

#07 (GEOFF ALPERT)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm Jerry Ratcliffe with Reducing Crime, a podcast featuring interviews with influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers working to advance public safety. Geoff Alpert is professor at the University of South Carolina and a bit of a legend in the policing research community. We talk about getting research into the hands of the police and what students need to know to become a better policing scholar. Find out more at reducingcrime.com and on Twitter @_reducingcrime.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If you listened to episode six of this podcast with Wendy Stiver, you might know Geoff Alpert is one of the affectionately named weird uncles of the NIJ's Lead Scholar program. But Geoff is better known as a professor of criminology and criminal justice at the University of South Carolina. He's also a chief research advisor for the U.S. National Institute of Justice. He's taught at the FBI National Academy, the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center and the Senior Management Institute for Police, and is currently a federal monitor for the New Orleans Police Department. He testified to the president's task force on 21st century policing, and is a member of the International Association of Chiefs of Police Research Advisory Committee and Policy Center Advisory Group.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

For the past 30 years, his research interests have included police use of force, emergency driving and the linkages between researchers and practitioners, something we touch on in this podcast. Though we ran into a couple of audio issues just at the beginning, I still found out from him what it is like watching baseball through a straw and what he thinks is the best thing that's happened to policing in generations. The games become all about publishing. I don't blame the cops for looking at academia and being cynical about it.

Geoff Alpert:

No, I think police departments don't gain much from research that we do because we don't present it well. We don't explain what it means at a practical level and I think one of the biggest problems is we don't get rewarded for translating our criminological research. It's, you publish in police chief, which goes to everyone and you're laughed at, not academic. It's not this, it's not that. Impact factor because your friends cite you as opposed to having a real impact on

what's going on in the world. That's got to change. If it doesn't change, we just continue doing what we're doing with no goals, with no thinking about why we're doing it. We just publish to publish.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So, what we end up doing is we send a signal to our young scholars that it's more important to have a publication in the Bangladeshi Journal of Sheep Stealing and Criminology than it is to have some kind of an impact on the field.

Geoff Alpert:

Well, I thought your article in that journal was quite good.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, I've personally it a bunch of times, so my h-index is going through the roof on the strength of that.

Geoff Alpert:

How about your Kardashian index?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I've got to keep an eye on that, actually, I've got to lift my academic game. We mock people for the Kardashian index for having more Twitter followers than they have publications and there is something in that, but I can't mock people too much. At least they're having some outreach with police officers and they're reaching a community in trying to get a message across rather than just publishing in obscure journals and then bitching about how nobody listens to what they have to say.

Geoff Alpert:

Well, the world's changed. I think back in the 40s and 50s, the only outlets were the academic journals. I think that when we had police science, was it Criminology, Criminal Law and Police Science. That was probably the main journal that police officers or managers would look at because there was no other outlet. And then, we started getting some of the magazines, but because of the lack of rigor and the lack of science, it never became acceptable. And I think in today's world, you're right, half the journals aren't published in hard copy, they're on the internet. So, that shows you where people are going. And now with the information through Twitter and through other websites, and through podcasts, that's how we get our information and that's how people learn, but it's not rewarded. And I think that's the big issue we've got to figure out.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think the journals are publishing only electronically as a cost saving measure because they're still hiding that stuff behind paywalls. And I know that's driving cops crazy because the cops that are actually trying to engage with academia, we just make it so damn difficult to reach our stuff. The model is perfect for science and flawed for practitioners.

Geoff Alpert:

That's a good one. I don't disagree with you, that they are doing it for the money and not having to kill trees, but it also gets the police officers on the internet, it gets the police officers to a new way of communication that we haven't seen before. It's moving very quickly. So, there are other ways of disseminating information. We don't do it because we don't train our students to do it and shame on us. We don't do it because we don't get rewarded for it, shame on the administrators. So, what we do ends up being for us and not for the real world. To do academics for the sake of academics is one thing and I think there are fields that do that very well. I mean, I'm a sociologist, most sociologists-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm not going to hold that against you. You seem like a decent bloke, mate

Geoff Alpert:

... most sociology is just that, how many angels can fit on the end of a pin? They're fun methodological problems that we explore.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's naval staring, most of it.

Geoff Alpert:

Absolutely. But my point is in criminology and criminal justice, I hope that's a more applied field. That's why I got into it. And some of us have had careers doing that in spite of these barriers we're talking about.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

To get to the stage where you get to your phenomenally Gucci lifestyle that you've got now, which is helping the police, bouncing around the country, helping the lead scholars, their best up-and-coming police officers who are also becoming pracademics. You didn't just start doing that from the beginning. You had to work your way through the academic trenches in the traditional publications and research and grants and all that kind of stuff. Right?

Geoff Alpert:

Oh, absolutely. I had to publish in the top tier journals, I had to publish single authored articles. I had to use the most recent statistical procedures. And I don't think, at the time, I realized that was the means to an end. I think at the time that was what I was trained to do. Fortunately, I learned this was just the means to getting the ability to have impact.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So, do we need to change that now?

Geoff Alpert:

Well, I think we've got to have a way to judge the rigor in which we do our work and doing experiments seems to be the prize de-jour, which will last for a while. But I mean these experiments, to do them well, they take years. They're very complicated.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They're not the be-all and end-all because they have to be done in, often done in large departments to get enough experimental power and that doesn't support many of the smaller departments.

Geoff Alpert:

Oh, absolutely. Even if you combine smaller departments, then you have all sorts of different issues that come up. But I think my point is, that that's, what's being accepted today, that's what's being rewarded today. And they are complicated and those who do them well should be rewarded. My point is, we've got to have a way to judge the rigor with which we do our work. And right now publishing in these peer-reviewed, high quality journals is the only way that we see that happening, but it has to go broader. It has to be other ways of evaluating. Why do we continue to rely on these journals? It's because we always have. And instead of thinking through, what are other measures, what are other ways to reward faculty for doing things? We just rely on what we know best.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We do run into the risk then of having, essentially, Twitter Kardashians, people who are commenting on policing and perhaps influencing the field, who have got no academic rigor behind them. They've just got lots and lots of followers because they can say a few you outrageous things or have a little bit of insight every now and again, how do we find that balance between people who actually bring some rigor and science and value, as opposed to people who just have an opinion?

Geoff Alpert:

Well, I think we see a lot of, on Twitter, people commenting who have no idea. We see videos that are thrown up on YouTube that are snippets of events, that don't give a proper picture. One of my favorite comments is I was told, even the body worn camera is like watching baseball through a straw because you get to see a very small portion of the event. And how do we distinguish someone on Twitter or someone on a YouTube video that matters, compared to someone who's just got a vendetta? And I don't know how you evaluate that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's tough. You've got young police scholars and there are not that many of them around, available to do work, but it's difficult because you can't just start straight out of a PhD and go, "I'm just going to do an RCT." You've got to build relationships with police departments. They ethically worry about RCTs because we're randomizing treatment and yet ethically it's often the best thing to do, if you have no idea whether the treatment works or not, it's got to be one of the best ways to have a look at it, but you can't start doing that. I don't know any young scholars who've gone straight out of a PhD and run a big RCTs that are getting funded. So, it's really tough.

Geoff Alpert:

Well, I don't know any young scholars who've just come out of their degrees and actually had a good relationship with the police department, because it takes years. It takes a long time to gain the trust and confidence of not just the police chief, but the union. It takes a long time to get to know the right people, who give you access to the data and who are honest with you because you've got to be honest with them. And we see so many shortcuts being taken. We see so many times when the academics don't live up to their part of the bargain with the police department, and then the police department gets jaundiced about the next scholar who comes in and wants to do work. And why should they agree to go out on a limb for an academic when they've been burned?

Geoff Alpert:

So, it is a very difficult process and we don't teach our students well enough to do that. We allow students to download data and write their dissertations. We don't require them to go out and form a relationship, even to do a simple survey of whatever that interests them. It's just easier to download a dataset.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And that's going to get worse now because more and more agencies are putting their data online. Where you had to build a relationship and have an MOU, and now a lot of the time they're putting sufficient quality geo-located data online, in volume, but people have just stopped building relationships with police departments because they don't need them. And that's to the detriment of both.

Geoff Alpert:

Absolutely. Because you end up looking at numbers, which are important, but you lose context, which is more important. And you can evaluate and run your statistical cathedrals on these wonderful data, but you lose what they mean.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Statistical cathedrals?

Geoff Alpert:

On shifting sands and wobbly foundations.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Nice.

Geoff Alpert:

Unfortunately, I didn't make that up. That was from Paul Tappin in 1949, but it's still true. It's still so true. We're increasing our analytic ability and decreasing our contextual abilities.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We're also losing policing scholars. Where are the new policing scholars coming through? There are not that many places training them.

Geoff Alpert:

Well, my generation, unfortunately, most are either retired or some have died already, and it's sad, but I don't see the next-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm optimistic about you staying around in this field for another 20 years, because I've seen how you keep yourself well pickled.

Geoff Alpert:

Thank you, sir. But I think there are not enough of us who are committed to the practical application of policing research, we don't have enough students to train, to create the next generation to fill that gap because they're all taking shortcuts. And you don't blame them because that's how they're rewarded in the field.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Shortcuts?

Geoff Alpert:

By downloading a dataset, analyzing it, writing it up, getting it published and boom onto the next one, without any concern for real impact, except this impact factor that we're all judged on and it's a horrible measure of what we really do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you think the lead scholars are somewhat a bulwark against that?

Geoff Alpert:

I think the lead scholars are probably the best thing that's happened to policing in generations. They've been around, but they've not been identified. So, now we have this group that keeps growing, of identifying cops who are interested in evidence, who ask the question, "Why do we do it this way?" And actually go out and collect the data and make a decision. And I think that's so important because these are cops' full-time jobs, doing this work, and they out shine us.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They are a really innovative group of people and they're great fun to be around because they combine that wonderful essence of policing and academic interest. But I feel that that's a project where we've got policing coming to try and meet academia, and good on them for doing that, but I don't feel that we're making enough effort to reach out to them.

Geoff Alpert:

Well, it's easier for a cop who has developed an interest in improving the profession to do that through research, than for a researcher to go out and go to the academy or go do ride-alongs and learn about the profession, and that's where we fail because those of us who've been successful in having long-term relationships with police departments have spent hours, have spent years learning. I mean, I have several mentors who were police chiefs and who taught me about policing, not from reading books, not from reading anything, but from hanging out, from talking to them, from learning, just riding with officers, talking to them about what they do, why they do it and having from the top down from, again, back to union leaders, to officers, to mid-level, and then to administrators, learning about the profession.

Geoff Alpert:

And let me explain one quick story, because I started as a sociologist studying total institutions, prisons, and only started working with the police when, in Miami, I was approached by police chiefs who wanted an outsider to evaluate the response to the riots. And they wanted someone who was not a police researcher because they didn't want to, as they pointed out, retrain the person. And so, the person wouldn't have to unlearn the academics and would come with a clean slate.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That almost sounds like an indictment of policing research up until that point.

Geoff Alpert:

Well, I think they wanted someone who hadn't already developed attitudes for or against. They wanted someone who really had no experience in police research, and they found one. These police chiefs who wanted me to learn, before I looked at one use of force report, I was spending months riding with the officers, learning about what they do, understanding the context of policing. And then, I got to the data and I think that's a lost art.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. Because now we can do the reverse, we can download the data without ever getting in a police car, without ever sitting in a meeting with the police chief.

Geoff Alpert:

And well, that's a good point. I used to sit in these command meetings. I'd be sitting in the back, but being a fly on the wall when they're talking about things that are not public, they're talking about things that most people don't have the fortune to be part of and learning about why they do what they do. And then, being able to look at data and understand the context of that information, but it's not something you just develop overnight. These are long-term relationships that we don't invest in, our young students and young scholars don't invest that time, and if you don't invest in it, you lose a lot of information that you get from downloading data.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Where are the next group of police chiefs, that have that insight, coming from in terms of understanding the value of research to what they do?

Geoff Alpert:

Well, I think the LEADs program is a good identifier. I think a lot of these young police officers will rise to chief positions, but there's so many others out there that don't get to be a LEAD scholar, but think the way the LEAD scholars do. And I hope, I think, the future of policing is in their hands. Otherwise, we just keep doing things the way we've done them because we've done them that way. Instead of thinking through why do we do it? But hopefully in medium-sized departments, we're going to get officers who understand to ask the right questions.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do we need to think about changing the promotion systems to make that happen?

Geoff Alpert:

Well, that's a whole different question. I mean, departments have promotional systems that vary greatly. Some do assessment centers where they're role playing and you're seeing how they act and how they think, others have tabletop exercises, and some have multiple choice exams.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. Well, we were talking to Mike Newman from Queensland Police and it sounds like they have a multi-day war of attrition. I mean, you get promoted just by going through the whole process.

Geoff Alpert:

Well, in Queensland, they have an outside group that does the promotions. The police department doesn't own it and kind of like civil service for an entrance exam, which is horrible. In most departments, the entrance exams, the cops don't even know what's on it. So, they're getting a group of people who pass the test and they don't even know the questions are, I don't get that. Except the city wants to own it and keep it away from the police department. They don't, either, trust the police department or they want to keep it as their own for some other reason, but it's a horrible way to run a business.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What would be the ideal system that you would design?

Geoff Alpert:

For recruiting or for-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Promotion.

Geoff Alpert:

For promotion. Oh, I think assessment centers. I think you have to have a series of observations, watching someone respond, watching someone think, watching someone understand the issues and know how to respond or know where to get the information.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's very different because it seems to me as you go further and further up in the promotion system in policing, the urgency of the decisions becomes less frequent.

Geoff Alpert:

Oh, absolutely. There are ways to get information as opposed to on the street where you have to ... We don't like split-second decision making, but it still occurs, where at the chief level you have time to reflect. You have time to think and ask, and hopefully we're getting people who will do that. And again, I get back to the LEAD scholars, because I think each and every one of them, and hopefully thousands of others out there who think that way, do exactly that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's you need to push more the slow thinking side of things, which sounds derogatory if you're not aware of the fast thinking, slow thinking discussions that take place.

Geoff Alpert:

Again, one of my mentors always used to tell me, "You want to react with your mind and not your fists." Because you've got to think through things. You've got to think ... Even on a street encounter, how does this encounter end well, for both of us? It's a win-win, because if it's not, then we're going to be fighting. And what's happening in today's world, which is really interesting, is we're seeing a lot of people fighting, not to just get away, the way they used to, but fighting because they want to fight. And that takes the fighting, the street fighting, up to a whole new level.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You talked about mentors being valuable to you. How do we mentor the new policing scholars for the new world?

Geoff Alpert:

We've got to develop a new paradigm for that because we're not doing well. We're still allowing these young people to take shortcut. We're not teaching them well enough or we're not convincing them. They're getting pressure from other people to do things, to give them this instant gratification. "I'll get my dissertation done quickly. I'll get this article published quickly." And I know you and I can look back on some of the stuff we did a few years ago and say, "Oh my God, how did that really happen?" And that's what we're seeing-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

More frequently than I care to think about. Yeah.

Geoff Alpert:

Well, even yours from yesterday. But I think we've got to instill in them, this is a long-term process. This is like any other business, you've got to invest in the front end to produce at the backend. You asked me early on today about where I've gotten wasn't overnight, and I look back on the investment I made early on in my career and it was painstaking, but worth it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And it's paid out in dividends, I mean, you're still having a big impact on the field.

Geoff Alpert:

Well, I appreciate that, but it's true.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. Yeah. Who likes to fly in the face of public, right?

Geoff Alpert:

I worry about the next generation of police researchers. I'm afraid that more than the police officers themselves, who realize that it's a long haul and that to get where they want to go takes time, and they've got to learn certain skills, our students take more shortcuts than we should allow them. But it's a tough haul because how do we convince them to take extra time, to go out instead of going partying or doing what kids do these days? To go out and ride around with police, to try to get into an agency and learn how it works, learn the mechanics, learn the organizational structure. It's tough but that's our job and we've really got to work harder at it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. And this model of frequency of publication over quality of publication is certainly driving a chunk of that.

Geoff Alpert:

Oh, absolutely. And it used to be, when we would see young assistant professors come apply for jobs, maybe they'd have one or two articles.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's not going to fly nowadays.

Geoff Alpert:

Well, no. And the problem there is, again, most of these are articles that in a few years, they're going to take off their resumes if they're smart, but they've got to impress the committee and show that they can do it. And most of the work's done by their committee members or by their main professor, their mentors. And they're put on there because it's their

project, but it's not their work, and even if it is their work, it's probably not of the quality that they're going to be proud of in five or 10 years.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You started off as a sociologist. I started off, at least my academic career after I was a police officer, as a geographer. And I felt that those things give us some insight into the business from a different perspective, which is helpful. Is there an issue with how now we've just got criminal justice departments that are taking people who are criminal justice undergraduates and criminal justice masters, and now criminal justice PhDs, to work in criminal justice departments, are we losing some different perspectives?

Geoff Alpert:

Well, I think so, as a sociologist I was forced to take multiple theory classes. I was forced to take theory construction classes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You can do classes in theory construction?

Geoff Alpert:

Absolutely. Absolutely. Stanford has a whole line of thinking about how you construct theories and how you deconstruct theories, and we were steeped in that. At South Carolina, we have a sociology class I make my students take in theory construction. So, I think we lose, we get so focused on the minutia of criminal justice, that we lose the bigger picture. And I think as a researcher, we don't even know what questions to ask unless we have that bigger, broader background. My work in graduate schools on total institutions, I never had a policing course and that's why I got hired to do the review in Metro Dade at the time of the riots, because I wasn't a policing person.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was surprisingly brave, I suppose, and insightful, of them at the time to make that hiring decision.

Geoff Alpert:

Where we were in the room and they asked people, "Who has done police research?" And those who put their hands up were asked to leave.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Wow.

Geoff Alpert:

So, it was a conscious decision they made to not have to retrain someone in how to think about the police.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Coming from Britain, I see that you can make a living trashing the police, as an academic scholar. It seems to be more prevalent in the UK than it is here, but that might just be the sphere of research that I view, but it's not uncommon.

Geoff Alpert:

Oh no. There's people today who have reputations and have published things that literally trash the police, and it makes it harder for young scholars to go have relationships with departments because they know what can happen. They know it can go bad.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And certainly their concerns working with academics are not unfounded.

Geoff Alpert:

No, absolutely. And we have to gain trust and it's not something you gain overnight. It's something you have to work on and invest in and we're not very good at it. It's almost like a dating relationship where you don't want to go in and say, "Hey, I've got a project I want to work on with you." Can you imagine that in a dating relationship? You've got to learn, "What are your likes? What are your dislikes? What kind of person are you?" And if you get along, then you can go to the next level.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

"And what are the things that you're worried about?"

Geoff Alpert:

Absolutely. "What are the rule?" I mean, riding along in a police car, the first thing I ask is, "If this thing goes bad, what do you want me to do? Do you want me to get out of the car? Do you want me to stay in the car?" That's his or her world and we're interfering and we want to do it with the least amount of problems.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think if more researchers built relationships, like the ones you're talking about, we would have more useful critiques of policing because I think people in policing do understand that there is value in a critique, but it's this distant hit and run critiques that piss them off. As opposed to informed, "This is how things might change for the better." My sense is that there's very little actual big changes in policing that have taken effect, when they've been imposed from afar on the outside, the changes in policing that seem to have stuck have been the ones that have been internally driven, maybe the consent decrees are an exception to that.

Geoff Alpert:

Well, we've talked about my work on pursuits. That was started by one of my mentors at Miami Dade saying, "This is a problem we're having in our department. What are the data show?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

An internal desire for change.

Geoff Alpert:

Absolutely. And bringing in an outsider to look at it. I think there is a lot of change that goes on, but again, with 18,000 departments, we still have some that are mired in the past. We still have some that chase people for a traffic offense, that chase them until the wheels fall off. We still have people dying. One person's going to die today in a pursuit, but there are other areas of uses of force. Some people go very quickly to hands-on law, other people talk more.

Geoff Alpert:

We know what works, but it still isn't being pushed in some departments. So, change is, unlike other countries like Australia and England, where there aren't as many police departments and it's easier to look at. It's easier to understand as opposed to here we're so fragmented. We end up with courts telling us what to do. And the perfect example is Armstrong versus Pinehurst. It's a taser case where the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals, it was judicial rulemaking, created a new level of force because they were so upset with the way the Pinehurst officers used the taser. Serious force is what they called it. I'm not sure what that means, but when you tase a tree hugger, basically, seven or eight times for not letting go, I don't blame them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. Well, what are the other options?

Geoff Alpert:

Wait till he has to go to the bathroom.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay.

Geoff Alpert:

He's going to get up. He's not a threat to anyone. He's just a tree hugger.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's a marvelous perspective on it. Is that going to have a big impact on policing?

Geoff Alpert:

Every police department in the Fourth Circuit had to change its policies. Absolutely, it was a huge change. We're seeing that in other areas of policing, where the courts are now making these decisions, which is horrible. We're starting to see the courts now relying on data. Sometimes doing it well, sometimes not doing it so well.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The difficulty with doing this by running it through the courts is that they're not set up to be experimental. They're not set up to be able to take the scientific methodology. They're not set up to be adaptive. They make a ruling and then it sticks, unless somebody overturns that. And that's a horribly rigid and inflexible approach to areas where we don't know what the right thing to do is.

Geoff Alpert:

Correct. And it ends up, in many cases, being the battle of the experts. We just had the attorney general, the other day, sign a document saying that, "Consent decrees will no longer exist under this current administration." I will make a prediction that while that's going to happen, we're going to start seeing police officers think that there's no accountability. You can't sue the department, the federal government won't step in. I'm going to make a prediction, we're going to see a lot more misconduct because of that appeal.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And do you think they'll overturn that?

Geoff Alpert:

Not this administration, but the next one probably. Consent decrees have their place. New Orleans, for example, is a real success story because of the consent decree.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And with 18,000 agencies, there are lots of agencies that we interact with, but they self-select into being innovative departments, interested in research, interested in learning, but there are loads of departments out there where people never attend conferences, they never attend meetings, they don't go to [IACP 00:29:18]. They never see the value of research and learning and development and they're still stuck in the dark ages.

Geoff Alpert:

That's true. Hopefully they're becoming fewer and fewer. Again, I'll go back to my relationship with now Miami Dade Police Department. I mean, I do some work down there now with children and even grandchildren of some of the people I worked with in the 80s, you've got to meet and get to know officers as they go through the ranks, to form these relationships.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What would you say is the biggest positive change?

Geoff Alpert:

Change in what?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Policing.

Geoff Alpert:

Oh, I think people asking the question, "Why?" I think we're seeing that far more often. We're looking at the balance, if you will, between government, the police, what they do and the rights of the public. And we're seeing them balancing, it's not just chase them till the wheels fall off because there are consequences. It's not just beat the crap out of them because there are consequences.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And what's the biggest, either, negative change that you've seen over the last, well, it's nearly 40 years, mate.

Geoff Alpert:

Thanks for reminding me.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, here to help. What's the biggest negative change, or if not negative, something that hasn't changed that you wish had changed?

Geoff Alpert:

Well, I think it's, some of these departments and administrators who are mired in the past, who don't want to change and who want to do things because that's the way they've always done them. And I think as long as that continues and we don't ask the right questions, we continue.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We were at a meeting at the national level a few months ago and it was interesting the back and forth that we had around training then, do you remember that?

Geoff Alpert:

Absolutely, because I was so disappointed in some of the comments of, "Curriculum had remained the same over decades." With the only answer being, "Because that's the way we've always done it." You would hope at the national level, we'd be asking the question, "Why? How can it improve? What are the outcomes we want from that training?" And to hear that, "We do it this way, we have the same traditions over decades, just because that's what we know, and that's what's worked in the past," is no way to run a business.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That sense of tradition is riddled throughout the whole business of policing, isn't it? Especially around training. The academy is old school cops frequently telling war stories, to some degrees, about what their experience is and perpetuating that sense of, "This is how we've always done it."

Geoff Alpert:

Absolutely correct. And I think the thing we haven't touched on yet is dosage, because we sit in a classroom sometimes for an hour, hour and a half, and half the students are falling asleep. It's no different in the Police Academy. We're learning through good research, shorter snippets, keep people's attention. Yet we still, even in academia, haven't changed our methods very much. So, it's on both sides. Young people going into police work these days are not the same as those who went into it 20, 30 years ago, many of whom have never been in a fight, many of whom never played sports and it's not your grandfather's police department. So, just because it's been done and even, "successfully," in the past, doesn't mean it shouldn't be changed.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The main aim of the academy is to make them defensible enough so that the new officers don't get the department sued. Beyond that, is the training effective?

Geoff Alpert:

I'm not sure we've done analysis of police academies to determine, other than not getting sued or not getting involved in some uses of force or citizen complaints, I'm not sure we've followed up enough on the academy graduates to see what they've learned and what they keep with them. Or is it something that, as many of our college students, just forget about after the test?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. Maybe that's the next area that we really need to focus some research on is.

Geoff Alpert:

I think the Alpert-Ratcliffe Police Academy is in the future.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, that's interesting you mentioned that because I see a lot of interesting work being done in the UK and it's had some teething problems, but I think as Ernest Hemingway said, "The first draft of anything is shit." And that's not a slur on the College of Policing, but that's just saying they've had some interesting teething problems just getting the message out. But I think it's fascinating and really useful that, in Britain, that they've developed a national College of Policing, that's something we need here, isn't it?

Geoff Alpert:

Well, it's something that's been brought up, in fact, my colleague, Gary [Cordner 00:33:31] has been pushing that for quite a while. But how many departments are in the UK compared to America? Who's going to agree on a curriculum, even though I don't think anyone ... Well, I should say that BJS actually went out and collected data on certain topics being taught in the academies, but we have no idea of what the curricula are and we don't know the quality of what's being taught. And I can tell you, in most academies that I've looked at lately, they're old school, they haven't kept up with a lot of the new information. And you're right, they're just cops who haven't been on the street for a long time, talking about their war stories and the legal liability issues, as you mentioned. Well, how about this one? They spend so much time teaching officers to use a firearm, which is necessary, but not sufficient. They spend so much time teaching officers to do that task, that statistically they will never do, compared to the communication tasks that they do every day.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The last time I was in the training facility in Philadelphia, I was talking to one of the instructors, and he was telling me that in their scenario training, they've now developed scenario training such as every single scenario has a potential solution. That if you do the right things, you do not end up having to use your firearm. That felt like a positive change.

Geoff Alpert:

Absolutely. Does it work?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's the great question. Isn't it? Yeah. I think police academies are, like universities, are almost this bastion of untested, unsupervised, it's a free-for-all, really, isn't it?

Geoff Alpert:

Yeah. That's an area that is under researched. And again, that's our goal, we need to get students interested to take that on as dissertation topics. We're still using hiring tests that were developed in the 80s to screen out the loonies. We still haven't figured out how to-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Sometimes unsuccessfully.

Geoff Alpert:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The same with academia though, right?

Geoff Alpert:

Yeah. But we haven't figured out a test to screen in the appropriate candidates because we're not sure what the appropriate candidate is.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. Anything else you want to talk about?

Geoff Alpert:

Not in public.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. I know that feeling. We better do that over a beer. Geoff, always been a pleasure, mate.

Geoff Alpert:

Thank you, sir.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Cheers. You've been listening to episode seven of Reducing Crime, recorded in November, 2018. You can find more podcasts like this at reducingcrime.com or wherever you found this. New podcast are announced on Twitter @_reducingcrime. Don't forget the underscore. Be safe and best of luck.