

#31 (ALEX MURRAY)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

This is Jerry Ratcliffe with Reducing Crime, a podcast featuring influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers. Commander Alex Murray is the lead officer tackling specialist crime for London's Metropolitan Police. We chat about offender management opportunities during COVID-19 and the important evidence-based policing lessons for police leadership.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Welcome, the guest theme tune for the previous episode was *The Wire*, the most realistic portrayal to East Coast, American crime and urban policing ever made. For this episode's guest theme, we headed over the ditch to revisit a British television police drama from the mid-1970s that had just over 50 episodes and spurred two movies. Some of the series was filmed in the London Docklands, an area that I policed as a young man back in the Jurassic Era.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Longtime listeners to the podcast may recognize it as the up-tempo opening credits to the original theme tune for this podcast. As the show featured officers from London's Metropolitan Police, it seemed a fitting choice for my chat with Alex Murray. Alex Murray is the commander over specialist crime in London's Metropolitan Police with responsibilities covering trafficking, online child abuse, the flying squad, cybercrime and major crime. He is a firearms, counter-terrorism and public order commander, and has previously worked in local policing, CID and counter terrorism. Prior to joining the Met in 2020, he was temporary Assistant Chief Constable for crime with West Midlands police. In 2008, Alex graduated from Cambridge University with a master's thesis exploring police legitimacy within Muslim communities.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

He's the founder of the Society of Evidence-Based Policing and conducted numerous randomized experiments. Many were the focus on behavioral science. He has also taken his expertise overseas with police training programs in India, Cambodia and Europe. He received the 2014 Superintendent's Award for Excellence in policing, has been recognized by George Mason University Center for Evidence-based Policing and as a visiting scholar at Cambridge University. In 2017, he was awarded an OBE in part for his marvelous contributions to evidence-based policing. Evidence-based policing is a movement that seeks to use communicate and produce research evidence that can really improve how

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we police. You can join the international society in a few seconds and it's free. Just Google Society of Evidence-based Policing. Some countries also have their own societies occasionally with a small fee, but still well-worth it. Due to COVID-19, Alex and I caught up online.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

All right. I think this will all work and if not, we'll all do it again. And ideally over a beer would be perfect.

Alex Murray:

Oh, wonderful. Yeah, when are you next over?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There is no plan at the moment because just nobody in their right mind wants anybody from America coming to visit since we've just given up on COVID. I think that's the best way to describe it. We have just given up here. I mean, what is it like policing in I mean, here we are in what feels like about the 3000th month of COVID and now you're GOLD commander for COVID for one of the biggest cities in the world. I'm kind of a bit fascinated as to what that's like.

Alex Murray:

It presents some great challenges and opportunities, Jerry. So there's a GOLD COVID and when he's not here, I'm GOLD COVID. I'm mostly GOLD resilience. So when he's not available, I take over him.

So when we went into first lockdown, our number one target is to reduce violence and that's right. And I've done stuff here as a result of listening to one of your podcasts. One of the things that I do in addition to my day job is look at offender management and we were coming out the first lockdown and thought, what is it we can do that will impact on violence? And so it was interesting in 10 days, I think we launched one of the biggest violent crime hotspot experiments ever. I got Jeff Barnes involved in it and we mapped where we thought the hotspots would be. And we put offices in those areas and then concurrently at the same time, up to 1000 defenders, we mapped.

Alex Murray:

And used some previous research just to knock on their door and sort of do a stick and a carrot and say, "Look, we know who you are." Is a great opportunity on the back of not going out for three months where you have committed no crime and crime did go through the floor in the first lockdown, to change the way you've operated. "How did it feel not getting involved in crime or continue? And by the way, if you don't, we're here."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'd love to know what the responses were. How did it feel not spending three months committing crime? And what were some of the answers you got?

Alex Murray:

Well, being a good leader, I thought, well, I've got to do some of these if I'm asking them to do it. So I did, I went out and we actually got behavioral science team to write a letter. So from each chief superintendent of the borough, so we

delivered a letter which really focused people's minds on why they shouldn't go out and commit crime. And we're getting it evaluated at the moment. I mean, the hotspot work was a randomized control trial. The second one was we just visited 1000 people. We needed to get out there and do it. The one I picked so, it was the guy who was connected with gangs who had stabbed people. And I sat down in his tiny little bedsit actually with his dad. His dad was a first generation immigrant. He was well in the London scene. And what more surprise me was this guy was really bright and an actual fact, believe it or not, I'm not making this up, he wanted to be an economist.

Alex Murray:

But he was in a heart of some tricky places in London. And part of this is always rapport building. Isn't it? Particularly, you're trying to stop people and you've got to make a quick decision. Am I trying to make people fearful and engage in the deterrent approach? Or am I trying to build a rapport to say, "Look where we're not bad people. We both want to stop violence. Look, this is a way out for you." And so, yeah, the conversation with him went like that. And we aim to visit 1000 people twice. We didn't visit that many and many of the people had moved, logistically it was tricky.

Alex Murray:

And I'm sure a lot of officers were told where to go, but there's a really interesting experiment with John Denley and Barak Ariel called, I Heard it Through the Grapevine.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes. That's really fascinating.

Alex Murray:

Yeah. So all they did was they picked people involved in serious organized crime who were not in trouble and they just got one detective to knock on their door once to say, "You're not in trouble at the moment, but we know who you are and you need to stop and how can we help you?" They did that using an RCT and they saw a 35% reduction in re-offending over the following 12 months as measured by arrest.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What I think is fascinating about that is that it taps into some of those criminological theories that we know from sort of environmental crim ideas about removing anonymity. I think a lot of offenders are unaware that police actually know who they are and have quite a lot of information on them.

Alex Murray:

Yeah. Or the other criminological theories around the certainty and deterrence aspects.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Exactly.

Alex Murray:

In all the deterrence literature, it's not severity of punishment that affects whether someone's going to make a decision to commit a crime. It's not often what they call celerity, so the speed of justice, it's a calculation subconscious or otherwise around whether I'm going to get caught or not.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. You founded the society of evidence-based policing. And you've been thinking about evidence-based policing for a long time, but COVID-19 was this kind of completely new thing that really we had, I think worldwide, very little experience of dealing with from a policing perspective. How do you take an evidence-based policing approach to something like COVID-19 given the lack of evidence in the field about how to deal with it? I mean, obviously as we move forward, we're going to know a great deal, but are there lessons that you learned already from being involved in evidence-based policing that were useful?

Alex Murray:

Yeah, definitely. I mean, it's worth saying that COVID-19 has had a profound effect on crime, particularly during the lockdown areas. Now sometimes crime has gone up like fraud and some of the online sex offending work, but generally crime, particularly street violence went down considerably. And even the news on domestic violence is relatively mixed, a lot of people are using dodgy data to say it's gone up like calls to help lines and stuff like that. Or, and a lot of them aren't absolutely bang on straight up data. So some of the observation or differences are quite interesting, but perhaps the one in the UK that makes me think the most is how do we take the community with us? How do we come out of this? Bearing in mind, it's a health crisis we're facing not a criminal justice crisis we're facing. How do we come out assisting the strategic aims of reducing infections in the UK whilst also having the public think that we are legitimate and think that the relationship with the police is good?

Alex Murray:

So in the UK we've been following this thing called the four E approach, you engage, explain, encourage and the last bit is enforce.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Rachel Tuffin talked about that on her episode. Yep.

Alex Murray:

So perhaps the criminal justice insight and that is it one around legitimacy and procedural justice. Now, what do we mean by legitimacy? Well, it's to what extent to the public think that we've got the right to do what we do? Why is that important? Because if they think that, then they're more likely to comply with us, cooperate with us and empower us to do things. And what is the thing that best builds therefore legitimacy? Well, it's procedural justice and these are all stupid jargon words, but what is procedural justice? Well, it's not rocket science, but sometimes we just don't do what is not rocket science. So it's treating people with dignity and respect, demonstrating your motivation is good and listening to what the individual has got to say.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So what you're saying is that there are definite lessons that we've learned from policing crime that are applicable to policing a public health pandemic.

Alex Murray:

Yeah, totally. So if you think about what Lorraine Mazerolle did in Australia with breath tests. How far away is breath tests for drink-driving from COVID? Well, quite a long way, in actual fact she noticed that whilst every cop understood you should treat people with dignity-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, most of them anyway, I mean most of them, right?

Alex Murray:

Basically the cop would walk up, they'd say, "Blow in there." They'd blow green and then they say thanks very much on your way. Whereas the PJ approach was, "Thanks very much for stopping. Do you know the hardest part of my job is telling someone that they've just lost their child because of a drink driver? That's why I'm doing this." Doing the positive breath test and then say, "Thanks very much. Is there anything I can help you with?" Now, those two reactions are miles apart from each other, but they breed a difference in how people think of the cops.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And so little effort required to do it as well.

Alex Murray:

Yeah. But it doesn't always happen. And I'm being polite there. When you are challenging someone in a COVID situation, [inaudible 00:10:28] someone's on a protest and there's too many people or they're not wearing a mask or they're in an unlicensed music event, the same applies.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. I think especially at the moment, because they probably do have questions about why is this a policing issue? And we're seeing discussions here in the United States around defunding police, because there's been so much mission creep in policing and COVID-19 is just exacerbating that in so many places.

Alex Murray:

Yeah. That's interesting. I'm not too sure how much mission creep has been over here, but if we had to take a true partnership approach, then in actual fact, we should accept that as a health crisis. And then we should accept that for a small proportion of the community in actual fact, we have to get involved in enforcement and albeit we don't want to because we'd much rather be tackling crime and injustice. In actual fact, sometimes we need to play second fiddle and help the National Health Service and help people who are suffering.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

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Isn't that a holistic approach to management anyway? I mean, we often get upset and we demand that other services help in terms of the fight against crime. And now it's time for policing to step up and help in terms of public health.

Alex Murray:

That's right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Your involvement in evidence-based policing has been extensive. You're one of the leading police officers worldwide in terms of promoting evidence-based policing. How did you get into it? Was it a creeping understanding of it or was there some light bulb moment?

Alex Murray:

Yeah, just a light bulb moment, a bit of an epiphany really. And it always circumstances sometimes conspire to make things happen. So I was fortunate enough as a young cop in Birmingham to get onto what they call a high potential development scheme. With that came some money to get a qualification and you could get qualification in those days in whatever you wanted. And I thought, well, I'd quite like a jolly in actual fact. So the only residential course you could do was at Cambridge University. And I approached the superintendent and said, "Can I do this master's at Cambridge?" And he actually said, "Who do you think you are? No, you can't."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

[inaudible 00:12:21]. There's a procedural justice approach to dealing with our own staff. That's marvelous.

Alex Murray:

Yeah. So I went away with the tail between my legs, unfortunately he got in trouble not long after that. And the new superintendent came along and I approached him and he said, "Yeah, of course, fill your boots. Go on."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So did you say unfortunately, or fortunately?

Alex Murray:

Well, I'm being diplomatic and-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The stars aligned for you, sir.

Alex Murray:

That's right. And so I went to diploma at Cambridge Uni, which was my first exposure to criminology after having been a cop for a very long time. And most criminology is about, what's crime about? Why do people commit crime? Why do people not commit crime? And then I thought there's so much more to this than I always thought as a cop. And then in the second year, this guy called Larry Sherman started on the course.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

He's a troublemaker. I've heard of him.

Alex Murray:

He's a troublemaker. Yeah. And then he talked the evidence-based policing approach, which was still relatively new and emerging then. And the two things like criminological understanding combined with an applied approach to how you police to make things better. I was just left going. What, why, why do I not know this?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How many of years' service did you have at that time?

Alex Murray:

I have 12 years service.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That is amazing. You can do over a decade in a job and then not really be exposed to anything like that until you go outside of policing to go and find that there is this whole world of policing that you were unaware of.

Alex Murray:

Yeah. If I'm superficial, then I guess as a police officer, there's good people, bad people. The job is to lock up the bad people to protect the good people and then everything is all right, apart from the sentence lengths are not long enough. Now that certainly that's massively pejorative and most police officers I know aren't like that, but that's simplifying it. So in actual fact, you quickly realize that that's not the case, that in actual fact, a significant proportion of victims and also offenders and vice versa, criminal justice impact on someone's life is perhaps less than a cop thinks. And in actual fact, other factors have a much bigger push and pull factor.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Once people have about five years' service, they start to look around and start to get a bit kind of like, "Really, is this it? Have I got another 20 years of this?" Because this doesn't seem to be having much of an impact.

Alex Murray:

Yeah. And of course let's not kid ourselves. People can't generally commit crime when they're in prison. So we're not here saying, being on one end of the spectrum, lock them all up or prison is bad for everybody. People can't generally commit crime in the community if they are incarcerated. So, and the worst people need to be in prison. Well, let's not debate around whether prison works or not. That's for another time I'm sure, but.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In every community, there are some people who really worked hard to earn our love and attention.

Alex Murray:

That's right. But our job is to prevent crime, is it not, I think?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Exactly.

Alex Murray:

And part of preventing crime is making sure we get the worst people incarcerated, but then when you move above and beyond that as a cop, what is it you can do to prevent crime? And we can be a lot more sophisticated to look at the evidence of what is effective and what isn't, and that's important. And that's what evidence-based policing is about. I think what is effective and what is not effective. And if you don't know, how do you get to a point where you understand whether it is or not?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you've got a bunch of that from your classes with Larry Sherman. So I'm a little bit fascinated because you've got an undergraduate degree from Birmingham. Yes?

Alex Murray:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What was that in?

Alex Murray:

Geography.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So like I did, do you think undergraduate degrees are preparing people for an understanding of science and evidence?

Alex Murray:

Yeah. I think it does in a way. There's no fear around reading a research paper for example, we know of course some of the best policing scholars like yourself, Jerry are academics.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You have a very low bar for best policing scholar, carry on.

Alex Murray:

But being an academic, they also write in a particular way and that needs to be translatable if we're going to do something with it. And so I guess having an undergraduate degree often will prepare you for reading stuff and understanding stuff like that first time, and it doesn't present any issues. But the amount of people for example, had

been through the Cambridge master's program, we've never had a qualification and come out with widely incredible stuff. It's never an issue.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, one of the things that I remember from my policing days in the Met, which is the force that you're with now is how many super bright, smart people there were that didn't have qualifications. And I think half of getting through an undergraduate degree is just learning the mechanisms and the skillset to get through. But the innate intelligence is still there.

Alex Murray:

Yeah. Well you're 100%. And I think some people could conflate the argument with now having a degree to join the police with. So what you're saying, you're saying that I'm not intelligent, which of course is so far from the truth. I think you've just said that. It's just now saying that their world is so complex that every cop who joins can get degrees as they join, which is what nursing does and has done a long time ago.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So even though I've been saying that, I think the best time to catch people is when they have at least five years' service, because I think they're more open to different ideas about how to do policing. Do you think that we should be teaching people about evidence-based policing earlier in their policing careers then? Because you went 12 years before you were really exposed to Larry Sherman and those kind of ideas. Do you think we need to be doing more of it earlier?

Alex Murray:

Yeah, for sure. I think some of the basic tenants of evidence-based practice is really important. I think some of the basic tenants of criminology is really important and it gives you an understanding of why people are who they are and that can actually change how you treat people out there. I did one really interesting experiment where we put growth mindset graffiti in cellblocks. So a prisoner comes along, sitting in a blank cell for 24 hours. Well, now they can read graffiti on the wall. And the graffiti actually came from the voice of an offender and it spoke about how they used to blame everyone else and they realized they got to change. So that was the crux of it. But the thing that it made me think about was I wonder how many police officers are reading that graffiti.

Alex Murray:

And I wonder to what extent it makes people and officers realize particularly perhaps those young in service who are coming in, there is a depth of character to everyone involved in this game of criminal justice, all the police officers and all the criminals. And I think if you have a good understanding of where a criminal is coming from, then you're better equipped to catch them, to incarcerate them if necessary, but also to understand what needs to change in their lives to stop them offending and hurting more people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is that one of the ways that we should be thinking about moving a little bit more evidence-based education to the frontline, thinking about ways like graffiti around police stations and different ways to reach out to them?

Alex Murray:

I think there's a bit around criminology. Why do people do bad things and what works? I think if people understand what works, then when their Sergeant or their boss tells them to do something, they'll know that it's effective or not, and it might change their motivation. And then I think as you go up a couple of ranks, there's a bit around, if I am setting a load of tactics, are those tactics effective, or if I am commissioning work from the third sector or something, what evaluation am I asking for? And are they engaging in something based on ideology or evidence? Because we all want the same thing. Everybody wants violence to stop or offending to stop, but sometimes we're going about it the wrong way. And so often we do it based on ideology rather than the evidence of what's effective.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And what do you mean by ideology?

Alex Murray:

You can go right and left on this. All domestic violence perpetrators are evil and therefore should be incarcerated for as long as possible, for example might be an ideological presumption. We need to look at the evidence of what is effective in domestic violence interventions to ensure that, and it's normally the woman with many exceptions doesn't get assaulted again. And often certain interventions that you think would be effective, might backfire for example. So that's an ideological perspective and the good old fashioned scared straight example of well, let's put everyone to a lot of PE because that'll make them feel better and offend less. Some of that's not particularly effective. And even some of the mentoring schemes, depending on how you run them, backfire that... And of course there's loads of evidence out there about stuff that isn't bad, but just is a complete waste of time.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You're a commander in one of the biggest police forces in the world. So you're spending a lot of time with command staff. What's your perception of the uptake of this amongst command staff? Because there'll be a lot of people who have not been to Cambridge who have not been through evidence-based policing classes, like the sorts of things that I run and other people run. Is there receptivity or is their resistance to these ideas? What are you experiencing?

Alex Murray:

Well in the Met, I find people are really open to it. And of course there's exceptions. And I think so much depends on the chief officer. I know other forces around the world where the chief officer changes and suddenly everything changes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's crazy, isn't it?

Alex Murray:

The chief officer does not like it, then you stop being engaged in it, which is interesting. Isn't it? Because this is about what works and what doesn't work. This is not like a fad that comes and goes, it wasn't invented in medicine and then after 20 years they said, let's move on to the next fad. I've heard that quite a lot that people go, "Oh yeah, it's about evidence-based policing." Now it was about problem-oriented policing. Last time before that it was intelligence led policing. And before that it was community-based policing, what will it be next time? Which is absolute nonsense. Evidence-Based policing means how do you problem solve appropriately? How do you deal with intelligence appropriately?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's the overarching tool that sits over the top of all of those.

Alex Murray:

Yeah. I mean, hey, if you want to be evident, you could be a very evidence-based criminal if you wanted to. In fact, I'm sure some of the best ones are. They will test rigorously and empirically what is effective and what isn't effective and then do what is effective because it will achieve their aims.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And they will continue to track their progress and they will track how they're doing and monitor their performance. Like very good drug dealers will do in terms of tracking what the market needs and in terms of how they're doing financially.

Alex Murray:

Yeah. So Jeff Bezos recently... No, it wasn't Jeff Bezos. It was Uber talking about how they said sorry to their customers. And of course they do loads of trials where they go, "Let's just try saying, sorry, let's try saying, sorry with a \$5 refund." But then they track the difference and they go, "Well, that wasn't that effective, but this was." And the same applies for anything, whether it's commercial services, policing, medicine, or criminality. And if we don't adopt this approach, then we are going to be the ones left behind.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There's too much tendency, isn't there? For people to say, this is what I think will work. And then you do it city-wide so there's no way of really testing it. And they only ever want to trial one thing, the one thing they thought of, but what you've of course, what you've demonstrated, there are so many different ways of trying to achieve the same outcome and seeing which one works. But we seem unwilling to experiment in so many times.

Alex Murray:

Yeah, this cause and effect thing. I mean, I guess at the heart of it is cause and effect. What's the effect of my behavior or activity on whatever? And I think in a hierarchical organization like policing that is very rank orientated and promotion orientated. What we want to say is I became a police leader and crime went down. And so you will attribute

that reduction in crime to your brilliant leadership. And til of course it goes up and then suddenly it's because of socioeconomic climate, bad sentencing, resourcing, everything else that isn't to do with your leadership.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That reducing crime you've talked about this in the past, the USP. Is crime the unique selling point of policing that we should be focusing on or is the mission expanding for policing?

Alex Murray:

Wow, that's an interesting, very interesting question. So I think there has been some shift in thinking around policing, which is expanding our mission. And I think it's motivated by wanting to get upstream and intervene early to reduce crime. And often that's based around well, how do we tackle vulnerability? But I've got my reservations about it because I think as a senior leader, one of our roles is to demystify and simplify the landscape for our staff. And if we go to early intervention, it massively complicates it. From what I can see, there's not a lot of evidence around what's effective in the early intervention space. And I think a lot of people who were trying for all the right reasons to be progressive sometimes miss what's right in front of them. So you often hear the refrain. For example, we can't just keep responding to stuff.

Alex Murray:

We've got to get upstream. And that makes a lot of sense. But interestingly, I've read some recent research by Tom Kirchmaier here in LSE where he looked at response times like the good old fashioned responding to jobs. He's a big data econometrician and he showed that for every 10% reduction and response times, you get there faster, you solve 4.7% more crime. And he worked out for every £1000 that I invest in a response officer, I reduced 1,700 pounds worth of crime therefore, I prevent £1700 worth of crime. So if we've gone on that mission creep, it says, intervene early, let's look at adverse childhood experiences, let's get into primary schools, a multisystemic family therapy for hard to reach families. We're going to be spending a lot of money on stuff that is not necessarily our core mission.

Alex Murray:

Meanwhile, we've stripped response down and we're not solving crime, which means we're not identifying offenders, which means we can't offender manage. So there is something I think about I will return to what is our core USP. And one of your earlier podcasts, which was really good was by Thomas Apt when you interviewed him.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yep. First stop the bleeding.

Alex Murray:

First stop the bleeding, right? So let's first stop the bleeding. And so perhaps if we lived in a really peaceful society, we could start engaging more police officers in primary schools, but first let's stop the bleeding, let's stop the murder rate, the GBH, the DAs, and all that sort of stuff.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And coming back to an earlier point that you were talking about is that notion of legitimacy, if our response times are so painfully slow, because we just put the bodies into frontline policing. That's going to have an effect on legitimacy that might have knock on negative effects on all the other things that we want to try and do.

Alex Murray:

Yeah. And similarly, we can be really evidence-based around how you catch people more effectively, how you solve crimes more effectively. That's what people want. So yeah, I think preventing crime is the vision. Isn't it? But how are you getting there is the question and what's your strategy for reducing crime?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You mentioned Tom Kirchmaier and I'm getting that he's one of your favorite academics at the moment. Who else is on your radar of people who are doing interesting stuff?

Alex Murray:

Only applied police scholar. So and by that, I mean-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you don't necessarily mean a criminologist, but you're talking about a police scholar.

Alex Murray:

Yeah. So who can tell me stuff that actually changes the way I ask my staff to do things, that wonderful Roosevelt is not the critic who counts. And unfortunately in academia, there's thousands of them who will just lambaste policing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You can make a good living being critical to the police without ever having to step out of your ivory tower.

Alex Murray:

Yeah. And people have got this view on policing, which is why shields and helmets. And they're forgetting the fact that 99% of police officers are at three in the morning are going to the domestic violence again, just on their own or with another officer.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So frequently they're on first name terms with the participants.

Alex Murray:

That's right. And it sort of breaks my heart to hear people fighting against police in the name of injustice. When I think policing is about fighting injustice and of course the police are not perfect and we do bad things as well, but I want to create a police force that works with active citizens to find injustice. Anyway, I think we got sidetracked there. Your question was my favorite academic.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We were talking about the role of academia and the fact that you're looking for people who can give you information that can help your team police better.

Alex Murray:

Big data is hard to deal with. And so some academics work really well in that space, Kirchmaier. Some people are really good at simplifying experiments in a quick way. Barak Ariel from Cambridge University really good at that. There's some theoreticians actually who can highlight our understanding so much better. So Justice Tankebe. Some police scholars who actually worked with police officers like you, Jerry or Lorraine Mazerolle or Justin Ready. These are people who write stuff without agenda, just wanting to improve the police service based on really sound often empirical methods. And so there's quite a few.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is your radar good at identifying those folk at their sort of certain characteristics of the academics that you go, "Okay, that's somebody we can work with." Fulfill certain criteria that you kind of think, "Okay, let's see if we can work with this academic."

Alex Murray:

Yeah. And I know methods purist, and again, evidence-based policing can be accused of being about randomized controlled trials. And-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We know it's more than that.

Alex Murray:

We know, and hopefully everyone does. What question are you answering? What's the best way to get to the answer of that question? So if it's why people do stuff often it's qualitative stuff. And if it's what works, often it's quantitative stuff. And of course it's best when they're molded together. But when I read an article that starts with a sentence in speech marks that you automatically know the background of where the individual wants to come from, they've betrayed their ideology, their context, their background, they have picked the quote that somebody has said, whoever it is that backs up what they feel. And that's the sort of stuff, which from my experience has limited utility. I'm interested in someone who can work with us or provide us with stuff that has a real use.

Alex Murray:

So I'd like to know, for example, I don't think the police is very good at forecasting who's most likely to commit harm in the future, but we still do because we want to prevent crime, but we don't do it very well. So I want to work with someone who is a good data scientist who can tell me that. And we've got Jeff Barnes in the Met, working with us on that at the moment.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And Jeff Barnes has been a guest on this podcast in the past. You talked a little bit earlier about identifying a sort of top 1000 people who deserve our love and attention in the Met and back going to speak to them. Have there been issues in challenges around people being on that list?

Alex Murray:

Yes, there has. And politically as well, but it was a one-off approach as the lockdown restrictions were lifted. So it meant that we intervened it on this one occasion. So for that reason, it hasn't been too problematic, but we have had things like the gangs matrix here in London that's had lots of publicity and I think this is where evidence based policing can really offer a better alternative. And what some people fail to realize is that if we don't use actuarial or statistical assessments, we will use non-actuarial and statistical testimonials, i.e., who do you Jerry and Alex, I think is going to be the next defender? And all of the data and evidence shows that that's much less reliable than a statistical assessment.

Alex Murray:

And none of us want to say, computer says yes or no, we'll always have a human at the end going, "Yeah, I agree with that." Or, "No, I don't." And so we just want to do the right thing and be as effective as possible. There's quite a lot of ethicists out there who go, "Well, we should rally against this." But let's combine good data analysis with human integrity to reduce harm on offenders

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's lost on so many people who are currently railing against predictive policing mechanisms. I think they think if the predictive policing software goes away, police will stop trying to guess where crime is, but what you're just going to get is a Sergeant who doesn't know a great deal, who has just come off annual leave, trying to figure out where to send the troops for a night shift, who's just going to make it up. And we should be trying to support that person as much as possible to help him or her better understand where the best place to use a very scarce public resources.

Alex Murray:

Yeah. And that's in place. And it's perhaps even worse impact for people. Every cop's going to say, well, who's our top 10 offenders? Because we don't want them to commit crime. So how'd you get to those top 10 offenders? Well, you could ask a whole series of cops. Who's our top 10? Well, let's put the posters on the wall. Or you could go through a whole set of analytics using regressions and things like that. And you can compare their accuracy in it. Hey, if one's more accurate than the other, you want to use the accurate one. Right?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Absolutely.

Alex Murray:

And of course, all the evidence shows that using multiple regressions and decision trees and methods like that are more effective.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And that's a very difficult one because I think people don't like the idea that a computer is making these sort of life-changing decisions. But the reality is that in this particular case, the end does justify the means.

Alex Murray:

And of course the other cliché is bad data in, bad data out. Bad data in, bad data out. It doesn't just apply to computers. It applies to my head as a cop when I'm trying to decide who the 10 top offenders are, and I've got much more bias over unconscious all there, 20 years' worth of experience going, "Well, I think it's this type of person." So one may have less biased than another. And the other thing to be aware of is that there is always bias. And how do we try and ameliorate it as much as possible?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How can evidence come into play when we're talking about actually getting these ideas across? Because one of the things that you and I have talked about in the past is about dragging in an evidence-based approach to all sorts of other things, such as even running meetings to have decision-making outcomes.

Alex Murray:

I was in a conversation with Rachel Tuffin the other day around where should we look in the world of evidence-based policing as we go forward? Because it is perhaps slightly focused on criminal justice interventions and policing at the ground level. But beyond the rank of inspector, 90% of my time is spent in meetings.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In other places that would be the rank of around a captain or a major in a Sheriff's department. Yep.

Alex Murray:

Yes. Indeed. But what is really good is there's loads and loads of really strong evidence out there around what's effective on how to run an organization, actually, how to run a meeting. Hopefully we are paid because we're trying to make a difference. And if 90% of my time is in a meeting, then surely I should be interested in what is the best way to want a meeting? And I'll tell you what, in a hierarchical organization, meetings are fascinating if you were a sociologist.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When you say fascinating, don't you mean just basically depressing?

Alex Murray:

Well, there's that wonderful phrase the HiPPO, the highest paid person's opinion. And obviously that's very overt and explicit in policing because it's normally who's chairing the meeting who's the highest rank.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

HiPPO decision-Making isn't it?

Alex Murray:

HiPPO decision making, yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Or is it HiPPO led policing.

Alex Murray:

It's HiPPO led policing, isn't it? The higher a rank you are, the further you are from the ground and probably the latest reality of what's happening on the streets.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes. But do you think you're the most experienced and you think you know more about it than anybody else because perish the thought from your exalted position that you might actually drag in a street cop who was actually out there yesterday.

Alex Murray:

Yes, indeed. Google and Amazon, some of the big data firms have done quite a lot of really good research around productivity, around how to run a meeting or in actual fact, the papers go out beforehand, they've written in a particular way. The HiPPO opens up the meeting by saying, "Okay, we don't need to go through the papers because you've all read them." So you don't waste the first meeting. And then they say, "Right, let's have some opinions." And they don't portray their opinion and then attract, everyone listens to each other. And then the decision is made at the end of that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If you end up writing the how to be a senior police officer and run a meeting manual, you could end up being one of the great unsung heroes of policing. And I say unsung, because nobody's going to give you a medal for writing a book for how to run meetings. But it sounds like it's really important.

Alex Murray:

Yeah. It is. Yeah. So if I just look at my podcast list now, obviously Reducing Crime is right up there.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Absolutely. As it should be.

Alex Murray:

WorkLife by Adam Grant, he's an organizational psychologist. And I listen to everything he says, and there's so much in, there you go, well, that is applicable to how I want policing. And Freakonomics my favorite of all time, other than yours.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The check's in the mail.

Alex Murray:

No worries. Malcolm Gladwell, of course, for everything. And of course, much of this is in a book by Matthew Syed called Rebel Ideas.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

He's a great writer. Yes.

Alex Murray:

And he started playing table tennis. He was intrigued why there were seven world champions came from one little village in England. The whole book balance was demystifying the myth of genius, his latest one Rebel Ideas is around the Power of Diversity. And [inaudible 00:35:14] you can read the Power of Diversity in Policing as well. How you need diversity of thought within the organization you operate in and a lot of that is how to run meetings.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But that requires senior leadership who are running the meetings generally it's always the senior leaders who are running it, to be comfortable with disagreement. And I think that's something that they struggle with.

Alex Murray:

Yeah. They can always have their flurry moment right at the end where they go, "I have your authority and power. I've had what everyone says, I'm doing this."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Did you just call it a flurry moment? Oh, I love that. Go on about the flurry moment. That was great. We're not talking about a McFlurry. That's like ordering in some gut rot from McDonald's. Right?

Alex Murray:

I guess the moment where you're paid for your decision, aren't you? But you're doing it having been informed by a diverse set of opinions and you are not lambasting someone who you don't agree with.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. There's so much about evidence-based policing is about moving forward and learning how to do things. Is there kind of ways that we can use an evidence-based approach in different ways or to challenge how we do things?

Alex Murray:

Yeah, sure. I think it'd be a great exercise if every senior police officer said, "What are the five things I want to unlearn in my organization or as an individual? What are the five things that I thought we were doing right that in actual fact we're doing wrong?" That's a really difficult question to ask. Yeah. Makes you think that, doesn't it?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, doesn't it.

Alex Murray:

It might be on how I want a meeting. Because you grew up where you go, "Wow. I want to be like that police leader. Look how he or she absolutely terrified everyone in that meeting. I'll be that one day." That's a lesson to learn, or, "We're going to do this operation and it's going to be across the whole of London or the whole of anywhere because I'm a senior leader and everyone's going to do what I say." But that's a lesson we should probably unlearn because we need to test what's effective.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That means using it and doing different things in different places.

Alex Murray:

Yeah. Or, "I would bring many, many people to justice as possible." So the kid who needs a snicker bar suddenly finds himself prosecuted at the age of 15, creates a turning point in his life. He doesn't get a job. And it actually affects his children and his grandchildren, one tiny ridiculous thing, because we think that a conviction of a 15 year old for a snicker bar might be good. These are things that we want to unlearn.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Did you get the sense that it's harder to do that? I mean, back when we used to have conferences, it always seemed to be lots of leaders in policing trying to find the next silver bullet, the next magical thing. But perhaps the secret is just to find out the thing, the bullets that you currently have that you don't need in your arsenal anymore.

Alex Murray:

Yeah. Or things that are just ineffective. The best thing to unlearn, probably the number one thing to unlearn is the feeling that what you say gets done on the street.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Isn't that the truth?

Alex Murray:

We have so much discretion in policing. And assume there's no Sergeant on your shoulder, when you're walking out on the beat or in your car and people will come back and go, "Yeah, that happens." And of course not necessarily people being disingenuous, it's just that people are creative and they sometimes follow their own way of operating. And so we just need to understand that and work out what's the best balance.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How do you do that? Is that through tracking?

Alex Murray:

Yes. So tracking is when we know something is effective and we used previously, didn't we, the example of two ways of dealing with a breath test. Every officer will say, "Yes, I treat them with dignity." But one will be saying blowing that on your way, the other one will be delivering the other approach. So if we are tracking what's happening, we actually know rather than relying on someone's opinion around what they've actually done. And so you can do that in a number of ways. There's all sorts of ways, but we need to be a little more intrusive, I think.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And to think a little bit more explicit about how are you going to actually prove that folk on the ground are doing what people at headquarters are asking them to do. And I think you're absolutely right. I think that's lost on a lot of people.

Alex Murray:

Yeah. And it's always a balance, isn't it? With the last thing we want is, can't go down that street because he or she said, I'm not allowed. You shouldn't be that strict, but roughly that we're paid to be leaders for a reason. And if we are being evidence-based, we want people to do things that are effective.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, it's a little bit like university professors always thinking that the students are doing the reading.

Alex Murray:

Yeah. Indeed.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Look, you have one of the toughest jobs dealing with COVID-19 for one of the biggest and most fascinating and beautiful cities in the world. So I will let you get back to it, but our best luck with what you're doing. And thanks so much for breaking away from your busy day and spending a little bit of time with me. I really appreciate it.

Alex Murray:

Great stuff. Cheers. Thanks Jerry.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was episode 31 of Reducing Crime recorded remotely in November 2020. You can find a transcript of this and every episode at reducingcrime.com/podcast. New episodes are announced on Twitter at [@_reducingcrime](https://twitter.com/_reducingcrime). If you're somewhat of a masochist, you can also follow me [@Jerry_Ratcliffe](https://twitter.com/Jerry_Ratcliffe).

Be safe and best of luck.