

#18 (THOMAS ABT)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Jerry Ratcliffe again with Reducing Crime, a podcast featuring influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers. Thomas Abt is a senior research fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. We chat about the motivation, the names behind his recent book, Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence--and a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets. Find out more in this episode at reducingcrime.com and on Twitter @_reducingcrime.

Thomas Abt is a senior research fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. His book, Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence was published by Basic Books in June 2019. His work's been frequently featured in major media outlets such as The Atlantic, Economist, New Yorker, New York Times and Wall Street Journal.

Before joining Harvard, Thomas served as deputy secretary for public safety to Governor Andrew Cuomo in New York, where he oversaw all criminal justice and homeland security agencies, and led the development of New York's successful GIVE initiative. That stands for Gun Involved Violence Elimination. Before that, he served as chief of staff to the Office of Justice Programs at the department of justice.

There, he played a lead role in establishing the National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention. A network of federal agencies and local communities working together to reduce youth violence. I caught up with Thomas in the middle of basically his book tour for his new book, Bleeding Out. He talks about the importance of translating academia into evidence-based policy advice. I compare criminal justice initiatives to the cost of a new set of tires for a fighter jet.

In case you're wondering, to change the tires on an F/A-18 Hornet costs about a hundred thousand dollars. You want to buy the entire plane? That's about 67 million. That single plane is worth more than the entire annual budget of the National Institute of Justice, the criminal justice research arm of the federal government. It does make you wonder how much we could improve the criminal justice system if we just cashed in a jet or two, doesn't it? I bet you've got a flight this afternoon.

Thomas Abt:

Yes. You're not going to keep me for three hours, are you?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm not. Yeah. Yeah. That's the plan. God, I have to edit these things. Imagine a three-hour, that would take the rest of the year to do the edit on that. You've been doing a bunch of these now.

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Thomas Abt:

Yes. Yes. I have.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Not a lot of people do this you know, so here you are at The Union League club in Philadelphia coming in to speak to city managers and people in the city. We had some media there. We had some police people there. We had some city folk there. What are you learning from all of that?

Thomas Abt:

Well, I've been speaking to various audiences publicly and privately for a long time. Moving between media and community and law enforcement and activists and policymakers is something I did in the Obama administration and something I did for Governor Cuomo. It's a skill that you develop over time. I think it's just paying attention to your audience and your context.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's for you, what are you learning about the cities and what their need is or what they're asking or where they're weak and need to lift their game?

Thomas Abt:

Sure. I apologize. I selfishly made it about me.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's fine. No. That's a really interesting point as well, which is, I mean, if we're going to start moving the needle with these kinds of audiences, we have to be less academic and more speak to what they need, and that's a learned skill.

Thomas Abt:

Or, we need to be academic when we're among academics and we need to be able to read an audience and be less academic when we're not around academics.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've been picking up that skill, which is good. That was evident today.

Thomas Abt:

I try. Also, ultimately, I want to have an impact and I hope that-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's so unacademic.

Thomas Abt:

Right. I hope that these strategies ultimately are going to save some lives. I'm very interested in communicating and bringing people along on these issues. I do what I can. To your other question, as I move from city to city ... And

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obviously I'd had a lot of experience in multiple cities before I wrote the book, but it's only been reinforced as I've been talking about the book over the past few months. Every city thinks they're special.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Thomas Abt:

You know, everyone says, "Oh, you don't know Baltimore. You don't know Philadelphia. You don't know St. Louis." In general, these problems look pretty similar across contexts and often the obstacles to progress. In most cities that are not doing well in terms of controlling violence, there's a polarized political environment where you have people who are hyper-supportive of law enforcement versus people who are hyper-adversarial to law enforcement. They've battled each other to a standstill and so nothing is really getting done.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They've gone at each other almost to exhaustion.

Thomas Abt:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Thomas Abt:

You also have, generally speaking, a reflection of that conversation is that you'll have a lot of resources arranged around deep prevention a lot of resources arranged around tough enforcement and very little in the middle on the intervention, Smart on Crime, interventions that are balanced with both carrots and sticks. Also, then you just see limited management capacity, limited technical capacity. Cities that are failing to reduce violence are not often hyper-competent in other areas.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. I mean, I sometimes see, I don't know if you've seen this, but especially with this move towards things like a public health approach to violence. You've got people whose expertise is epidemiology and public health. You've got people whose expertise is often frontline street policing. You've got people in these pockets of expertise, but nobody with the expertise to form a cohesive strategic plan.

A police leader rarely gets that kind of how to put together a strategy. If so, it's not how to put together a strategy with public health people who think completely differently. I see a lot of cities seem to just be missing a bigger plan and part of your book has that notion at the bar. I mean, I figure you probably recognize that limitation too, because you included an appendix which was, here's how you work towards a plan, right?

Thomas Abt:

Right. I was fortunate in that during my time at the justice department under President Obama, I was coordinating a national initiative where we went city to city to develop comprehensive anti-violence plans. I saw cities doing better,

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doing worse. We were supporting them. We talked about what those plans needed to include, and so I've been very lucky over my career to see this issue from all these different angles.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, sorry to interrupt, but-

Thomas Abt:

Sure.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

A chunk of those haven't survived. This is the struggle with this, right? Because we're coming in from outside the stuff doesn't survive. Internally, there isn't the capacity. We have to do something different but there seems to be such a willingness to fail conventionally.

Thomas Abt:

That's a great way to say it. I think that's very true. That's where the least risk is.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. Because that's how we've always done it.

Thomas Abt:

Right. You know, when the forum was assessed, we couldn't do a rigorous evaluation, but you know, Jeff Butts form-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Up in New York.

Thomas Abt:

... from John Jay did an independent assessment. He said that based on his metrics, we were improving the way the cities went about doing their anti-violence work. I think given the modest scale of that effort it was really thrown together with initially less than \$500,000 at the national level.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Good grief.

Thomas Abt:

Then ultimately I don't think we ever scaled it up to more than two or \$3 million. It was a very light intervention. To even have modest results was worthwhile. You know, with GIVE, which is a more robust effort that I started in New York with more funding and more focus and having learned more, we're seeing stronger results. You know, most notably in Newburgh, New York, which has had a massive reduction in violence.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

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It just astounds me that the kind of money that is being spent on things like violence reduction plans that drastically affects millions of Americans is the equivalent of a set of wheels for a new F/A-18.

Thomas Abt:

That really is shocking. I sometimes-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I have no idea by the way how much a set of tires or a set of wheels for an F/A-18 cost. I think those things cost a fortune, or an F-22. You know, the cost of one fighter jet sunk into the criminal justice system could-

Thomas Abt:

Transformative.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Absolutely.

Thomas Abt:

Transformative. Any time I'm reading the paper and the actual dollar figures associated with defense come up, I have this reaction. I go-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's heart stopping, isn't it?

Thomas Abt:

I go, "Oh my God, what we could do with even a fraction of that." The plan in my book over eight years to work with a nationwide plan, 40 of the most violent cities, save thousands of lives, it's 899 million. Over eight years. That's like a quarter of a plane.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Thomas Abt:

Or whatever.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, less than that. I mean, these planes are coming in at tens of millions of dollars.

Thomas Abt:

Sometimes billions.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

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For the development and cost. Yeah.

Thomas Abt:

Right. Yeah. I agree. That's one of the things that-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think in Afghanistan or Iraq, we've lost more than that falling out of the back of a Hercules.

Thomas Abt:

It's sobering.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What's interesting about that is it's ... Yeah. That's just the air conditioning. It'll flick on and off. Maybe I can do something about it then.

Thomas Abt:

I think you're making it angry.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No. I'm really fucking this up. I've taken the liberty here of editing out the five minutes where I bugger about with the air conditioning and eventually figure out how to switch the damn thing off.

Thomas Abt:

We were talking about defense.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay. Yeah. The amount of money that's being spent, that's right. Just outstanding. That leaves the issue then it seems that half the struggle of what you are trying to do is also to teach people how to form a plan. Not just what to put in the plan, but it seems you're also having to educate and train them how to make a plan.

Thomas Abt:

Yes. I think that's right. You know how to create a plan that is actionable. One of the things that I increasingly think is that if your plan is more than some maximum length, 10 pages, 15 pages, it ultimately is not a workable plan. You need a plan that people can read in one sitting, a plan that has deliverables, a plan that has names, dates, SMART goals, specific, measurable, all of those things.

That may not be your outward facing plan because you don't necessarily want to put people on the spot, but there has to be that type of thing. I have to tell you, I've implemented these plans myself you know as head of public safety in New York, as chief of staff at the Office of Justice Programs. It's hard to do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh yeah.

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Thomas Abt:

If you looked at my own personal success in developing and then implementing these plans, maybe you'd give me a B plus or a B you know. It wouldn't be that-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's okay. I'm in a D category at this point. I'm sitting at the back of the room failing to take notes, so don't worry.

Thomas Abt:

Right. There's enormous resistance. I can tell you, like sitting in meetings and saying, "Okay. You are going to take on this concrete deliverable, correct?" No commitment.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Accountability.

Thomas Abt:

No commitment. No commitment. You'll finish this by what date? To get that out of people is-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Don't pin me down.

Thomas Abt:

Right. Is challenging in any context and-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Don't set me up so I might fail.

Thomas Abt:

Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Set me up so I can continue not doing my job.

Thomas Abt:

Right. Not surprisingly, I was a lot more successful when I was head of public safety and I had a lot more authority.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. That's interesting. I mean, the whole part about this then is that it needs to be ... Or that you've got an increase in accountability because part of your appendix in the plan is you don't just separate out the idea as having a plan. You're specific about, what are you doing about prevention? What are you doing about intervention and what are you doing about enforcement? Those are different pieces. They're going to require different parts of the city to play nice.

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Thomas Abt:

Correct.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

All those parts of the cities have a tendency to want to focus on just the specific things. You know, I think you almost see it in some of the questions and answers that you've been getting in some of the sessions I think. They're not interested in so much what works. What they prefer to focus on is what feels good, what they think works or what they've always done.

Thomas Abt:

Well, I think one of the things that you see in our field, but you also see it in other places in this work is a lot of people claim to be focused on the problem, but in reality, they are champions of a particular solution.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. Yeah.

Thomas Abt:

They're always trying to fit their solution to the problem. I think one of the things that I tried to do when I approached writing this book is I tried to be as agnostic as possible as to solutions and just go where the evidence led me. Part of the reason that I was able to do that is because it was based on this systematic meta-review and there are rules for how that is done.

You know, the fact is, is that the only strategies that really received an endorsement in the book are strategies for which there was a systematic review that had a number of quasi-experimental or experimental studies that studied it. I did not talk about every promising strategy that I might like, or that I might think worked. Ultimately, I had a criteria and if it met the criteria, it would be in the book and if it didn't, it wasn't.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's an interesting thing because so many people are involved in evidence-based policy, such as people involved in evidence-based policing, but it's more than that, run into this issue that I find kind of fascinating even if it just frustrates the hell out of me. Which is people are quite to believe in science when it comes to climate change, when it ... Well, most people, when it comes to evolution, well, most people.

They'll get in an airplane, which is fundamentally a great big metal tube flying six miles up at 500 miles an hour, quite happily because it's just full of science and engineering. Then suddenly when it comes to another area, which is crime and crime prevention, which is a scientific field, and it continues to emerge as a scientific field. At that point, no, it's an art. It's my opinion.

It's what I think and my experiences is equally as valuable as these 30 studies that went into the systematic review. It just drives me fucking crazy.

Thomas Abt:

I get it. I think one of the things, when I was writing the book, I began a chapter about, why haven't these policies received more attention and why aren't they receiving more support? The original framing was, we know what works

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so why isn't the word getting out? Then I really realized that this we, who knows what works is actually exceedingly small. We spend a lot of our time, this collective we, this small cadre of criminologists, crime researchers, practitioners talking to one another. We are often not out there writing the evidence-based [crosstalk 00:16:18]

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I try not to talk to criminologists. Have you met them? Good grief. I mean, at least a few of them are decent drinkers.

Thomas Abt:

Right. Right. I think that we actually haven't always done our homework because among this very small circle of researchers, yes, there's a lot of consensus about what works. We understand the evidence, but is that true of most mayors? Is that true of most legislators? Absolutely not. Is it true of most people in the media? One of the things that the book is intended to do is break out of our bubble.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mainly thought the main reason I wasn't making any progress was because of my personality, but it's because there aren't enough people who are ... Actually, it probably is my personality in my case.

Thomas Abt:

Jerry, I think you're making enormous progress despite your difficult personality.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well played. Ah, so true. It hurts, but it's true. The issue of reaching out to people is a challenge because academics are not trained to do it. I think this is where the book you've written is really interesting, because also the effort that you're making to go to cities and go to speak to people speaks a lot to the fact that you've not always been heavily vested in academia.

Thomas Abt:

Well, I think-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Believe me, that's a compliment.

Thomas Abt:

Right. Well, I think this is something that we share. I think you get enormous leverage within the law enforcement community from the fact that you are a former law enforcement official. Not just that, I think it informs your ability to communicate effectively with them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If that's the case, it makes it a challenge therefore, which is spreading an evidence-based message, because a lot of the really good practitioner ... Not practitioners. A lot of the really good people who understand this field and can make a significant contribution haven't necessarily had a practitioner background. Then you see these dichotomous views, which is they should have a practitioner background.

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Well, that's crazy because we need to work better on helping other academics start to expand and move into more public facing criminology because that's like saying, you can only treat my cancer if you've had cancer.

Thomas Abt:

Right. Right. I absolutely agree. I'm a former prosecutor and I also get leverage and credibility among certain audiences for that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You're up in Manhattan too.

Thomas Abt:

Right. There are things like that, but I think that you and I ... and I think we both do this in our own respective ways, we have to serve as ambassadors. We have to open the door for other academics. Not that other academics necessarily need our help, but I agree with you that the message shouldn't be only trust academics who are former law enforcement. That would be a terrible message to send. I think that the message we send is that we should be doing more action-oriented practitioner-researcher partnerships.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, good grief. Don't tell mainstream criminology that you want to do stuff that might actually be useful.

Thomas Abt:

Well, do you think you're not part of mainstream criminology?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Silence. That's a really interesting question. I don't think I'm part of mainstream anything, but that's just possibly me personally. The areas I'm interested in like environmental criminology, which for the listeners is the criminology, the built environment. We're not talking about all selects in Alaska. That area of the built environment trying to think about why is there more drug dealing on that corner rather than the corner three or four blocks away?

That I think is really fascinating. I think that's becoming mainstream, but only in the last few years. We've had people working in those areas but I think they've largely felt that they've been outside of mainstream criminology. Mainstream criminology still feels like it's absolutely focused on developmental life course criminology. When you look at the attendance at sessions at things like the American Society of Criminology, that's where so much of this is.

There's value in understanding that stuff, but I think for the policy relevance to do what you're talking about, which is let's first stop the bleeding, that has very little value. I think these smaller areas are probably a little bit more niche. They're talking about the effectiveness of frontline policing, thinking about what's going on, on street corners? This micro geography, these kinds of factors, they aren't part of mainstream criminology by any stretch.

The community that's available to be that outreach to the practitioners and the policymakers still seems really small. If we're starting to exclude people because they don't have a practitioner background then we're really screwed.

Thomas Abt:

I guess, I think I'm more optimistic. I think that-

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

I like that about you. Good. I've been beaten down by my own miserable experience.

Thomas Abt:

Well, I actually think that you're having a lot of success in reaching practitioners and building this research.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I give them something to listen to while they're driving in the car.

Thomas Abt:

Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Don't fall asleep on the drive home folks.

Thomas Abt:

I think you're having some success. I obviously think that pioneers like Larry Sherman, David Weisberg-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh sure. I mean, giants in the field.

Thomas Abt:

They've had significant impact and so I'm optimistic that criminology that is both practical and rigorous is going to continue to influence policy making. You know, we need more of it and what I'm actually concerned about is that translation function.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. The work's there. We've got the academic work. I mean, there's obviously more that needs to be done. There are so many things that we don't know about. How do we take the message that you want to spread and how do we expand that to things like city and county managers?

Thomas Abt:

I think we speak to them. I think we engage them. You know, I'm spending a lot of my time now thinking about, can I go to the U.S. Conference of Mayors conference or the National League of Cities? Can I reach audiences there? I think that many of us don't, with a lot of intentionality, go out and try to engage these various audiences. We wait to be asked. I think that that is challenging.

As we often do, it's natural and it's understandable, we're often more interested in what our colleagues, our academic peers think than the world outside. I think that that while it's understandable, I think that that can be seductive. For me, I'm a former policymaker and I've been a policymaker and practitioner for much longer than I've been in academia, and so ultimately for me, research is a means to an end.

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

One of the challenges of trying to work within a policy environment when you're an evidence-based person, is it's really easy to become negative about what's going on. That's what frustrates me about mainstream criminology, is that people who are not heavily versed ... I talk about policing because it's more my area, who are not embedded in policing that really understand it, find it really easy to sit outside and just snipe and be negative without really understanding some of the nuance. That seems to be a model that a lot of people in academia find successful. I find that hugely frustrating.

Thomas Abt:

Well, I think that the standard book on various issues, academic or otherwise, is always long on diagnosis and critique and short on concrete solutions.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Thomas Abt:

I made a big effort for Bleeding Out to be really mostly devoted to solutions. I think that there is a balance and I think what frustrates me is when we're out of balance. I think we do need critiques from outside.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Absolutely. I'm not disputing that.

Thomas Abt:

Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

As you say, it's the balance. It feels like it's so heavily weighted towards you guys working in policing, you're crap. Then we follow up with, "Okay. And?" Then there's nothing.

Thomas Abt:

Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Crickets.

Thomas Abt:

I do think that we have a lot of conversation about what the criminal justice system should not do. That's very important.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes.

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Thomas Abt:

We also need a lot of conversation about what the criminal justice system should do and providing the field with affirmative guidance. At the end of the day, as I say in the book, we need to shift the narrative from winning an argument to solving a problem.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's a nice way of putting it.

Thomas Abt:

Right. I think it's easy to say, but quite hard to do. Ultimately for me, when I'm doing this work what I'm trying to gauge from people often is, are you a problem solver or are you an argument winner? If you're really just an argument winner, I'm going to probably try to find a way to spend a little bit less time and energy working with you. I'm going to try and spend more time. Whether I agree with you on the specifics or not, if I believe that you are a committed problem solver and that you're working in good faith, I want to be helpful.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's a great way of thinking about it because otherwise you exhaust huge amounts of energy. We only have limited time. That's one of the frustrations of working in an environment where you have to do multiple things. Where you have to be answerable to the university and be in committees and service and teaching. All those things are good, absolutely, but if you have a commitment to moving the field forward, first we have to identify what forward looks like and then have the time and energy to make those kinds of moves.

Thomas Abt:

I agree. I agree.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I've got my own views on the book, which I enjoyed reading very much. I'll be upfront, I especially like the fact that you were brave enough and it takes some guts to come up with you know, "Here's an appendix with an actual plan. Here's what you guys should do." Because it's so easy to read. I think that a lot of practitioners complain that they get a lot of ideas from academia, but they tend to be abstract.

There's lovely theoretical notions but then I talk to cops on the street and say, "Well, that's great and I get the theory, but will you just tell me what the fuck you want me to do? What is it you actually want me to do?"

Thomas Abt:

Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is that what you were trying to do with the book? I got that sense of it, but is that what you're going forward to some degree?

Thomas Abt:

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Well, ultimately I come from the policy world, so I wanted to have a policy impact and I really did write the book as a how-to guide on saving lives and reducing violence. The idea is that it is a call to action, but it is also very much a practical roadmap. You know, you need networks, frameworks and a plan. That plan needs to be focused, balanced, and fair. You need to focus on people, places, behaviors.

You know, I made extraordinary efforts in the writing of this thinking about the level of complexity, because if you sacrifice too much complexity, you lose accuracy. If you have too much complexity, you lose accessibility and so striking that balance, I really tied myself up in knots about that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No. I get it completely having written Reducing Crime: A Companion for Police Leaders.

Thomas Abt:

I think you were very successful.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You want to make it simple enough that people can remember it and will actually action it, otherwise it's pointless. Then you run the risk of making it too simple and it loses some of that nuance and value. Yeah. It's a struggle to find that balance.

Thomas Abt:

Let me ask you a question. What did you not like about the book?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That is a good question and I'm not sure I have an answer for you.

Thomas Abt:

I'm interested. Ultimately for me, I'm trying to get better. I'm trying to make the work better and so in an odd way, the criticisms are actually sometimes more valuable than the compliments because the criticisms give you an opportunity to improve.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This is not a criticism of the book per se, but this is a struggle that I have generally, which ... And I've never found ... I'm sorry, I'm not sure. I think you came closer than I did. How do we take the horrible way that we articulate science around things like systematic reviews, which are full of discussions about odds ratios and confidence intervals and sample sizes and convey to people who are not interested in learning that? Bless them for that because it's only a masochist that dives into that. Convey that to people who have actually got to try and learn from that.

I think that's the biggest struggle because we want to convey to our scientific colleagues that we have done due diligence in understanding the scientific literature and the research. We've done a systematic review so we're not just making shit up as we go. Then we have to convey that in a book form to people in a way that we're not blowing their minds with these unnecessary terms. I think that's incredibly difficult to do.

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I think you came closer than I did, but I still think it's really difficult to sit in front of an audience of policymakers and practitioners and community people and say, "Let me tell you about this systematic review, the 33 reviews, the odds ratios and the confidence intervals." At that point it becomes they're reaching for the phone to catch up on Twitter. You know?

Thomas Abt:

I think we can always aspire to do better. I also have to say, this is why you have editors. I had people working with me to help me make this accessible. I have to say the-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, collectively, you guys did a great job.

Thomas Abt:

Yeah. I have to say, my editors made a real contribution. You know, the draft that I handed in was significantly improved by that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

As Ernest Hemingway said, the first draft of everything is shit. He'd read a lot of my work apparently.

Thomas Abt:

It is a process and it was also helpful that my editors were not in the field.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. Actually, for Reducing Crime I sent draft copies to a few cops that I know who I thought would be honest enough to give me feedback, and they did. They gave me great feedback. I probably wasn't able to well enough incorporate it in there. It's tough because we think it's our baby and we think it's awesome, but you've got to send it to people who will tell you where you are.

Thomas Abt:

Right. At the same time, I think that you also want the work to be credible. One of the things that I was very fortunate to do was that the Guggenheim Foundation set up a meeting where we invited, I think, eight or nine people. People like David Kennedy, Tracey Meares, Pat Sharkey, Mark Kleiman.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There's a few luminaries in the field right there.

Thomas Abt:

Right. Also, Walter Katz, who was Rahm Emanuel's head of public safety, Juan Carter, who's an effective street worker out of Providence, Rhode Island and others. I got to, ahead of time, check with people, is this credible? Is this a fair representation of the research? Again, the book was significantly improved.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

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You actually sent me some stuff I remember appreciating you for doing that.

Thomas Abt:

Absolutely. Actually, yes, you were one of many people who ... I'm also very fortunate because of my relationship at OJP. I was indirectly playing a role in funding so many criminologists that I have a great Rolodex. I ran the gang section by Scott Decker. I ran some of the gun stuff by Phil Cook and Daniel Webster. You know, sometimes they were like, "Well done, not many corrections." A few times they had significant comments.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's great and the book is better for that.

Thomas Abt:

Right. My position was like, "I don't want to be surprised. You know, I'd rather you tell me I got it wrong in private and I can fix it." Ultimately I think part of this is that the book at the end of the day is really a synthesis of other people's work. There's really not that much sort of ... I think the highest compliment you could pay to me about the book is that, "Oh, you arranged that well. You framed it well. You organized it well."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's really important because if we make people go off ... And people have started mocking me for saying this. If we make people go off and force them to read the latest issue of the Bangladeshi Journal of Sheep Stealing and Criminology, nobody's ever going to read scientific literature again.

Thomas Abt:

Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think the rearrangement, the translation, the conversion into something that approximates policymaker language is not only huge, but it's horribly undervalued in academia.

Thomas Abt:

Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Whereas you almost don't get rewarded for writing stuff that is comprehensible to normal human beings. That is I think a horrible failing of academia generally.

Thomas Abt:

Well, I also think there's this massive bias towards novelty in academia, which is that you are rewarded for pioneering and coming up with new ideas. That's good in some ways, but it also means that you often don't intellectually play nice. You don't always fully acknowledge that your work is standing on the shoulders of all of these other people. That people are often so concerned with intellectually branding their work and differentiating. For me, I am a synthesist and so I am not trying to represent-

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's not a member of an 80s electronic band, is it?

Thomas Abt:

I'm not trying to represent the work as original things. I'm trying to do the best I can to represent your work, Anthony Braga's work, David Weisberg's work and the work of many, many others. Again, I think that's about really being focused on working towards a solution as opposed to branding yourself or focusing on a problem rather than branding yourself about a particular solution. If the evidence swings and we learn things that are contrary to this book in 10 years, I'll write something else that says, "I take it all back."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What's next for you?

Thomas Abt:

I think in the immediate term, I want to do everything I can to make sure that this book influences practice. I want to help cities like Philadelphia, Baltimore, St. Louis, other places, if they're interested in putting these principles into practice, I want to be supportive. I'm going to be doing a lot of that. I think ultimately I see my career ... And it's obviously not all up to me, but I see my career as going back and forth between academia and government. I hope to return to government in some capacity at some point.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We'll be better off for it.

Thomas Abt:

Well, we'll see.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Thomas, good luck with it. Thanks very much.

Thomas Abt:

Thank you.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've been listening to episode 18 of reducing crime recorded in Philadelphia in September 2019. Other episodes look at reducingcrime.com or the usual podcasty places. New episodes are announced on Twitter @_reducing crime. Be safe and best of luck.