

## #10 (GEOFF BARNES)

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### Jerry Ratcliffe:

Jerry Ratcliffe here with reducing crime, a podcast featuring influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

Geoff Barnes is the director of criminology for the Western Australia police force. He's also worked in the US and at Cambridge University. Our chat includes promoting evidence-based policing and the role of senior leadership in making that vision sustainable. Find out more in this episode at [reducingcrime.com](http://reducingcrime.com) and on Twitter @\_ReducingCrime.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

Geoff Barnes is the first ever director of criminology for the Western Australia police force, where he leads the agency's office of applied criminology. He's also an affiliated lecturer in evidence-based policing at the University of Cambridge, supervising graduate students in the Police Executive Program. He's led and participated in multiple policing randomized controlled trials. And his research interests also include the use of restorative justice and cognitive behavioral therapy with criminal offenders and the connections between criminal justice involvement and mortality. He earned his PhD in criminology from the University of Maryland and was elected a fellow of the Academy of Experimental Criminology in 2011.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

Unlike my other podcasts, this one was recorded in a South Philadelphia diner. I've edited out the background noise as much as I can because, well, let's face it, too much Spandau Ballet is a breach of the Geneva Convention. But in between the coffee and waffles, we talk about how not to do a literature review, the relationship between opinion-based policing and shoulder jewelry, and one way a police chief can make a huge difference in policing in just 90 seconds a year.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

See, this is my kind of place. I should do more of these in diners like this. This is a classic South Philly diner.

### Geoff Barnes:

Yes, it is.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

A pile of food that doesn't cost very much and has got about enough calories to invade Moscow.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Yeah, exactly.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You only get coffee. Yeah. I remember an Australian comic I saw a few years ago saying, "We should just charge by the syllable. If you want tea, 50 cents. If you want coffee, it's a dollar, 50 cents a syllable. But if you [inaudible 00:02:12] that foofy shit with caramel drizzle and low fat, skinny, whatever from Starbucks, you need to bring a checkbook." And this place just does coffee.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Coffee, yeah. You can't get waffles anywhere in Australia.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You can't get waffles, yeah. And everybody here calls you hon.

**Geoff Barnes:**

That's more a Baltimore thing. Yeah. You got to go down there and watch the Orioles play down there and 33rd street.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

All right. I'm definitely editing out you try to do your best Baltimore accent. That isn't happening. I don't know where you want to start. Do you want to start in Cambridge?

**Geoff Barnes:**

Cambridge might be a good place to start. I've been teaching there since 2013. And I know that because my twins were born about two months after I started. That certainly was an adventure.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

How was that different from criminology or criminal justice that you'd encountered before?

**Geoff Barnes:**

I remember just the revelation of being there in the first few years and just saying the access that these police officer students have to data that I would have loved to touch throughout all my career leading up to ... and suddenly realizing these guys can get ahold of everything.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Right. But they weren't using it.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Right. And very often, "Well, why are you even collecting this information?" "Well, because we feel that we should." Okay. Well putting it in the UK context, all right, so you go to a domestic, you've got this form. It's 28 to possibly more, possibly up to the 35 questions on it. You fill it out. Where's that go? "Well, we use it." "Okay. Where do you use it?" "Well, we use it in prosecution. For that case, we use it to assess the risk in that case the next day or the next couple of months when we're making decisions about what we're going to do for the victim or what we're going to do with the offender." But on a larger profile, "What is the profile of people ... How many people answer yes to this question 12?" "Oh, I have no idea."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Well, and also, I don't think they use it that often in those other things either.

**Geoff Barnes:**

I think that's dead right. And we have an added-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It just becomes something that you collect. Policing is great for collecting data, lousy for using it.

**Geoff Barnes:**

I'm working with one force in the UK at the moment on a risk forecasting model. And the big thing was, okay, well, we're forecasting the risk of the offender, repeating domestic abuse in either a seriously violent or just in general manner. Fine, we're going to do that. "Can we use the DASH questions to assess that?" "Well, the DASH that our officers see is actually a Microsoft word document that they fill out on the scene. Then when they hit save, it gets saved on the database as a Microsoft Word document."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Okay, good grief.

**Geoff Barnes:**

"And that's available to look at. If you want to pull up a PDF of it, you can look at it for making prosecution decisions or for assessing the risk in a multi-agency safeguarding hub or a multi-agency ... I don't even know what [inaudible 00:04:46] stands for anymore."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

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I think it's a multi-agency [inaudible 00:04:49] ... You know somebody got promoted on that, but nobody else has a flipping clue what it means-

**Geoff Barnes:**

Exactly.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

... what it does. Yeah.

**Geoff Barnes:**

But for looking at individual case-by-case information, sure, pull up that Microsoft Word document, pull up that PDF. For looking at global information, over 90,000 some cases, well, how do you even make use of this document?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That's a classic description of so many policing information systems. It's perfectly designed to tell you everything you need about an individual case and useless for aggregate business.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Right, yeah. In that case, they found some people that can write some code to go into those Microsoft Word documents, dive into them, and actually pull out individual answers from question to question to question. But now-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You didn't take the traditional approach of assigning it to a graduate student to do by hand?

**Geoff Barnes:**

There was some talk about using ... The policing version of that is, "Well, we have some operational officers who've gotten a little bit injured, can't be on the street. They're on light duties."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

The sick, the lame, and the walking dead.

**Geoff Barnes:**

They're sitting around. They're not doing anything. Surely, they wouldn't mind.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Can you open 19,000 Word documents, please, and pull out this one piece of information?

**Geoff Barnes:**

And go ahead and type it all into an Excel spreadsheet.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

What it like, then, teaching there? Because Larry Sherman set up a very different program at Cambridge than is traditional in most places.

**Geoff Barnes:**

It's a two-year program, very much aimed at bringing in mid-career, even sort of maybe just a little past mid-career police officers and saying, "Look, we're going to teach you a little bit about what we know about what works in policing, but the end game here is for you to write a thesis." I don't know how often that ever happens. I think the thesis is essential. I think the thesis is probably where 80% of the teaching in that program happens.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And yet that's something that in most master's programs nowadays, anywhere, it doesn't happen. It's so easy to get a master's degree just about anywhere without writing a thesis, without following an idea, write the way through setting a hypothesis, examining data, getting an answer and interpreting it. It just doesn't happen anymore.

**Geoff Barnes:**

No. And it's a central bit of focusing all your attention on one question. That's what really reveals things. And very often we'll have ... I didn't realize our data was this inaccessible.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You raise an interesting question or at least an issue in terms of how important that was for the learning taking place, to just stick with that one idea, because what I'm seeing is the reverse in so many places. Master's degrees are becoming easier and easier and easier, or it feels that way. Master's degrees are becoming this commodified ... We'll advertise it and pitch it to you because it's so easy to do. You just do a bunch of courses, a bunch of them that are online. If you have tenacity, enough to stick you way through it, you'll be fine. There isn't that process of going in depth into a subject now that you do with a thesis or a dissertation at the master's level.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And that's got to be a huge gap in terms of helping people understand evidence-based policing, because evidence-based policing isn't that one thing. It's going through a process of setting a question, having a hypothesis, getting data testing done.

**Geoff Barnes:**

And diving into the literature.

Speaker 3:

Here we go, guys.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Thank you.

Speaker 3:

Are we good? Do we need anything else? Silverware, napkins?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I could get some coffee, please.

Speaker 3:

You got it.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Thank you.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Actually, I'll get some, too.

Speaker 3:

You got it.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Wow. That's enormous. Like you say, there's a small Russian city that it could pretty much power itself.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah. "Papa, Papa. Look what washed up on the beach. The village is saved." No, we've just brought a waffle from a South Philly diner.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Two things that we do that nobody else would really be doing inside our police agency, first of all, really diving into the literature. Now, that doesn't mean that other people couldn't do this. Other people could do this. The difficult thing, of course, these days is getting access past the paywall, which, because I'm continuing my teaching at Cambridge, well, I have access through a copyright library in the United Kingdom. If something's published in English, chances are I can get access to it, which is a little bit frustrating in that sometimes I feel like, okay, well I just spent an hour and a half of my day and I downloaded 12 articles, each of which, of course, required a different login to the library.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Oh yes. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Let's not make it easy.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Yeah. That is something that we're able to at least go grab the literature, review it relatively quickly, look at it. And of course, the other thing we do that nobody else will be doing is actually testing one police practice against a different police practice.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

But those two pieces are very interesting. One of the major roadblocks to evidence-based learning is helping people get access to the literature, which begs the question in one of two ways. Either we allow people to have access to the journal articles, which means police services and police departments investing the cost necessary to make that happen even when it's only still being used by a tiny minority of offices. Or we invest in the time that those of us who do have access see as part of our job is to continually translate this literature for them, which is a huge uphill task considering the broad swathe of possibilities of areas where people need literature to help them make better decisions in policing

**Geoff Barnes:**

And reading that literature on your own, trying to come to terms with what it's telling you, recognizing whatever problems it presents. We were talking a bit about the thesis, but the other thing Cambridge program has is what's called SA4. The whole point of it is here's some bits of literature that we know there are problems in these particular studies. Go in there, read it, but you need to tell us what were the problems with internal validity? What was the problem with external validity? Did it actually measure what it purported to measure?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I'm teaching an online evidence-based policing class. And I assigned an assignment where students went and found three pieces of academic literature on a subject of their choice, but they had to tell me and explain and justify where on the, essentially, my equivalent to the Maryland scale, each study was. And what I found was actually, they do a really good job of that. I thought it might be a bridge too far, but they did an excellent job and that my students really stepped up.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Students tend to do a good job with this, but it is that liberating moment in your education of realizing that just because something's published doesn't mean it's good.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Right. That's the key part. That's the part that I think my students found amazing because they've been trained as academia is this and you believe the literature, all that kind of stuff. And now we're giving them exposure to the idea,

"Some of this stuff kind of sucks." I think that's a key part to starting to dispel the myth about academia, is helping people understand it's not perfect.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I think the other piece that either it's good or it's bad, or what we often find, I think, in the policing literature, it's as good as could be possible under the circumstances because you can never set things up perfectly, which doesn't mean that's a critique of the researchers. It just means that what that is is saying, look, you have these circumstances, you maybe had a natural experiment. You couldn't do any randomization or this is just the best that could be done under the circumstances. And that's okay because it lets the students see how to do it better. It's great that that assignment is being run.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Especially these days, journals are more of a business than they've ever been. They need to fill those pages just as much. I get stuff for peer review that you just read it and I say, "Okay, well, why does the world need this?" But the world doesn't need it. The journal needs it. They need to fill those pages. They need to get something out there.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

But do you also find it helps the students think about the project that they're going to do?

**Geoff Barnes:**

I think so. As you move into a thesis, the reality is that every literature review should end with the same story, should end with, well, other people might have looked at what I'm looking at, but nobody's ever done it exactly the way that I'm about to do it. Okay. Well, that's great. But that means you have to be able to identify that gap, to be able to say, "Okay, well actually there is a whole here."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And the very simple approach is to look at the literature and say, "Well, this is what it says," which is terrible.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Which is terrible.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

What doesn't it say?

**Geoff Barnes:**

Right. And I'm sure both of us have read student literature reviews, which are, "Let me go through the 17 things that have been written on this and just go from one to the next, to the next, to the next and tell you the same seven things about each one of them" so that by the time you're on the fifth one, you have no memory at all of what the first one is.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Exactly.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Well, no, you need to tell us a story, find things that have been missing throughout a number of different studies and then say, "Okay, well these five studies all looked at this, but they didn't use randomization."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Knowing some of the literature and knowing a bit about the field of policing, if somebody says, "Give me some ideas on things that we could do research," I need to absorb oxygen from the pores of my skin to maintain a continuous flow of talking about all the areas that need research. But when you speak to police officers who are not experienced in evidence-base policing and open their eyes to, "Have you ever thought about doing things differently?" I think it kind of stuns them that they go, "Oh, right."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I taught a commander's course on reducing crime just in the last few days, and I was talking about roll call. Roll call is such a simple thing, but everybody thinks they're doing it the right way. And then when you ask them how they're doing it, some people are standing up, some people are sitting down, some people have a sergeant standing behind a podium, some people are sitting around a table having a conversation, some people are reading out a list of officer safety things, some people are reading out long lists of where cars have been stolen in the last 24 hours for no apparent reason as far as I can tell.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

There's even a lack of clarity around the purpose of roll call. And so we have this fundamental thing that just about every single police department does, for every single shift, for every single day. We've no idea how to do it, or at least no agreement.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Probably nobody has a wider geographic diversity than Western Australia. I go into the beginnings of shifts and you go from district to district and sub-district to subdistrict and the disparity is enormous.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And nobody's going to change because they're doing it the right way.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Possibly until a new officer in charge comes in and says, "Look, I'm now the senior sergeant. This is the way I've done it in my three or four postings throughout my career, so we're just going to do it this way." And everybody's like, Okay, sarge. Yeah, boss, we'll do that." But having done that, how do you know you're doing it? How do you know you're

communicating things? You have seen some stations where basically all that information's already written on the whiteboard. You read it as you walked in. We're small enough that we don't really need to meet. There's only a few of us working here. We're pretty rural to, well, there's 70 of us and if we don't meet, nobody will ever be on the same page. Sometimes, even if we do meet, nobody will be on the same page.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Your work in Western Australia now, you're doing a whole bunch of things that I think are really interesting. You've got a reading club for journal articles.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Every Friday, we do that whole SA4 thing where we get together and we pretend we're reviewer number two. I like to think that when I do a peer review, they always give me number two.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Write back to the journal editor, "Thank you for asking me to review this article. You didn't ask me to be reviewer two, but I'm going to be reviewed two anyway." Yeah.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Exactly. But it's really funny because what we do is we pass it around and [inaudible 00:15:37]. Every week, one person on the team gets to pick which article we're going to review. They email it out to everybody. The understanding is that not everybody may have time to read it. There'll be a brief presentation on what it says. And then we will sit there and start tearing it apart. And there've been a number of things where you read it and you sort of say, "Well, but we picked this because we thought the title looked great. The abstract looked great." And then when you actually got to the findings, we realized, "Well, they don't have any findings to back up what we thought this was about."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Right. Yes. The title was click bait.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Well, yeah, basically it was the academic version of click bait. We keep finding a number of things on that. You have to be pretty choosy about what you pick.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Are you aware that [inaudible 00:16:20] program that scans a lot of literature and every week sends out basically a brief summary of all the academic literature that's been published across 40 or 50 journals. It's really great work. I skim through that every week and look through every single title and frequently find that there isn't a single thing I want to click on and follow up on.

**Geoff Barnes:**

For our team, relatively small team of researchers embedded within a police agency, to us, it's somewhat heartening at times. You say, "Well, look, if this stuff is actually getting published, our little thing where we've gone into our data and we've tried to estimate the optimal number of random breath tests to do in our population and at what point does that meet with the costs derived from fatal and serious accidents, that's something that actually does have a home. This stuff, which is just guessing at it, it didn't have access to all our data. Well, if that can get published, well, then surely, this more detailed analysis we've done with our data ...

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You're finding it's a confidence-building thing for the officers that are working in the team?

**Geoff Barnes:**

Absolutely.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

How is the traction with the team, with the wider police department? I had a nice interview with ... Podcast number two is an interview with Mike Newman from Queensland police talking about what they were doing to try and spread the evidence-based policing message. How are things going in Western Australia?

**Geoff Barnes:**

We almost have polar opposite approaches. One of the things they've done is they've said, "Okay, we're going to take three inspectors, about that rank. We're going to embed them in universities that are around Brisbane. And that way, they'll be interacting the academics." Good idea. We've gone the other way and said, "Let's bring in one and only one academic, myself, put that person in the agency." Now the advantage there ... I've said this to everyone in the agency. I've said 90% of my job essentially amounts to going to meetings where you don't really know that they're going to get to it or not, but if you can be in the room when an idea first gets discussed, "Oh, we think we're going to do this." "Oh, wait, wait. Before we do it, guys, I got an idea. Let's set this up so that we can actually find out this new thing we're going to do, whether it works better than what we're already doing."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Let's pilot it.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Yeah. And sometimes it doesn't have to be enormously complicated, but you have to be in that room when it first gets mentioned, because if you are in the room the second time they get discussed with it, it's, "Well, yeah, but we've already decided how we're going to do it. We formed a team at that one meeting. We went out. We've designed how it's going to be implemented. You coming in now and saying, "Well, I want to randomly assign this or maybe don't go into this town or I'm going to use this town." Well, no, we're going to do something else over there."

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

I saw a great analysis and it may have been him that said it, but the great English football player, Gary Lineker once said, "How do you score so many goals?" He scored a lot of goals up close because whenever his team got the ball and the winger was running up the side of the pitch, he would run straight for the penalty area and the six yard box. And nine times out of 10, the ball wouldn't end up being delivered there. But every time they got the ball, that's where he was heading, because you just had to be there enough times. He was going to be successful in scoring goals because that's where you score goals from. And that was his approach.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

And that sounds like the same kind of thing, which is just keep going to meetings, keep being around. And eventually, there'll be opportunities to run interesting studies and experiments and move policing forward. It sounds like the same thing.

### Geoff Barnes:

I think my biggest moment of pride in two years, missed the meeting, but an assistant commissioners meeting with a group that wants to do something a little bit different in one of our suburban courts. This kind of court processing was available in Central Perth. But if you were from the one of the more distant suburbs of Perth, you'd have to find transportation all the way in there, so could we implement this in a small number of mostly Aboriginal families in this one part of suburban Perth? The thing was, well, we were just going to get started with it. We think we're only going to do it in maybe 10 or 20 families. We'll see how it goes. If it goes well, then we'll try to ramp it up.

### Geoff Barnes:

He said, "You would have been so proud of me because I said, "No, let's not do it in 10 to 20. Let's do it in 20 to 40, but only 10 to 20 are actually going to get it. The other will be sitting out as a control group."

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

Excellent.

### Geoff Barnes:

And that was ... Okay, something I'm saying is actually landing. It's actually changing things.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

Hold on a second. I knew. She's walking past with the pile of ice. Why do we have ice machines as she's wandering around with buckets of ice in the kitchen. I have no idea what's going on.

### Geoff Barnes:

This is part and parcel of growing up where I grew up, York, Pennsylvania, famed for air conditioning and refrigeration. When I actually got out into the Navy, they make the auxiliary machinery officer, which basically is any bit of machinery

that doesn't make the pointy end go through the waves is yours, including all the air conditioning and refrigeration on board. I'm in this space with these two enormous air conditioning plants. Where were they made? Well, my hometown.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Really?

**Geoff Barnes:**

In fact, my neighbor designed them. What were we talking about?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Oh, here we go. One of the vulnerabilities of new initiatives like evidence-based policing is it tends to be driven by a few champions and often doesn't survive changes in regime and policing when a new police chief comes in or a new team come in. Are we reaching the stage, do you think, in some departments or some police services like Western Australia where it can survive regime change?

**Geoff Barnes:**

It's an enormously difficult challenge. I think I saw Larry Sherman giving a presentation last October, I think. And he was praising West Mids, saying to his mind, this may be one of the only four instances in which the chief officer changed and evidence-based policing didn't disappear. We certainly suffer in policing with the notion of, well, if the last guy did it, chances are he shouldn't be doing it.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Well, I'm not going to get any kudos because it's not a new initiative. Therefore, I'm going to start my own thing.

**Geoff Barnes:**

I remember seeing a deputy commissioner of NWA talk to a bunch of people we brought in to do an experimental workshop, can we design an experiment that you could test in your own operational practice? And he very eloquently put it as, he says, "Look, we have two options. We can do opinion-based policing. And opinion-based policing, I'm actually really cool with that because I've got more shoulder jewelry than any of the rest of you. When it comes time for opinion-based policing, my opinion will matter a lot more than all the rest of you. We can do that. Or we can do evidence-based policing. And then my shoulder jewelry doesn't matter as much anymore. If you come up with a good idea, you develop a test of it, you come up with evidence, you can show us it works, I don't care if you're a first class constable or whether you're an inspector or whether you're a commander or whether you're an assistant commissioner. All of us can apply evidence to what we do. And if you can demonstrate that in a convincing way, now your idea can win out over the top."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That's a great sell.

## Geoff Barnes:

Yep. You think about it, a lot of people have gone through their entire career waiting for that moment when their opinion actually began to matter. And the other mistake we make an evidence-based policing is we forget that whenever we say, "Hey, here's a new idea. Let's test it." Now what we're actually saying is let's test it. And we think we're saying that because those are the words we're using. What's heard on the other side is, "Everything you've been doing up til now is probably wrong. I have a new idea. You idiots didn't see it. And now I'm going to do this and we're going to do this test. And at the end, I'm going to show that it works. And when it does, I'm going to show how stupid the rest of you were," because that cycle of the new boss coming in and coming ... Well, okay. The new boss' new ideas are always good ones. Everything's doomed to succeed.

## Jerry Ratcliffe:

Isn't that the nature of human nature in so many regards? What I say is not what you hear. And that's what with from one rank to another, with a new boss to another, from an academic to a practitioner. And when the practitioner tries to explain that back again, what they say, the academic doesn't hear. Making sense of what I say is such a struggle for all of us in all of these relationships around this area.

## Geoff Barnes:

That's absolutely right. Inherently, there is this belief that, well, we wouldn't be doing something new if it wasn't better. Of course, in an academic sense, well, no, we do new things in drug research. We test new compounds all the time that may not be better, may have worst side effects, may not actually have an active effect on the disease that we're trying to alleviate. We recognize that a lot of the new things we try, aren't going to work. That's why we try them. If they don't work, then we move on to something else.

## Geoff Barnes:

But that's not part of the normal human condition in any industry. It's not just policing. You certainly have that background of, "Okay, well, you wouldn't be testing this if you weren't so ... You think you know everything." It's like, "Well, no. Actually I'm testing this because I don't. I have no idea whether this is going to be good or bad."

## Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think finding a way to refine that pitch is going to be huge for pracademics working with police organizations and also academic working internally. As you know, with the American Society of Evidence-Based Policing conferences has a lot of people who are relatively new to the idea. It's a struggle for them finding traction. That's even the same for established pracademics ... are still struggling within their agency to overcome that issue. It's not just from academic ... It's, "I will listen to you, but you have to be a cop and you have to be the right kind of cop."

## Geoff Barnes:

There is that element to it as well. You'd ask about how's Queensland doing it? How's WA doing it?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Have you thought [inaudible 00:25:21] the best way of doing it, having seen these different approaches?

**Geoff Barnes:**

It's difficult because it's not just what the academic says. It's also what people say about what the academic says, where the academic may not be around when they're saying it, if that doesn't get too confusing. We did a really, really good hotspots experiment in a suburb of Perth that I'm enormously proud of. And every day, we would randomly assign three spots to get patrolled by cars and three spots to get patrolled by bicycles. About halfway through there, we went down to ... and said, "Okay, well sometimes we don't get the patrols we're getting." And one of the people working on this proudly said, "But we're doing what you asked. You give us three spots every day, we pick the two we want to go to, and we go to them." And there's this long pregnant pause in the room. It's like, "No, we send you three spots because we want you to go to all three spots." "No, no, no. I was told we only had to do two out of the three." Okay. That was never a thing. We know we never said that, but somewhere that got passed along.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Because it gets filtered down through ranks and this whole notion that we said at headquarters when we explained the experiment there, and then we rely on the police service to disseminate what everybody should be doing, seems to becoming a bit of a floor in this process. I think academics or the people who set the research up really need to be going out as much as possible, getting straight to the people who are going to implement it, straight down to the sergeants.

**Geoff Barnes:**

And absolutely. Early in my graduate school career, I was working with Larry Sherman and Larry said, "No, we absolutely need somebody in this police station every day." Well, I was a graduate student, so that ended up being me and I hated it, but I did it. I was like, "What am I doing here? This is silly." Later on, there I am as a professor, now I've got a graduate student. We're doing an experiment at probation. And I'm saying, "You need to be there at least three times." "Well, this is silly. Nobody ever talks to me. The questions never come up." I was like, "Yeah, but just you being there forces them to stick with what was randomly assigned." And at the end of it, both of us agreed that was essential.

**Geoff Barnes:**

I roll into Western Australia. We start up this hotspots experiment. I push a little bit. We probably need to get somebody down there, but it's a 40 minute drive away from headquarters and it's really a pain to get to, and do we really need somebody? And we didn't do it. And that's how you end up with the, "I thought we only had to go to two out of the three spots."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Is there a future for police-led experiments in evidence-based policing?

**Geoff Barnes:**

I think it's the only future, is police-led experiments. It is the only way to get to that central message of we're not testing this because we're convinced it works. We're testing it because we honestly don't know whether it works better or not. We're testing it because maybe it actually has some detrimental effects that we don't even know about.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

What's the role of academics to help them? Is there a role?

**Geoff Barnes:**

Well, there absolutely is. I got to Western Australia two years ago. They had done some experimentation here and there. They'd done one thing with the behavioral insights thing of giving people nudges. They had randomly assigned groups to get different treatments. But there's so many pitfalls in how random assignment works and what should happen. In this case, they wanted to send text messages to some drivers who weren't in a randomly assigned group, but of course, they didn't have mobile telephone numbers for everyone. What do we do with people that were randomly assigned to get a text message, but we don't have the mobile phone number so we can't send them a text message? And working with one of the local universities, the decision was, "Well, they can't be treated. Move them into the control group." Yeah, that wasn't the right call because of course, the people that don't have mobile telephone numbers tended to be older and-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

They weren't randomly selected.

**Geoff Barnes:**

They weren't randomly selected not to have a mobile phone number.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Exactly.

**Geoff Barnes:**

There were some fundamental things that led to them not having a mobile telephone number and then moving them into the control group made the control group now heavily biased in that direction. These little things, they seem obvious to people that have been doing random assignment for a long time, but you have to reach back to where you were when you first heard about this. When you first heard of the ridiculous notion that the people who don't get treated in a randomized trial need to be kept in the treatment group, even though they didn't get treated, and you think, "Well, wait a minute. Why would I do that?"

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Intention to treat.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Right. But the first time you heard about intention to treat, you probably thought that was madness.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Absolutely.

**Geoff Barnes:**

And as did I. If there's not somebody on the team who can say, "No, actually, guys, I'm really convinced that this is the way to go."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

We're 10 years down the line in evidence-base policing. We're all secure that evidence-based policing is business as normal. It's what police departments that we've been working with, big police departments are doing. How did we get there from where we are?

**Geoff Barnes:**

That's a huge premise. It is a challenging time. In 10 years time, everybody that's doing it now will have to have changed chief officer at least once. Some of the ones that have picked it up in that 10 years will have done it because a new chief came in and said, "Hey, this is the way I really want to go."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So like Max Planck, science advances one funeral at a time.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Yes. Yeah, exactly, one career funeral at a time. It's a really challenging notion that we can get past that sort of churn at the top. Our commissioner's great. I've had a number of conversations with him. One of the things I like to say is, "I think all I need is about 90 seconds of your time each year." If on three occasions, you ask somebody that's running one geographic unit of Western Australia, if you just ask the question, "Hey, what kind of research do you have going on with the evidence-based policing unit?" Don't even need to listen to the answer. You just need to ask the question. Just by asking the question that superintendent will say, "Oh, clearly, I'm supposed to have an answer." They'll come up with something on the spot. But that doesn't matter.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Of course, they'll talk to the other superintendents and they'll say, "Gosh, the commissioner was just through here. And isn't he coming to you next week or next month? You might want to get on the front foot and call them." The amount of power that a commissioner or a chief has, I don't think I appreciated it as an academic when I was just sitting, looking at them or talking to them.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Just set the tone.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Right. But-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

The capacity to set the tone as amazing.

**Geoff Barnes:**

But also to do it in a soft, easy way. If the commissioner was out there screaming, yelling, and saying, "I insist that every single district has one project going with evidence-based policing."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That's one way to do it.

**Geoff Barnes:**

That's one way to do it. It will engender, a little, "Who are you to tell us? And these evidence-based policing people-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And some resentment.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Right. If it's a soft question, a soft, "Hey, so tell me about the research you have going on with them." Oh, that's different.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

What we really need, then, to move evidence-based policing forward is for senior police officers just to think about investing 90 seconds a year in asking the right questions.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Just asking that one question. And the answer almost doesn't matter, because the amount of panic that will be lit on fire by a senior officer asking that question will be huge and it will pass through the grapevine just as quick as my little story of, "I thought we only had to go to two spots out of the three." Well, use that grapevine to our advantage, I think.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

In 90 seconds a year. Geoff, I think that's a great place to finish. Thanks very much for your time.

**Geoff Barnes:**

Thank you.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You've been listening to episode 10 of Reducing Crime recorded in a South Philly diner in April, 2019, you can find more episodes like this at [reducingcrime.com](http://reducingcrime.com) or the usual podcasty places. New episodes are announced on Twitter @\_ReducingCrime. Don't forget the underscore. Be safe and best of luck.