused on turnstile jumpers and felonies went down immediately. Even they were surprised it worked so well, but what was going on in New York was not a secret. Bratton was on the cover of Time Magazine, and that's why by most accounts, Giuliani fired him.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes. I don't think anybody really would ever describe him as shy and retiring.

Peter Moskos:

No, it's a big city with big egos, but they had a dog and pony show. People were coming to Comad. It won presidential awards. I mean, it was a basic problem solving approach. I mean, the technology was not advanced. It was basically going from an overhead projector to PowerPoint, but at that time it was sort of gee whiz. But the main thing was just mapping crime accurately quickly. Jack Maple had a four step approach to this. Previously, the department was worried about corruption, it was worried about brutality, worried about avoiding scandal, but crime wasn't on the idea of some years crime goes up and some year crime goes down. And I don't think cops bought the sociological arguments that they had no impact on crime, but they were happy to use them when crime went up and say, well, it's not our fault.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So it's a cultural shift to say, we will take ownership of this thing that we've never really taken ownership of before.

Peter Moskos:

That's exactly it, and it's a big risk now. Now it's on you. Before it wasn't. They did not have a healthy work life balance. I mean, they were sleeping in cots in police headquarters and they never saw their kids and things like that. Though all of 'em say in hindsight, it was the best two years of their life, it was a wild ride.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I heard CompStat once described as police. Darwinism. The commanders who couldn't hack it didn't survive.

Peter Moskos:

Lewis Anon, one of the first interviews I did, and I went to his house and his fearsome reputation and what do you know? He's a sweetheart.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm sure he'd love to be

Peter Moskos:

Described that way. He'll hear this and laugh, but he cared. And yeah, there was a very rough edge and people did lose their careers over it, but Arthur Stewart said, who was a colleague of mine at John Jay, he was a precinct commander. He's like, they ask the same questions every week. There's no reason not to be prepared. He's like, it wasn't actually that tough to go to Comad if you were prepared and you should know exactly what to do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think it's interesting you're saying that it was the same questions coming up every time at CompStat because I wonder if one of the benefits that the guys had back in those days was actually the limited access to data. You'd only just started collecting shooting data. We had basic maps on a PowerPoint on a screen. There wasn't a volume of data. I got a COMPSTAT meetings in police departments across the country now and in overseas, and because there's so much data, the captains or the precinct commanders or the district commanders have to prepare so much more because they could get questions about a whole variety of topics that just wasn't how things were done back in the Bratton era.

Peter Moskos:

It's interesting because for the first time, I think ever NYPD is having a tough time getting people to be commanding officers, and part of it is work-life balance as treasured more in 2025 than it was in 2020, and a lot of that's CompStat. Not many people are happy with CompStat now though I don't see a better alternative, but one of the thing that somebody in my class proposed, which makes a lot of sense, is you either got to give us more time to prepare or give us no time to prepare and then change the standards accordingly, which I think might be the best system. Call us that morning, say, come on down, don't tell us which cases we have to learn because as a precinct commander, you shouldn't know everything that goes on because you delegate and you have people to

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Deal with and you should be delegating.

Peter Moskos:

Yeah, you should be getting summaries and reports, but you should not have to know how the investigation of this suspect is going at that moment. You're going to CompStat and suddenly you lose two days that probably could be spent doing better things, preparing for it. Yeah. Does policing benefit from that prep time put in, especially when it makes that job, which should be a plumb prize, not desirable to some

Jerry Ratcliffe:

CompStat. The Bratton era also got associated with right or wrong, and you're going to tell me the answer now, broken windows and broken windows policing, how did that all get screwed up?

Peter Moskos:

Well, it really got screwed up later when it morphed into zero tolerance, then Bill Bratton and George would go blue in the face saying, this is not broken windows what you're doing now.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The original idea was just a basic social order and social control.

Peter Moskos:

Yeah. George Kelly was a social worker by trade. It does not have, now, mind you, broken windows was written with James Q. Wilson who was more conservative, but it wasn't seen as ideological until far later. A lot of people hate a broken windows from day one because it is inherently a more aggressive form of policing. It is actual policing, and there are people who don't like policing, so they're opposed to that. Broken windows is a more old fashioned form of policing because it cares about things like public order and order maintenance. Now, it is still misunderstood. It does care about the little things, but it's focused on a problem. You have to define what a broken window is, and one way to do that is I would say that when someone who usurps public space, whether that's through behavior, through vandalizing things, there are various ways you can eerp public space, but if you are somewhere and other people can't

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Use it, taking six seats in a subway car and

Peter Moskos:

There's a broken

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Window, spread your bags out and smelling rough and you can destroy the aura in half a subway car.

Peter Moskos:

Yeah. Can't be about writing tickets as a performance measure. And that's what it became later. But then it's no longer broken windows. I don't really buy the theory of broken windows so much. The idea that people say you take care of the little things, the big things will take care of themselves. Like hell, they will. The guy who's out robbing doesn't care

if there's graffiti. Now the little things might matter on their own, and at some point, look, if a place is trashed, it's going to get more trash. That part of broken windows is true. There is a urban environment, but what broken windows allowed the NYPD to do was to legally stop people who many of whom were wanted. I mean, this goes back to turnstile jumping on the subway.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes.

Peter Moskos:

If you just pay your fair, there's no problem. Now, if you paid, if you didn't pay the fair and you got stopped and you did not have an outstanding warrant and you did not have guns or drugs on you, you'd be given a ticket and released. It might take an hour or two for the processing, but you were not taken to jail. But one in eight people, I think, had an outstanding warrant. One in 20 had a weapon, the way to stop them before they actually commit the crime. The key thing about broken windows also, and this comes from George Kel and I took a class from him in Harvard, and I said, this sounds a lot like Jane Jacobs and chapter four of Death and Life with great American cities. And his eyes lit up and he said, oh yeah, this all comes from Jane Jacobs. I'm just repackaging it and I think that's why I got an A in the class. I said that before he had was read Jane Jacobs

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Public Fear Matters, go back 20 years. I used to be a little cynical of impacting on public fear of crime. I would also argue, can we first of all do something about crime? That being said, their fear of minor disorder and just that kind of crappy stuff that goes on a regular basis is not unrealistic and it's not unwarranted. There are still a lot of problems go on, but the serious violent crime, we've not there yet, but the low level stuff is still a big problem in neighborhoods.

Peter Moskos:

So my book is almost off from the police side. That's the story I wanted to tell because I can talk to cops and a lot of people can't. But I also talk about the business improvement districts because that preceded the crime drop. And I'm talking about 42nd Street from Port Authority to Times Square to Bryant Park, but Times Square got a lot of people don't understand the timeframe. They all think it happened later. That was under David Dinkins that they signed the deal with Disney and they cleaned up 42nd Street. And Gretchen Dykes who ran the alliance there said, we still had to convince people about this. They didn't believe it. So many times the perception is reality and the way to reduce fear is you have to think somebody is in control and in different environments that'll be different. In the subway, it might just be that turnstile. You cross that barrier and the idea is now you're in the system and anything doesn't go. Times Square was hiring unarmed, I would say security guards, but they were just guys in a security like uniform. But that idea that, well, they're there at least, but the idea that you're not here alone and that somebody can't randomly come up to you and change your life in a bad way in an instant.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It sounds like you really enjoyed the process of doing the research for the book. You did a stack of interviews for this.

Peter Moskos:

I know I work formally recorded about 50. I did countless more informally and get the right people. And I mean I also, I have sort of multiple snowball sampling and the first of all, I work in a department where a lot of the people in the book are in my department. They were there. They know what they accomplished and they never got credit for, and they weren't asking for credit, but they like to get a little credit for the good they did. Are there any

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Highlights from the interviews that really stand out to you?

Peter Moskos:

Well, I did love them all. The first interview I did was more than a decade before the book came out, I didn't know what I was writing yet. And the first interview I did, his office was next to me, Vincent del Castillo. He just retired. Great guy. He was the transit chief before Bill Bratton became Transit Chief. And he says, yeah, I am responsible for the crime drop. The day I retired, crime started going down, but he was able to talk about getting rid of graffiti on the subway. It was lucky to have this access to people. And then one guy I ran into randomly in a bar as a friend of a friend, Billy Gorta,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I met Billy Gor in Nottingham in the UK to, he was doing a tour about CompStat

Peter Moskos:

Did,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This is back in the late

Peter Moskos:

1990s. I cite his article just, it needs to be out there. Well, let me tell you this story. I don't know if you want to leave this in or not. I go to a Mets game with a friend and my friend Jordan says, oh, let's go to a bar on Sunnyside. My friend Heather is there. And so we go to this bar and she's with this guy, and Jordan goes, oh yeah, you two are cops. Which I always roll my eyes like, oh, now we're supposed to be playmates. I don't know. I say, well, I'm writing this book about CompStat. And he goes, oh, I invented CompStat. I'm going, who the hell is this blowhard? And that blowhard was Billy Gortat, but he did sort of, it wasn't a lie. And when I got the first copy of the book, I came over to my bar and I gave him the first copy, but he reopened his proverbial Rolodex to me. And I mean, he was there for all of it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

One of the things I was grateful for was even to be frank, just the opportunity to read the fucking thing, because I know that you really struggled to actually get this published.

Peter Moskos:

Yeah, I went through three publishers, the third and last being Oxford Press, who stepped up good, stepped up. I failed up on this thing. The first publisher I signed with was University of California Press, and that was because editor of my first book ran University of California Press. And he said, ah, I read it, it's great. And then he quit. And then suddenly I was told to cut 20% of my book. They didn't tell me which 20%, and it's a little hard to cut an oral history. There are other people's words, I can cut my own words, but I'm a little afraid to cut others. This is what they said, and you have to do justice by them and you have to do justice by 'em. And then I looked at their catalog and it was all abolished. Police, black Lives Matter. It's overtly hostile to police.

And I realized, oh, maybe they don't want me. I asked to be relieved of my contract. They very quickly said yes, because I saw trouble in the future of getting this book through the process there in any form that I would accept. And then Columbia Press was interested, but the anonymous peer reviews came in extremely favorable. And at that point the book should be rubber stamped by the board done. And instead, now again, it's their press. They can publish whoever they want, but the unethical part was they specifically asked for a critical review. They needed something negative so they could tell me to go fuck myself. And they got one I got two months later, and it wasn't a hit job, the review, it was just sad, some negative things in it, but they needed something negative. And I wasn't at the meeting, but the complaints I heard specifically were that I referred to the FALN, the Puerto Rican Arms Struggle for National Liberation for Puerto Rican independence. They bombed the France Tavern in the seventies, and I called it a terrorist bombing because it was, no, you can't call 'em a terrorist group. This is like in 10, 20 years not being able to call September 11th a terrorist attack. They blew up a bar, and I'm trying to present it of the era. The newspaper headlines are terrorist attack. They injured 75 people killed. I mean, just lobbed a bomb into lunchtime into a restaurant. Honestly, for all I know, maybe someone on the board was on the FALN because they've hired them,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But what else are you going to call it for

Peter Moskos:

Christ? It actually made the writing better. I used Arm struggle for national liberation. This is not the point of the book. I'll take the word terrorist out if that's what it takes. And Arm Struggle for National Liberation has a red fist in the air kind of theme.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But there's an interesting theme throughout all of this just about how editorial decisions can subtly and in very small ways, control change the author's voice, change the author's message and control what people are reading.

Peter Moskos:

I was asked why I didn't interview people who had been harmed by police. I'm like, well, because that's not my book. You've written that, but that book is

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Out. Lots of those books are

Peter Moskos:

Out. Lots of those books are out. And you know what? Some of 'em are even worth reading, but that's not my book.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We can have different books.

Peter Moskos:

And also it's not easy to get cops to talk to you. Honestly, you and I can do that, but most people can't. And that's my strength. So basically they got the negative review, and technically they did offer me a contract, but I would have to write a different book with different methods and a different conclusion. And it was a bad contract on top of that. And I said, L, after Columbia rejected my book, then I had to ask, do I go public with this? I did not want to be a rightwing cause celeb, I'm not rightwing nor is my book.

But at some point I got to get a published, so I had a thing in one student newspaper that talked about it. So at least it was out there. But I turned down a lot of interviews because at some point I didn't want to be seen as hard to work with. How are you going to get a contract if you're flagging off a press? Assume that now there must be two sides to the story. But I did get the word out there a little bit, and then I did get an agent out of it and got Oxford Press. So that all worked out well,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You got there in the end. But I feel like this is a story that's explained a lot about what's been happening in academia and academic publishing and scholarship generally over the last few years.

Peter Moskos:

And it's, it's been difficult being scholar. People don't want to improve policing. They want to be anti-policing. When I say that, of course, I don't mean everybody. And that to me is a litmus test. Also on any reform is are you trying to make policing better or are you just trying to keep throwing rocks at policing until you achieve your utopian goal of police abolition? Certainly the book is sympathetic to cops as people and to policing as a practice, but it's not a rah rah war story type of cop book either.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Did it sour how you feel about in a very progressive left-wing academic politics, the world, or you'd already soured.

Peter Moskos:

I was already soured. I mean, look, I can't get on the criminal justice PhD at my school. And then the department,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You can't teach in the program.

Peter Moskos:

No. Three times I've applied and I get rejected, and this is at John Jay College too. This is nuts. It is nuts. No reason is given, so I can only guess, but I suspected is because of my police background.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So that massive lurch of academia certainly felt like it took after the murder of George Floyd, a big massive lurch to the very far left, hasn't really abated, but it's still alive and well in some places.

Peter Moskos:

But it was alive and well in those places before 2020. I actually think the pendulum has swung back to where it was before in public. No one seriously takes police abolition seriously.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think the irony here is, as you say, you're not like myself. I don't consider myself to be right wing. I just apparently am not left wing enough.

Peter Moskos:

And I've noticed, I looked at my CV and where I published stuff and I mean maybe this is a fault of mine. My writing hasn't changed that much over 20 years, which I don't know if that reflects well on me, but I'm still basically playing the same music

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Hang around the middle politically.

Peter Moskos:

And I notice and I look at op-eds, that used to be the Washington Post and the New York Times and the Daily News and M-S-N-B-C appearances, and now it's the New York Post and the Wall Street Journal. And I'm thinking that's interesting. And I wrote a book called inef Defensive Flogging and Cop in the Hood is about policing. And I got a lot of press from sort of left of center media outlets and magazines, and that hasn't happened yet for this and that. I find it a little discouraging.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's as if this progressive left wing of just decided to abandon policing. And it may be, I think it is, you say they don't want better policing, they just want to be able to keep beating policing with a stick.

Peter Moskos:

And they're afraid of good policing because it shows that policing works. But good policing scares them more than bad policing. Bad policing is the scandal they can point to and say, this is the problem. Look, you're one of the few people that actually does real policing experiments and it works. And you can show them they don't like that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No, and I think they make a tidy living. And that's the whole thing is to say that policing is bad. Policing is bad. There are organizations often with policing in the title. I just don't see them actually improving policing. It's all about constraining policing.

Peter Moskos:

It's one of those NYU by any chance.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But if there was actually any evidence they were about helping police get better, I would be more supportive. But it's always about policies that constrain the activities, police not help them learn and be better at the job.

Peter Moskos:

And to some extent, it's a shame because there are a lot of smart and good people at some of those organizations, and they could improve policing if it wasn't always constantly in the less policing direction. Because you and I both know that policing ain't perfect. And sometimes you need voices from the outside to say, Hey, look at what you're doing here. That's not right. Yeah, for sure. But the problem is it's rooted in ideology and not incremental improvement,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And in the end, it's the communities that suffer.

Peter Moskos:

Let me ask you a question, Jerry. So how did you feel during 2020 as a academic, as a researcher?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Obviously disheartened. I mean, first of all, the murder of George Floyd is terrible, but I think what was really disheartening is the damage it did to a profession where there are some just incredibly dedicated, caring professionals who want to improve the business. Think about they think about policing in their spare time, listen to podcasts, they read books like yours and the damage it did to them during that process.

Peter Moskos:

Well, that's about them. I said, did you feel that your whole career was suddenly a waste? As I started thinking, not about your career, mind you, but about my career for 20 years we had in our own little way, they're about 20 of us out there in the academic world trying to make policing better. It's a very small club, and I like to think in a small way, we were making policing better. Crime was going down, use of force was going down, incarceration was going down, everything was moving, was trending. And then cops murdered a man in Minnesota. And somehow we decided we had to break the whole system down. But to go from here's how we can make this little part of policing better in our little corner of the policing world to saying, guys, actually we do need police in America. I spent 20 years to get to this point. My God, it was

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Demoralizing. I'm the same. I didn't really want to make this about me. But yes, there were a couple of years where I was sort of thinking, is this it? Yeah, what have we done this for? That's right, because you don't enter academia for the money, as you say, it's a very small group of people.

Peter Moskos:

Everyone knows we do it for the glamor and

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Fame. Oh God, I think quite a lot of us were demoralized and disheartened. It takes so long to build up those relationships and to actually make progress, to run studies, to find out what works, incremental, slow, incremental progress, and then just watch people come in from the outside and burn it all to the ground.

Peter Moskos:

And there's been a weird amnesia I find now in 2025 where on Twitter, blue sky, people are like, well, defund never happened. I'm like, oh no, you don't, motherfucker. Do not tell me. That is the true definition of gaslighting to tell me's own file. What happened did not happen. No, it did not happen everywhere. No, it did not even save money. But oh, it happened. I mean, my master's program got defunded. I personally got defunded from defund

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And just the whole mindset, the whole ethos was around that regardless of whether you can actually show a budget line change,

Peter Moskos:

Though you can

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In many places in la,

Peter Moskos:

Seattle, New York and other places,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And even just frozen budgets with inflation is going to be essentially a budget cut.

Peter Moskos:

And I also don't think a lot of people realize, look, if we decide we want to cut the police budget, we could do so in a rational way with a five-year plan. But 90 plus percent of the budget goes to labor. 10% may not sound like much in dire times, but if you cut much more than that, you have to start laying off cops. And that's the last thing the police department will do. So everything else gets cut. Recruitment, training, education, vehicle purchase, everything,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

All the stuff that actually generates good policing.

Peter Moskos:

And it's that last fringe of that budget that matters. Do you feel that's gone away now? I do overall crime. I don't like saying crime is down nationwide, even though it is because it's not down everywhere, and it's not something magic. It's not the tide. It's because individual departments, they might be doing the same thing, but they're working and together with prosecution, collaborating with other agencies, they're incarcerating, violent, repeat offenders. You put all that together and you get a crime reduction. And so leaving aside the abolitionist fringe, when people see that it's working, I think they're more sympathetic. And there have been improvements, I think, in policing in terms of, I mean, some of it's from body, some of it's from 2020 even. That's the idea that you can't get away with everything. But

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you think we'll survive the next egregious use of force that's bound to happen at some point somewhere in the country?

Peter Moskos:

I think we will. I think it's happened and we don't even know about it because we've moved on to other issues. Now, if it's about Palestine, it'll be about something else. I do think there is a certain protest of the day kind of thing. Yeah, I mean, cops are shooting as many people as they used to.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, that hasn't really changed.

Peter Moskos:

And I'm sure some of them are still bad. Not many, of course, but it never was that many. There might have also a thing when body cameras came out. I think a lot of people were shocked to see it for the first time. A term I don't like using, but to see police violence for the first time, maybe some desensitation,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, it's a little like when people saw a video from the Vietnam War, it was the first time they'd ever really see war televised and live and on their screens every night in the night they news. And I think it shocks people when they're not exposed to reality, how the world actually is when they see a little glimpse of it. I mean, before all we had was the TV show

Peter Moskos:

Cops basically. And that I think has moved on or shifted or I don't know. It is very interesting to me how some incidents get traction and others. I mean, there almost always has to be a racial element, but even within that, some incidents get traction and some

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Don't. Well, you managed to get a quote from David Simon, the famed writer, Baltimore baby, off The

Peter Moskos:

Wire. He's been good to me. He's a mensch,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

A worthy read. He wrote about kill books.

Peter Moskos:

He wrote more than that. But that's the short version

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Back From The Brink by Peter sco. Well done on the book and thanks for spending some time with me. Hey,

Peter Moskos:

Pleasure. About

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Time. That was episode 91 of Reducing Crime recorded in October, 2025 in New York City. Reducingcrime.com has episode transcripts. And if you're an instructor, DM me for multiple choice questions for every episode. Subscribe to Spotify, SoundCloud, Apple, or wherever. Otherwise, you're going to miss out on great episodes just like this one.

Be safe and best of luck.