

## #63 (SETH WILLIAMS)

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### Jerry Ratcliffe:

Reducing Crime features conversations with influential thinkers and leading crime and policing researchers.

Seth Williams was a groundbreaking Philadelphia District Attorney and the first Black District Attorney in the state of Pennsylvania. That ended when he was convicted in federal court on a charge related to the receipt of undisclosed gifts. We talked about his incarceration and the role of the District Attorney.

This is Reducing Crime, and I'm your host, Jerry Ratcliffe. My guest, Seth Williams had it all. He attended West Point, transferred to and graduated from Penn State University and Georgetown Law School, was a major in the Judge Advocate General's Corps of the US Army, and in November 2009 with more than 75% of the vote, was elected District Attorney in Philadelphia, becoming the first Black District Attorney in the state of Pennsylvania. He initiated a number of high-profile prosecutions, securing the conviction of Philadelphia abortionists, Kermit Gosnell, and taking on the Catholic Church, with the prosecution of three priests and a schoolteacher for sexual abuse of an altar boy and student. As I say, he had it all.

He was reelected in 2013 to a second term and was on track for a third when in 2017, the FBI announced a 23-count indictment, charging him with bribery, extortion, and wire fraud in connection with tens of thousands of dollars' worth of concealed bribes and undisclosed gifts while as District Attorney. In a plea deal, he subsequently pleaded guilty to one charge. He was sentenced to five years, ultimately serving 34 months in federal prison. Back in June, Seth joined me for breakfast at the Broad Street Diner in South Philly, a Philadelphia institution. As you join us, we had just sat down and we were discussing that it was six years to the day that Seth was incarcerated....

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

Six years ago today, you entering that plea.

### Seth Williams:

Unbelievable.

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**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I will say this about you, you've being very contrite and honest about what happened. I admire that. I think a lot of people would've a tendency not to want to talk about it and say, "That was in my past.", and stuff like that. But you've been good about it.

**Seth Williams:**

I think-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I think that says something to your character.

**Seth Williams:**

... I appreciate it. But I think I'm not like some of the guys that I was in prison with who were just some accountants somewhere. I can't just go off and be Floyd Schoenberg and become somebody different.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah, they went in without a name and came out without a name. You went in with a name.

**Seth Williams:**

Right. There's a famous verse in scripture says that God comforts us. I know you're not a big believer, but God comforts us, not that we may be comfortable, but that we may comfort others.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

My skin starts to blister whenever I walk into churches, but-

**Seth Williams:**

I got you. What I learned though, is that things happened and I'm supposed to use that, use my professional experience and my personal journey, hopefully to help others. My greatest impact, I think now, preventing crime, reducing recidivism is what I'm doing now. I've been struggling. I was working at Lowe's overnight and I was teaching, I enjoyed teaching criminology, but then that poofed because of the shrinking students.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

... Yeah, the students themselves are still the same.

**Seth Williams:**

Yes, yes. Student population. And so, I spent all the money I had saved for taxes, living, paying my rent. But I learned when I was in prison, when I'm down to nothing, there's no hope it seems, the door opens.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So something's popped up for you?

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**Seth Williams:**

A friend of mine, he calls me out of the blue, "Seth, I want you to help me out, either for my firm or you can be a consultant." Long story short, he's hired me to be on his board of directors. That's a great start.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah, it's fantastic.

**Seth Williams:**

And Volunteers of America, which is a nationally, 42 affiliates across the country. They've hired me to create a vocational training program for them, because what I really learned in prison when I was the DA [District Attorney of Philadelphia], when people say, "Well, what do you want to be when you grow up? You want to be the governor, you want to be the mayor?" I said, "Well really, if I had courage and did it all over again, I'd be more like my dad." Who was a school teacher, he ran a rec center at night and he ran a day camp every summer for Fairmont Park.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

See, this is one of the things that stands me about people like your dad, because I've heard you talk-

**Seth Williams:**

Right, he did more to prevent crime than I ever will.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

... [overtalk] No, but it's the community, especially in Philadelphia, I've been here 20 years now. There are so many unsung heroes that just seem to have inexhaustible amounts of energy to just put back into the community. I work like 12 weeks a year, and sometimes I'd be on campus as early as 10 o'clock in the morning and often twice a week, and I'm exhausted by the end of the day. And there are these other people holding down two full-time jobs and then going, "In my spare time I do..." And I'm like, "Seriously?"

**Seth Williams:**

In his spare time, he did all the stuff out of his church. But my point is, they named the playground after him.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Was that in Cobbs Creek?

**Seth Williams:**

Cobbs Creek. There's a big memorial plaque. And so, I never would've chosen to happen to me what's happened. But it wasn't until I was in prison and I was teaching GED, I taught spin class, where you ride the bike.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I have to interrupt you for two seconds, because I was like, before you went inside, don't take this the wrong way, but you had a few pounds on you. Bit of a chubby lad, I remember. Because I met you a couple of times beforehand and

now you are just jacked. I need to get the bulletproof vest out because you have brought the big guns here. You're in great shape. .

**Seth Williams:**

I was in the army and I had to take a PT test, but by all the standards I was obese. But I lost 55 pounds in 2015 to raise money for a cousin that eventually died of Lou Gehrig disease. But I put some of it back on. I was 217 when I got incarcerated, now about 190.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You look fantastic. You're looking solid shape. Because we're the same age and I'm looking at you going, "Fuck..."

**Seth Williams:**

You're 56?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah.

**Seth Williams:**

I'm 56, but you look younger than me, I think

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I'm preserved by alcohol.

**Seth Williams:**

Okay. Okay. I think we're ready.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah, we are. Can I have scrambled eggs with bacon, please?

Speaker 3:

Sure.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Thank you.

**Seth Williams:**

And I will have, are you ready?

Speaker 3:

I'm ready.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

There we go.

**Seth Williams:**

I want scrambled eggs with onions, cheese-

Speaker 3:

In the scrambled?

**Seth Williams:**

... In the scrambled. Spinach, on a side of bacon, a side of scramble. No potatoes, no bread. Then one of those sliced tomatoes. Yes, ma'am.

Speaker 3:

That's good with scrambled bacon, home fries and white toast.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Thank you.

Speaker 3:

Okay.

**Seth Williams:**

You got great memory.

Speaker 3:

I can do up to five.

**Seth Williams:**

Okay.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That's fantastic. I was lost halfway through and she's like, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. That's a skill.

**Seth Williams:**

It's a skill. So, I learned teaching GED in prison, being in prison, it's one thing as an academic or as the DA or public defender even to talk about it, but to actually be there when the doors close. It was on June the 29th, 2017, I was there handcuffed, solitary confinement.

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**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So tell me, day one, walking in. I'll be upfront, I'd be absolutely fucking terrified.

**Seth Williams:**

So June the 29th of 2017, I went to court to enter a guilty plea.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And that is six years ago today,

**Seth Williams:**

Six years ago today. And I had been told that I could go home at lunch probably, that I'd have time to get my affairs in order, to self-surrender at some point in the future. I went to court, I entered the plea. Much to my surprise, the judge revoked my bail immediately and I was handcuffed in court, taken underground, strip searched, given an orange jumpsuit, asked crazy questions by the staff there, the psychologist upfront. And then taken, handcuffed with two correctional officers walking me through the hall as if I was Lex Luther or Hannibal Lecter.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You got convicted of one bribery charge, you weren't a mass murderer.

**Seth Williams:**

One count of a violation of the Travel Act in furtherance of bribery, contrary to Pennsylvania law. Nonetheless, I found myself in solitary. And I tell people, it wasn't for having been in the army and going through reception day, 1 July, 1985 at West Point, my head would've just exploded. I'd been to prison often as a criminal justice clinic student at Georgetown.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Because you graduated Georgetown Law from DC.

**Seth Williams:**

Correct. And I represented indigent people. I always hated going to prison. When I was an Assistant DA, we had to go up to the detention center, they're going to do bail hearings. I hated going there then. And most people don't recognize when you're inside a prison, for the most part, all the inmates are just walking around. They think they're always behind their cells or something. No, it's just like a free for all, all the time. And so, being in solitary and hearing just people screaming in their cells, and I had to quickly just forget all about where I was living in my plush house and-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

This was your new life.

**Seth Williams:**

... This is my new life. This is what it's going to be.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

But what was that first day like?

**Seth Williams:**

First day, I walked into my cell, they took the handcuffs off. My head was swirling, and I slid against the wall, sat on the floor. I heard a guy in the cell next to me go, "Yo, who the hell did you piss off?" And so, I just could not imagine five years living in the size of a parking space, about seven feet by 12 feet concrete and just steel. Amnesty International, the United Nations, even the Obama administration Justice Department, all say that anything more than 10 days in solitary confinement is deleterious to your mental health, in and of itself causes trauma.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I can't imagine 10 days.

**Seth Williams:**

I was there for 152 days, which pales in comparison to a lot of people, understand that. And I tell people, only way I got through it was faith and through God. I know your skin is crawling now, but-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Oh, it's all good.

**Seth Williams:**

... I learned that I lost, in one day, I lost my reputation, my political office, my pension, which would've been \$122,000 a year every year the rest of my life, time with my daughters, my house, I lost everything. And as I've told you before, when God was all I had, I learned God was all I needed. I got through every day.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Is that the approach? Is that the way to look at it, which is, "If I can just get through today. Okay. Tomorrow, I'm just going to get through today."?

**Seth Williams:**

Because I use today to mark also my sobriety, and it's just one day at a time. My friend, Brian Lentz, who'd been in the army, he had done tours in Kosovo and Iraq. He was my campaign manager when I first ran in 2005.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

He's been involved in Philly many years.

**Seth Williams:**

Many years. Great criminal justice reform and public safety mind. But the perfect balance of those things. Brian Lentz sent me this book, and you can see I got it in July of 2017. I have my name, my prison number. And you asked me how did I get through it. It was right here on page 306. Chuck Colson went to prison. What he said was, "I was in prison,

because I had to be there, an essential step. A price I had to pay to complete the shedding of my old life and to be free to live the new."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That's nice. Let's talk for a moment about your old life, because I know you've talked about your background and history, but people can hear that in a lot of other podcasts. But I also want to make it current, because I'm really interested in your experiences as DA. What I understand about your background, you were put up for adoption at birth.

**Seth Williams:**

Yes.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And you were raised in West Philadelphia by your family. Was your dad somebody that you felt that you had to live up to?

**Seth Williams:**

I think so. I think I had to live up to everyone's expectations. And I had great grandparents who were phenomenal. I had, my father was a school teacher, he ran the playground and rec center in our neighborhood, he ran a day camp. Everybody loved him. It was almost like being a preacher's kid. Everybody in the neighborhood knew me because of my father.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That sets expectations too, doesn't it? But you lived up to those. You went to Penn, you went to graduate Georgetown Law.

**Seth Williams:**

Yeah. First I went to West Point. And I tell people I got a medical discharge, they found out I was allergic to math and chemistry. And then I went to Penn State, where I followed in my father's footsteps and I was the president of the Black Caucus. I led a march of 102 miles, I got our school to divest from South Africa. I was the president of the whole student government. I then went to Georgetown Law School as a public interest law scholar, and I was in the criminal justice clinic. And the professor, God rest his soul, great guy, said, "Seth, as a young Black man, you should go back to Philadelphia and be a public defender because you understand the criminal mind."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Jesus, really?

**Seth Williams:**

He meant well, it was almost like Archie Bunker giving Lionel Jefferson career advice.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I'm not the most tactful bloke in the world, and even I can go, "Really, dude?"



**Seth Williams:**

Yeah. But what I learned from that experience representing indigent people in superior court in the District of Columbia and going into the prisons and meeting my clients who almost all of them suffered from some sort of addiction that spurred their drug use and their retail thievery, or whatever they were doing. It was the young Assistant District Attorney who had more power than Johnny Cochran, the highest paid defense attorney, a public defender. Other than a police officer who's actually on the beat, the young ADA has the most discretion in the system.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Huge amounts of discretion in the system here, yep.

**Seth Williams:**

Right. And so I learned from that, "You know what, I want to be an Assistant District Attorney who's fighting for the victims of crime, but also trying to apply real world understanding and to reform a racist class system from the inside." So that was my goal.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

The system we have here, right or wrong, does rely on people exercising discretion. ADAs, Assistant District Attorneys exercise a lot of discretion. Cops on the street exercise a lot of discretion. The system relies on that discretion.

**Seth Williams:**

Yes.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Because without it, we'd either have anarchy on the streets.

**Seth Williams:**

Correct.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Or we would have a criminal justice system that's overflowing and clogged. So this was your first experience trying to find that balance?

**Seth Williams:**

Yes. And I loved being an Assistant District Attorney, but the problem is, no one's trained in any of the theories of criminology. Basically, people are just repeating what's been done without knowing what the effect of what they're doing is. We're doing this because we think it's going to prevent crime or make the neighborhood safer, but does it? We're just doing these things daily.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

No disrespect, but lawyers in my experience, have not exactly been a group who are big into questioning what they do. They bring a certain confidence to their role.

**Seth Williams:**

Yeah. And so, it was my job as an Assistant DA, I was told by the Chief of the Municipal Court Unit when I first started there, September the 8th, 1992, "Get all cases ready, try all ready cases." So really, in some ways, it wasn't my goal to figure out, "Well, what's the best outcome for this individual? What's the best outcome for this victim?" My job's, no, I'm making sure my witnesses are there, I'm going to put on my cases, I'll let the judge decide. I let somebody else figure this all out. But I learned so much going all around the city, putting on felony preliminary hearings, trying misdemeanor trials. My second year, I prosecuted adults that commit crimes against children.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

God, that's a fun job.

**Seth Williams:**

The super majority of those are sex crimes.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Do you not feel like you were taking on a poison chalice because that is not a...

**Seth Williams:**

It is very, very difficult. And I began to numb myself, became too friendly with a guy named Jack Daniels. I learned one out of four American women are the victims of sexual abuse before the age of 18. Shockingly, one out of six American men are the victims of some sort of sexual abuse before the age of 18, but nobody talks about it. What I also learned, was the majority of the victims in my cases, when I would go to court, the family, they were mad at me and the victim, because they knew that Uncle Skip had done it, but they wanted to handle it inside the family.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

We've known about this problem for so long, our inability to deal with domestic violence, sexual abuse, things in the family. It's such a pernicious problem, I don't feel that we've made a dent in it in the... I don't know. Next year I'll been involved in law enforcement in some capacity for 40 years.

**Seth Williams:**

Wow.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I don't feel like we've made hardly a dent in it. There are some innovative people out there, but this is just such a pernicious problem.

**Seth Williams:**

I am an inadvertent criminologist, and I learned by just being involved that 82% of the offenders are people that the family knew. All the things that we believe, oh, it's going to be some guy dressed like a clown at the malls. No, it's Uncle Skip. It's a grandfather. It's mom's boyfriend. It's a teacher. It's a camp counselor. It's a member of the clergy.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

The people you know.

**Seth Williams:**

People that the family have entrusted their children with.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And that gives those people opportunity. There's a whole brand of, not mainstream criminology, but criminological thinking around crime prevention that looks at opportunity, of reduction of opportunities as a major way to have crime prevention. But I don't think any lawyers ever learned any of this.

**Seth Williams:**

I agree. And I learned most of this in 1996, I got married.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

We all make that mistake at some point.

**Seth Williams:**

Sure. I needed to make additional money. I wanted to remain an Assistant DA. What can I do to supplement and augment my income? I began teaching the Administration of Justice, Constitutional Law, Criminology at Penn State, Abington. And it wasn't until I was reading the textbook that I really started learning criminological theories.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah, it's a lot of wicky-wack-woo, weird criminological theories that are all a waste of time. In fact, most of them. But there are a few in there that are really useful to understand if you actually want to be involved within crime prevention.

**Seth Williams:**

Right.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You've got a fan over there.

**Seth Williams:**

That's great. I love it. I learned this as-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

See, people still know you around this town a lot.

**Seth Williams:**

... I appreciate it. It means a lot to me. But I was the president of the Civic Association and Town Watch in my neighborhood. My dad and I would go out on patrol in his 1991 Ford Crown Vic.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Holy shit. So somebody other than cops drives a Crown Vic?

**Seth Williams:**

Yes.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I thought that was only police departments that bought those.

**Seth Williams:**

It was great. We're fine, thank you.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Cheers, thank you.

**Seth Williams:**

And so what I found was, most crimes are crimes of opportunity.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

They are.

**Seth Williams:**

Right. People don't plan to go steal your lawnmower today. But the guys walking down the alley-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

They were walking past and you left it out.

**Seth Williams:**

... and you left the garage door open, and that guy thinks it's payday for him.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I'm interested to know how you took this knowledge when you became, you got elected as the District Attorney. When were you elected District Attorney?

**Seth Williams:**

I was elected in November of 2009. I was sworn in January of 2010 as the first African-American District Attorney in the history-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

the State of Pennsylvania.

**Seth Williams:**

... of Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The 24th elected District Attorney-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That's a hell of an achievement. You know that, right?

**Seth Williams:**

... thank you, in the city of Philadelphia. And what I learned, as an Assistant DA, we had a horizontal prosecution process. DAs were assigned to a courtroom. The cases are from all over the city. You prep your case the night before, you go to court, you write down what happened. The case gets put on a shelf until the night before the next time, the next ADA gets it in that courtroom, complete systemic failure.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Right. But this is how we've always done.

**Seth Williams:**

But this is how we've always done it. And so, what I learned and recognize from teaching, crime occurs geographically. There are patterns to crime based on time, temperature, season. I know you are an expert in this, but-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I'm not an expert in anything, but yeah, I know this much about crime, because it's opportunity driven.

**Seth Williams:**

... It's opportunity driven. And what I tell people is that, if you grew up in my neighborhood, you knew the good people and the bad people. You knew the people that when you were coming home from the grocery store, "Uh-oh, he might try to rob me." Or, "That person might help me."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I studied this a few years ago now, but half the people who are shot in Philadelphia are shot within two blocks of their home address.

**Seth Williams:**

And only half of 1% are responsible for 65% of the violent crime in Philadelphia. My point though is that, when I was a kid, if your car got stolen, everybody knew who probably stole it.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That's right. So should we make crime prevention and criminological theories that drive crime prevention mandatory in law schools?

**Seth Williams:**

I would think so, or definitely as part of the training for people who are involved in the criminal justice system. Everybody's in a different silo, they don't even speak to each other. The sheriff's department, the police department, all of them have their own ideas. So we really need to bring them together to talk.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I think it's funny that we call it a criminal justice system, because it really isn't a system.

**Seth Williams:**

It's not.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It's a collection of individual little fiefdoms run by people who were just scrambling to get as much resources for their little part of the piece, the puzzle than anybody else.

**Seth Williams:**

Correct. And what I wanted to do if I became the DA, was to have geographic prosecution, vertical prosecution teams.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

How did it work?

**Seth Williams:**

The Bureau of Justice Assistance published a 17-page document that I created that explained how we implemented community-based prosecution in Philadelphia.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And for the listeners, I can make that available on [reducingcrime.com/podcast](https://reducingcrime.com/podcast) where you can find a link to that, that Seth just talked about.

**Seth Williams:**

The police department is separated into six divisions, and they each have either three or four police districts. I restructured the District Attorney's Office to reflect the exact way the police department was structured, so that if 20% of the crimes were in the southwest division, which is the 18th District, the 19th, the 12th and the 16th, then we would have a identical number of Assistant District Attorneys assigned.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

What I like about it is that the ADAs can then build a relationship with the cops in those areas and build a relationship with the detectives. Because the reality is, the criminal justice system largely works on informal relationships.

**Seth Williams:**

Correct.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And if we don't recognize that and design systems that actually support that, the whole thing breaks down.

**Seth Williams:**

So, when I was an Assistant District Attorney, I started creating after hour parties at this place in Philly that played music, dance music from the '70s and '80s.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Fantastic.

**Seth Williams:**

And I would invite court staff, police detectives. And my goal was, if we can get people together informally to meet each other, to break down those barriers, maybe that can help us formally.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Many years ago when I worked in Australia, the Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence, once a month had a Friday afternoon networking session. I wouldn't suggest that there was beer involved, but there might've been a slab or two kicking around somewhere. But it was a great chance to meet everybody in town in Canberra who was involved in the system. And you build relationships that way.

**Seth Williams:**

That's how you do it. And so, we created the geographic based prosecution mirroring the police department, cooperating with community groups that are geographically based in Philadelphia. All the neighborhoods have a civic association, a town watch involving them, clergy, business leaders who were concerned along this 60th Street business corridor or wherever.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Well, they do say that all politics is local, so why don't we make criminal justice local too?

**Seth Williams:**

It should be, because the solutions are all local. Because what's important to the people here in this neighborhood might be completely different than the needs of people in a different neighborhood, but no one's needs are more valuable or have less merit. I also knew we had to have great partnership. There's always going to be a tension, but a better working relationship with the police department. And I was blessed to have the opportunity to work as the DA with Police Commissioner Charles Ramsey, who I thought was a phenomenal police commissioner here in Philadelphia. And also-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

He's been a guest on the podcast and he's fantastic.

**Seth Williams:**

... And then also, Richard Ross, who I knew since high school and also at Penn State. He became the commissioner under Mayor Kenny.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I remember those days. And it really did seem to be working. You were the DA. Chuck Ramsey was the Police Commissioner. Michael Nutter was the mayor. And those were the safest years we've had in terms of shootings. We were over 500 last year, over 500 the year before, but during those years-

**Seth Williams:**

We were down 234. We had reduced-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It went down to 246 and 248, I believe.

**Seth Williams:**

... Yeah. We had reduced gun violence in Philadelphia to 45 year lows as a result of some very simple things, community-based prosecution, holding people accountable for the unlawful possession of firearms, which my successor is opposed to. Now I'm no criminologist, I'm terrible at math.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah, but you can count. And 500 plus.

**Seth Williams:**

When I was a young Assistant DA, it was the number one thing people had in common, they got arrested in Philadelphia, was they didn't finish high school. Another thing though was that, all the shootings, about 99% of the people who are shooting people don't have a license to carry a firearm. We need to hold people accountable when they get arrested by the police for carrying the gun illegally.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Not having a GED, general education from high school. Obviously, there's lots and lots and lots of kids in Philly that don't complete high school, that aren't offenders in any way, shape or form, never get involved in gun violence. But the second part comes back nicely to what you were talking about, the sex offenders in the family, is opportunity. And if you are allowed to carry a firearm and the system permits you, not a formal permit, but just doesn't do anything to interdict and stop you, why are you not going to carry a firearm?

**Seth Williams:**

And defense attorneys, and now the actual elected District Attorney of Philadelphia believe that holding people accountable for the illegal possession of guns does nothing to promote safety. That they believe, in fact, it criminalizes poverty. Which is to say, they argue that it doesn't cost much money to get a license that most of these people could



get a license. The fact that they're not getting a license is because they can't afford the license. They also believe that, "Oh well, he lives in North Philly, he has to carry a gun, so we're not going to hold them accountable for carrying a gun illegally." And I say, "No, the people who are carrying guns illegally are the people who are willing to shoot and kill people." And if we're concerned about protecting the lives of these young Black and Brown men, then we need to hold accountable those that carry the guns illegally.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

So let me play devil's advocate for a moment and put yourself back in the position when you were the District Attorney. The argument that the office of our current District Attorney, Larry Krasner has put forward, I believe, is that the prosecution of young men for carrying illegal firearms is heavily skewed racially. The argument is that it's racially bias. What would the response be given the fact that, overwhelming we talking about young Black men and you're a Black guy?

### Seth Williams:

One, it angers me when people say that. I take it personally because I see every day, three, four, two African-American men are murdered, Black and Brown men are murdered. And four times that are shot. But because we have tremendous trauma units in Philadelphia, they're saved, where the police scoop them up and take them to the hospital, which doesn't happen in most cities.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, the work of people like Scott Charles and what they're doing up the town is fantastic.

### Seth Williams:

Correct. So to me, allowing for the status quo to remain, you are telling me basically, you don't care that these young Black and Brown men are being killed.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

But the argument is, that it's going to incarcerate them and it's just going to perpetuate mass incarceration and all that kind of stuff.

### Seth Williams:

Again, it's not the severity of punishment that changes behavior, it's the certainty of accountability. I'm not saying we need to have mass incarceration, that we need to send people to jail for 20 years for counting a gun illegally. I'm saying, we need to have the police make constitutional stops, remove people from their illegally possessed weapons and hold them accountable, whatever that incremental scale is. If it's just a fine and then probation and then some small period of whatever. But there has to be accountability. Not having accountability, that vacuum creates the lawlessness that we have now and allows for the disproportionate number of Black and Brown men to be victims of gun violence and homicide. But if you're going to tell me you're stopping all these Black and Brown men is holding them more accountable. Well, we're shooting each other. We're killing each other. It's not the KKK killing us now. My father used to say, "We put the KKK out of business."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Oh, can you imagine the KKK in Philadelphia, they'd lasts like 10 minutes? A bunch of clowns.

**Seth Williams:**

Right. We have to hold people accountable. Mass decarceration is just as bad for public safety as mass incarceration. The indiscriminate just releasing people from prison.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So how'd you find that balance? I obviously can't answer this question. I'm so White even speed cameras don't give me a ticket. I'm not the guy that can come up with a solution. But this seems like where you've got the very progressive movement saying, "It seems to be increasingly accepted that any kind of prosecution rate or any kind of arrest rate that doesn't reflect the overall city's demographics must be racial bias."

**Seth Williams:**

Which doesn't make any sense to me. Just the fact that though Black and Brown men are shooting each other at astronomically high rate, if we say that their lives matter to us, we must research and then implement strategies to save their lives. If we see that whatever percentage of White males are committing a specific crime, but that crime is a significant harm to public safety, then we have to come up with strategies to address it. I have no way to know this, but let's say that the crime is downloading child porn. Well, if more accountants are downloading child porn and then we implement a strategy to reduce that.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It's going to overwhelmingly target White accountants.

**Seth Williams:**

People saying, "Well, we can't do this policy." No, we have to protect children. Can I get some more scrapple?

Speaker 3:

You want another scrapple?

**Seth Williams:**

And some more coffee.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I don't know how you can do scrapple, it's one of the things I'm like...

**Seth Williams:**

It's everything from the pig, but the oink.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Damn, you're making that sound so attractive.

**Seth Williams:**

My aunt, Shirley and my mother would go for walks in the park and they carried sticks. They weren't carrying sticks because they were shepherds. They weren't carrying sticks because some people from the far northeast were going to come rob them. They're carrying the sticks because kids they knew from the neighborhood might try to rob them while they're going for a walk. But my aunt wanted them to not rob people, she wanted them to be held accountable, but she wanted them to be treated fairly. Got it. We've got to do that. We also have to prevent people from breaking people's houses, stealing cars, shooting, murdering, getting guns. And we have to treat drug addiction as a public health crisis, I got that.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So that's the next question, is that you recognize that holding some people accountable is a part, it's not the whole thing, but it's a part of crime prevention.

**Seth Williams:**

Correct.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Okay. How do we deal with the drug crisis, because it's getting worse too? How does the role of District Attorney, how can that help some of these issues?

**Seth Williams:**

The District Attorney should be able to learn from and defer to people that are experts in subject matters. Because what we don't do, there's an entire branch of criminology, as you know, that is about the ecology of crime. There's an entire branch that deals with the criminogenic needs of people. None of that is generally being done now.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So there's a conflict there though. I've had police officers saying they feel a lot of the public health approaches do create increased safety, reduced overdoses, but also enable drug use and keep people in that lifestyle. It comes with a perception that what it ends up doing, is it just creates Kensington in Philadelphia, which is one of the largest open air drug markets, on the Eastern seaboard, and I suspect in the United States, it's the largest open air drug market I've ever seen. And we've had a public health approach for, got to be seven, eight plus years under the current mayor, when it's clearly not working.

**Seth Williams:**

Right. I believe in the harm reduction of sharing clean hypodermic needles with people, because we know the majority of those hepatitis, of all of its forms, HIV are passed through the sharing of intravenous needles.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

As a friend of mine said to me, "If you're dead, you ain't getting clean."

**Seth Williams:**

Right. So, I believe we can couple a program like that that's harm reduction with social service experts, nurses, practitioners, social workers, that type of staff to help people get into recovery. I'm opposed to just people being able to have whatever narcotic they want just because it's their right. No, I think that leads to public safety issues that as a society we need to protect ourselves from. I get people angry from the far left and the far right.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Oh, that's when you know you're doing something right.

**Seth Williams:**

That's when I know I'm doing something right, because I think the solutions are in that gray area in the middle.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

How the hell were you ever successful as a politician understanding that the world is full of nuance and subtlety?

**Seth Williams:**

Well, I think part of the reason I was prosecuted clearly was as a result of making enemies. I made enemies of the Attorney General of Pennsylvania, of the Catholic Church for the shielding of a pedophile priest.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So, being a Catholic yourself and being a regular church goer, how did that feel?

**Seth Williams:**

I was doing the right thing. It's not the church, it's not the... Jesus isn't out there saying we need to rape children.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I haven't read much of the Bible, but I just certainly would've noticed if I come across that part.

**Seth Williams:**

There are a lot of rapes in the Bible.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Really?

**Seth Williams:**

Oh yeah, a lot of crazy stuff happens.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Old Testament.

**Seth Williams:**

Yeah yeah. But it's not the church theory or theology, it was just people. There's no coincidence of what happened, but it gave me the opportunity to learn on the inside, living daily with people who had been drug dealers of every ilk, people who had shot and murdered people.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Using that experience, how do we find that balance between holding people accountable but not generating the high incarceration levels, against this-

**Seth Williams:**

We have to address people's trauma at an early age in a healthy community-based therapeutic way. Now that's not to say we don't hold them accountable when they end up shooting people. But when the kid is in third grade and he's pulling the wings off of every insect, or he is hurting animals, a red flag should go off somewhere, the person should get help.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

... But what do we do in the meantime? So what do we do, there's a cop somewhere in Philadelphia that's going to see a kid walking down the street and he's going to frisk him, and he's going to find an illegal handgun, that kid's 16 years old?

**Seth Williams:**

We should hold him accountable. A charge should be brought against him in juvenile court where a judge then figures out why is he out at 2:00 AM? Why does he have the gun? Who is he associating with? What can be done now as an intervention to help get this person back on the right track? And what I learned on the inside, is that wasn't being done. And that the system in many ways had failed the people that I was in prison with.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You just become a number and churned through the system.

**Seth Williams:**

That's it.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So the people that you found inside, and we've talked in the past. Do you still believe every single one of them was rehabilitate-able? Did I just make up a word? I think I just did, didn't I?

**Seth Williams:**

I think people have-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I just think I made up a word.

**Seth Williams:**

... I think it's only a very, very, very, very small percentage. I'll defer to you as a criminologist and people that work with you.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Not my area, but yeah.

**Seth Williams:**

Right. As to know the number of people that are just purely sociopaths-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

There are psychopaths, yeah.

**Seth Williams:**

... very, very low. Or a psychopath, whatever the term is. One of the first things I did every year at Penn State, was show my students a movie with Eddie Murphy and Dan Aykroyd called Trading Places.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It is one of the great films.

**Seth Williams:**

And in it discusses many causation theories of crime.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It's a good example, it's really good.

**Seth Williams:**

And most people who are in prison, if they do have a transformation, it's only because they wanted it, they did it. It's not because the institution helped lead them to it. It was by luck, or by divine intervention. And so, I created my own company because nobody would hire me, Second Chance Strategies, is to implement what I learned as the DA and as a GED instructor to help people, not only get jobs, but to reduce recidivism, to help them learn how to keep jobs. A conflict resolution is one of the greatest things. Learning how to say, "I'm sorry."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So this is one of the things I find fascinating about this, and maybe I spend too much time in academia now. Everybody's all about reentry and second chances, and we talk about it, and everybody's virtue signals in all the right ways.

**Seth Williams:**

They don't mean it at all.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah, it's bullshits, right?

**Seth Williams:**

It's bullshit.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You've got a background. You were a Jag in the Army. You were the District Attorney, for Christ's sake. You were-

**Seth Williams:**

A criminal defense attorney.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

... criminal defense. You've been incarcerated, you have all this experience. And I don't know how you don't mind me, but I know since coming back out, you've struggled to find work, which I just find incomprehensible.

**Seth Williams:**

Even organizations that are about criminal justice reform, they don't want to hire me because I was a prosecutor. Public safety organizations don't want to hire me because I went to prison. They all treat me like I'm radioactive. I've learned that almost nothing is done by the system. Once the person gets arrested, we should be able to figure out, "Well, this person needs this and that.", and what's necessary for you might not be the same as necessary for me, even if we commit the same crime. But none of that is to say we don't hold people accountable. We don't just give people a free pass.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It doesn't help that there's a more fractious relationship between the prosecutor's office now and the police department and the Mayor's Office.

**Seth Williams:**

The mayor's non-existent.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

How do you think things will change, we've got a new mayor likely coming, it's highly likely to be Cherelle Parker? Do you know Cherelle Parker?

**Seth Williams:**

I do, I know her very well. She understands the actual definition of Terry v Ohio and what a Constitutional Terry Stop is, based on reasonable articulable suspicion.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

We should say at this point that almost like a consent decree in Philadelphia, about 2015, what's called the Bailey Agreement locally came in, some estimates said that only about 30% of stops by the police were constitutional. The most recent figure I heard is it's north of 90% now, so that's definitely-

**Seth Williams:**

The term stop and frisk been manipulated by people to mean cops just jumping out of a car and stopping some random person. No, that's bad. I'm not condoning that type of behavior, but I'm condoning a constitutional stop as articulated and opined by the United States Supreme Court when they wrote the opinion of Terry v. Ohio. Mayor Parker, if she wins in November and is sworn in January, like my aunt Shirley, she wants people to be held accountable, but fairly, that's all we want. We don't want to stack people up in prison for long periods of time if not necessary. We want to prevent crime. We do all we can to redesign the environment to reduce the opportunity for crime. But then when people do commit, hold them accountable. Get them the help that they need so they don't become repeat offenders. That's what we have to do.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I just love the fact that you just tied in the lightly future mayor of the city of Philadelphia to your aunt Shirley.

**Seth Williams:**

There you go. Because my Aunt Shirley was a type of person that Ms. Parker really identified with. Those are the people that voted for her.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Those are the people in Philadelphia who they deserve better policing and they want better policing, but they don't want less policing.

**Seth Williams:**

Correct. They want the police to arrest the right people.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And I think a lot of the time what's misunderstood, is when they talk about wanting more policing, because they don't really understand the system, they also means they want kids who are on the wrong track to be held accountable.

**Seth Williams:**

Correct. The majority of 911 calls in Philadelphia come from the poorest neighborhoods.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yes, they do.



**Seth Williams:**

Where the people want help. Now, they don't want the police officer to show up and then beat to death their kid because he's autistic. But they want somebody to come and end the violence that's occurring in the moment, in real time.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And all the day-to-day stuff that just grinds people down as well.

**Seth Williams:**

Right. Graffiti, having your car stolen, all those things.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So in your spare time, how did you get into spending your weekends marrying people? I think that's fantastic.

**Seth Williams:**

I have a friend who owns a wedding chapel. And she contacted me because she needed help at her chapel, and she asked me if I was an ordained priest, because she knows how I've had a significant spiritual journey. Said, "I'm not ordained, but..." So I go online, and in about 15 minutes, anybody can go online and be ordained to do weddings.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

This is so quintessentially American, I got to tell you.

**Seth Williams:**

Right? And so, I love officiating weddings. I did one yesterday. On an average Saturday I'll officiate five to seven weddings. Where my old job was about murder and mayhem. This new life, and specifically officiating weddings, is about hope, it's about love and joy, excitement. And so, I love officiating weddings.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Well, I've got to tell you, I certainly on the wedding side of things, I love following you on Twitter, because every now and again, amongst all the murderer mayhem that we're experiencing, you just post these absolutely lovely pictures of people at their happiest moment. It's fantastic. It's fantastic.

**Seth Williams:**

Exactly. Right? I tweet every morning a verse of the day, something that's inspiring me that day.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

My phone blocks that, but yeah [laughing]

**Seth Williams:**

[laughing] I do a report. I talk about Philadelphia sports, the Sixers and the Eagles, and there's weddings.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And then you post these wedding pictures, it's fantastic. Seth, it's been great fun. Thanks.

**Seth Williams:**

It's been great talking to you, Jerry. I always love talking to you about criminal justice.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Likewise mate. Likewise. Cheers.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That was Episode 63 of Reducing Crime, recorded in South Philadelphia in June, 2023. New episodes are announced on Twitter at @\_reducingcrime, and my personal random ramblings occur at @jerry\_ratcliffe. Want to use this episode for a class you teach? DM me for transcripts and spreadsheets of multiple-choice questions for every episode. And of course, subscribe to Reducing Crime wherever you found this, that would make me happy and we need more joy in the world. Like this podcast, subscribing costs nothing.

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