

#20 (CHRIS MAGNUS)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Jerry Ratcliffe here with Reducing Crime, a podcast featuring influential thinkers in the police service and leaning crime and policing researchers. Chris Magnus is the progressive police chief for Tucson, Arizona, where he and his department are pioneering a number of innovative approaches to social problems affecting the city. Find out more in this episode at ReducingCrime.com and on Twitter at [_ReducingCrime](https://twitter.com/_ReducingCrime).

Hi, folks. Two quick housekeeping announcements. I'll be in Baltimore, Maryland, running a police commanders crime reduction course from the 11th to the 13th of March. There are a handful of places available for folk from other agencies. So if you have any interest and if you have seen the why or why wouldn't you, then sign up at ReducingCrime.com/events. Also, if you have any interest in evidence-based policing, don't forget that the American Society of Evidence-Based Policing will be having their annual meeting in Washington, D.C., June first and second. Details can be found at AmericanSEBP.org.

My guest for this episode is Chris Magnus. He's the police chief for Tucson, Arizona. He's previously served as the chief in Fargo, North Dakota, yep, that Fargo, and Richmond, California. Prior to these leadership roles, he was a police dispatcher, paramedic, and sworn officer with the Livingston County Sheriff's Department and the Lansing, Michigan police department.

Chris was the first openly gay police chief in the company to marry. He also achieved some notoriety and support when photographed with a Black Lives Matter sign at a local protest in Richmond. Chris is known for being a pioneer of innovative solutions to complicated social problems, and is an advocate for less Draconian issues such as immigration and homelessness, arguing that they complicate the challenges of modern policing. I talked to him in a hallway at the IACP, International Association of Chiefs of Police, Conference in Chicago in October 2019. He talks about moving away from a reflexive arrest approach to all policing problems, the challenges of dealing with service providers in non-crime areas, and working with city politics. I find out that the Tucson area, while quite beautiful, is also full of shit with weird names that can kill you like haboobs and javelinas.

I love doing interviews, and I loving meeting, talking to people, which is great. And I think it's a great way to chat to practitioners and to get stuff outside beyond academia. But then the editing is like multiple hours for a 45-minute [crosstalk 00:02:47]-

Chris Magnus:

Right. Yeah. I believe that. No, I get it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

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It takes a lot of editing to make me not sound like an idiot.

Chris Magnus:

I doubt that somehow.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How long have you been in Tucson now?

Chris Magnus:

About four years. It's gone quickly. Well, some days it goes really quickly, and other days perhaps not so much.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What's interesting is that it seems like you're at the forefront with some of these changes that have been taking place in policing. Because we're here at IACP, and it's almost like there's hardly anything to do with crime. It's now about officer wellness. It's now about mental health. And it's now about public safety much more than crime. It's as if we've gone, okay, not that worried about crime because we've got homelessness, and we've got people with behavioral health crises all over the place. And you seem to be dealing with so much of that because people want to be in Tucson because it's warm.

Chris Magnus:

Right. It does seem to be a lasting spot, if not even more than that, for a lot of folks who struggle with whether it's mental health, substance abuse disorder of one sort or another, or homelessness. Sometimes all three. We have a fair amount of that. I would make the case that those things to link to crime to some degree. We certainly see that with the addiction stuff that drives a lot of our property crime. So that's challenging to figure out if you have an impact on getting people into treatment or dealing with the substance abuse. Are you having an impact on the crime? Because otherwise, it does seem like you're just sort of repeating this cycle of arresting people for low level property offenses. They go to jail briefly. They come back out. And they just re-commit the crime over and over again. So I'm not sure any of it we have solid data to work with, but you do see a pattern.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you think that Tucson is a magnet for people with comorbidity kind of problems?

Chris Magnus:

I think it is. Weather-wise, it is certainly appealing for people. Although, during the summer I have a hard time quite understanding that because it is so hot that it's hard for me to believe that that can really be ...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm a bit confused about the weather. I don't know if I told you, the first time I ever went to Tucson I didn't mean to come to Tucson. I was supposed to land at Phoenix between California to Phoenix, Phoenix to Philadelphia. And we couldn't land at Phoenix because there was a bloody dust storm. There was a sandstorm. What is it, a haboob?

Chris Magnus:

They call them haboobs, yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh my god. Nobody should live where that's a thing. When we diverted to Tucson I thought, "Who lives in a place where there is just a wall of sand hundreds of feet high sweeping across the city?" That just doesn't seem right to me.

Chris Magnus:

It doesn't seem right. [crosstalk 00:05:30]-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Huge impact on the homeless and people living on the streets, doesn't it?

Chris Magnus:

Yeah. Tucson, we're a little different than the Phoenix Valley in terms of some of those issues. It really is a world in and of itself. We have what they call washes, which is this term I guess for sort of ditches, where when the monsoons come through with the heavy rains in July, August, September, the water flows. But during most of the years they're empty, and they tend to be a little cooler. So it's interesting. Homelessness is diffused. Rather than some cities where you see it concentrated in very specific areas, Tucson is so large geographically, homelessness is really diffused across the city. You see it in parks. You see it in these washes, in alleys behind homes. It's very challenging because there are few central points where you can say we're going to focus resources or attention on this one spot.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you have monsoon seasons. You've had haboobs. Is there a plague of locust seasons that you just try and escape town from?

Chris Magnus:

Not that I'm aware of. When I moved to Arizona, they sort of, referring to the natural environment, they said in Arizona everything will kill you. And it's like there's a combination of javelinas, which are these wild boars that roam even the nicest neighborhoods.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Sorry, what?

Chris Magnus:

Oh yeah. Javelina, it starts with a J. They look like some prehistoric wild pig. They roam around, sometimes in packs.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, this sounds absolutely terrifying. But to be fair, you've been coming to IACP for many years, so you must be used to wild boars, right?

Chris Magnus:

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I've experienced one or two here. You don't want to mess with them when the mom is pregnant. So you have those. You have birds of prey that are known to even swoop down and take small dogs up with them. This has happened in the area where I live.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You are fucking kidding me.

Chris Magnus:

No, I am not kidding. It's serious. And then of course the snakes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You should work for the Tucson tourism board.

Chris Magnus:

I think, and as you have seen from being in Tucson, it's funny because there are many neighborhoods that have a better tree cover and are greener than some of the cities I've lived in, in other parts of the country. It's a pretty nice city all in all. But in terms of, again, the homelessness, it provides an environment where it must be attractive for people who have this combination of issues. So we're dealing with it pretty much in every neighborhood throughout the city. Some departments are only having to focus on one area. For us, it doesn't matter what part of the city you patrol, you're dealing with these challenges. And there are crime issues that come along with it. So trying to find what the balance is between enforcement, providing services, doing what we're doing more of now, pre-arrest deflection, getting people into treatment with small amounts of drugs rather than taking them into jail. All of these are things we're kind of experimenting with. You see sometimes promising results, but the challenge is, and you know this well, this issue of cause/effect. Is what you're doing really contributing to the solution, or are you just fortunate that things are changing for some unknown reason, right?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Have you run into objections? Have you run into resistance with your move towards things like pre-arrest diversion programs and some of these de-incarceration programs that you're really pioneering in some regards with your, shall we say, troubled population?

Chris Magnus:

We had anticipated that the objections would come from more of the officers, officers saying, "This is ridiculous. Now we're supposed to be picking up folks and taking them into treatment? Why aren't we arresting people? Isn't that our job as law enforcement?" But to our surprise, it's not really been that way. I'm not saying this has caught on with everybody in the department. We're still experimenting with how we sell and explain this to people and then what buy-in looks like. But we're finding that a lot of the most senior authors who you would think would be the most resistant to doing this differently [crosstalk 00:09:36]-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

"I don't like how we're doing it, but I don't like change either," those guys.

Chris Magnus:

Yeah. That group has been surprisingly open to this because a lot of them are saying, "I feel like all I'm doing is arresting the same people over and over again."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. Yes.

Chris Magnus:

"So what's the point of that? I know that isn't working. So maybe it is time to try something else."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, there's a bunch of research that shows that once somebody's been arrested once their chance of being re-arrested is about 30%. Once they've been arrested twice, chance of being a third time is 50%. And then each time they're arrested, until you reach the point where it's kind of once you've been arrested 10, 11, 12 times, your chance of being arrested a 13th time is like 85%, 90%. We just keep arresting them.

Chris Magnus:

We just keep doing it. And it's really a cycle that you can see. I was a victim of this myself, interestingly. And of course it gets lots of attention when the police chief is a victim. But my city car, I made the mistake of leaving my backpack in it when I got home late one night [crosstalk 00:10:33]-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I thought you were about to tell me you got arrested 13 times.

Chris Magnus:

Not that. Not to my knowledge.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You would've remembered, right?

Chris Magnus:

I don't remember. And if I did, I deny it all. Yeah, I stupidly left my backseat in the backseat and came out in the morning, and somebody had smashed a rock through the window and taken it. I was fortunate, and I'm sure got the chief's treatment. I didn't ask for it but I got it anyway where the crime scene folks came out and took fingerprints. And people looked through the neighborhood and of course found this guy that had done it had broken into a bunch of other cars as well. And they eventually found the backpack with blood on it, and they did a rapid DNA test on the blood.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Holy schmolly, you really did get the [crosstalk 00:11:15]-

Chris Magnus:

I did get the special treatment, right? I know. I did. There's no question about it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There's homicides in Baltimore that don't get this level of attention.

Chris Magnus:

No, I hear you. In a way, I feel sort of bad about it. And my comments back to within the department were I'd like every member of the community to get that level of service. And we're working towards that. But ultimately, it led up to them identifying who this guy was and then tracking him down. And on Facebook somebody made friends with him representing that they were a woman who was interested in hooking up with him. They went over to his apartment, and sure enough, there he was, and they arrested him. But my point is, he's a good example of someone with a drug problem, and that's all that was driving it. [crosstalk 00:11:59]-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Was he originally from your area, or [crosstalk 00:12:02]-

Chris Magnus:

He lived on the east side of town. It wasn't particularly close to his home. But it was a neighborhood that presented a lot of convenient targets.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. When I went for a ride along in Tucson with one of your officers, and he was great by the way, because you know I like to go for ride alongs pretty much anywhere I go because it really gives you a lot of insight into a city when you've not been there before.

Chris Magnus:

Yes, it does. I agree.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's really I think one of the best ways to really understand a city. You can stare at data, but actually just rolling down some of those back alleyways-

Chris Magnus:

You get a better picture.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, you absolutely do. Because when people say people live in poverty you have no idea what poverty looks like. Poverty in southern California is very different than poverty in Philly. Poverty in Philly and how you live there is very different than poverty in Tucson.

Chris Magnus:

Well, and people have this image of Tucson of resorts, and they see the mountains and the spas and that kind of thing, and they don't realize that-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There were mountains and spas?

Chris Magnus:

Yeah. I'm sorry you missed out on that. Perhaps on a future visit-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I missed the spas.

Chris Magnus:

... we'll see what we can do for you. But yeah, they don't realize that much of the city really is very, very poor. You have neighborhoods where people even in the homes that they live in are struggling to get by. And then, as you say, you go in the alleys behind their homes; you see makeshift structures that are set up, and this is where the homeless are. It's not an exact correlation, but a lot of them are struggling with drug or alcohol issues, and then that drives a lot of our property crimes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you're finding that you're getting more support than you were perhaps anticipating?

Chris Magnus:

I think we are. It is still hard to get cops out of this almost reflexive approach of thinking that all crime is best addressed by just making arrests. Okay. On the one hand, it piles up stats that I suppose are attractive. [crosstalk 00:13:48]-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

"Look how busy I am. Look how hard I worked."

Chris Magnus:

Right, right. And I get it. I certainly lived it for years and years as a cop in Lansing, Michigan, where I started. The idea that everybody who goes to jail is a small victory for victims of crime, for doing the right thing, for just taking the bad guys off the street. But at some point, you do wise up I think.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When the bad guy gets out on the street quicker than you do at that point.

Chris Magnus:

Yeah. That's exactly it. You start to see that perhaps this approach is not really having an impact on things. And so then the question becomes, what does have an impact? And that is more challenging. I'm not sure we've really figured that out yet.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There's a very interesting randomized controlled trial in the medical field about homeless using the emergency room as their primary care provider. So because the hospital's wanting to reduce costs, they give them the minimal treatment and send them back out again. And so a doctor tried to do something different. Said, "Let's do wrap around services. When they come in we'll give them everything they've got, and we'll look after all of their collective needs." And what they discovered was, contrary to everybody's view, that it actually reduced the amount of time that those people came in. There was a cost benefit. Because those people didn't really want to be in the emergency room like a lot of people thought they would. They actually just were coming in there to have a few things dealt with. And when they got better care, they spent less time in there and ultimately cost the hospital less money.

But can you imagine being the person trying to do that? I kind of see guys like yourself a little bit in policing trying to be that same level of pioneer, where everybody just goes, "Well, that ain't going to fucking work. We need to just keep arresting these people more, and you're trying something new."

Chris Magnus:

And it can be a challenge to communicate this in the right way within a police department, because there is no question, there are people that need to go to jail because they're dangerous, they're violent. They really have done serious stuff. Sure, I'm all for rehabilitation, but let's first put them behind bars where they're not going to harm anybody else. So it's not about saying nobody goes to jail anymore.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This is the 21st century in America. You can't have nuance in a program. What are you talking about?

Chris Magnus:

I know. And that's very hard because let's face, it's not just cops; it's our communities at large don't particularly do well with nuance when it comes to criminal justice. And yet, that's what it really takes. I think of it sometimes even in terms of a medical model where if you have a problem, a gastrointestinal problem and you're dealing with a specialist, you don't want them just going in and throwing the kitchen sink at your medical problem. You really want it diagnosed appropriately, and then you want a very specialized approach where if you need surgery or something has to be done it's done in the most precise way to get at the problem.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's evidence-based, but it's also tailored to the specific.

Chris Magnus:

That's right. Tailored to the specific need. We're not very good surgeons sometimes. We're reasonably good generalists. But sometimes a problem that's really complicated requires precision. And I'm not sure we train our cops to be that precise. We're not patient with them to the degree that sometimes patience is needed to solve complicated problems. We look for very traditional measures of what an outcome should be. Because we're police executives, we're often under stress from the community. They want to see more arrests. They just want to see numbers go in a certain direction quickly. You come to learn over time that's not really the best way to treat the patient if the community is the patient.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Talking about taking time is really interesting. So in the book I wrote, *Reducing Crime: Companion for Police Leaders*, which I know a lot of your officers have now-

Chris Magnus:

That's right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

... there's a vignette from a cop in the UK. And he was writing about dealing with a runaway that was a continual problem for the police department. She would go missing on such a regular basis. And they would find her and return her and find her and return her and find her and return her. And singly, she was just a big drain on police services because she was going missing every day. And then eventually sort of sat and sat down and spent hours with her trying to get to the root of the problem and actually finding out why she was running away on a regular basis. And I thought it was a really innovative solution, but when I followed through on the tweet storm as it were and all the replies there were no shortage of cops saying, "This was disgraceful. Because I'm sure the calls stacked up. How are you not supporting your other officers?" As if dealing with all the calls in a timely fashion has become policing as opposed to solving problems.

Chris Magnus:

No, that's exactly right. And we struggle with that so much in Tucson where officers come to work and there are as many as 10, 20, 30 or more calls that are waiting for them right from the get-go. And that then becomes the measure of what policing is about or what productivity looks like is getting through your calls, making sure the board is clear, as it were. And this drives me insane because this becomes time-consuming. But what I would really like the time to be spent on, and so this is a balancing act, is we know, for example, whether we're dealing with shooters in a gang type environment, prolific shooters, whether we're dealing with prolific users of EMS and emergency rooms, that kind of thing, these are manageable numbers of people in most cities. And in many cases we can identify who they are.

When I was in Richmond, California, we knew who the worst of the worst in terms of gang violence, who those perpetrators were. Maybe you have 500-some shootings within a year, but they're committed by as small a number as 75 individuals. And out of that, the influencers are an even smaller number, the really serious shooters. And so you know who they are, and you can focus on that, just like we know who those individuals are that are committing a lot of these property crimes because they're the same ones that are in and out of the emergency rooms, in and out of the police cars and the EMS vehicles. We don't provide enough time and resources to go after people in a thoughtful and strategic way.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think part of the objection there from some members of the community is that we're investing hugely in people that they see as not deserving of that level of investment.

Chris Magnus:

Well, and that's fine. They may feel that way if you want to make judgment about where somebody's ended up in their life or what their behavior looks like. I don't ask anybody in the community or even in the department to have sympathy. To me, it really comes down to a cost-benefit analysis.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This is not supposed to be used as a reward, and it's not being used as that. It's a way to try and reduce the costs of the criminal justice systems.

Chris Magnus:

No, that's precisely right. So rather than chasing the same people around over and over again, if we identify who they are. And then I think this is a really important piece because here's where I think cops have a really legitimate complaint is why are we doing all of this by ourselves?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's very true.

Chris Magnus:

I think we have to have better partners in the community working with us that are helping us address these, which is why I like the idea of being able to team cops up with social workers or clinicians, mental health providers, substance abuse specialists. We're not even trained to deal with this wide range of need that's out there that has to be addressed. Yet we're looked to as the go-to folks for all of this.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And how on Earth did that happen? How is it that we almost allowed all these other social services to withdraw from their responsibilities and just policing became the thing?

Chris Magnus:

Yeah. It's a good question. I think the idea that this has to be a partnership that involves other service providers. And I don't think in Tucson, for example, I don't think it's because there's a lack of committed service providers. I really don't. [crosstalk 00:21:31]-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You don't have to say that. They're not going to be listening in.

Chris Magnus:

No, it doesn't matter. I say it and I believe it. I don't think it's a lack of committed service providers. I think the problem is that they are not well coordinated in terms of being able to work as a partner with the police.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When Chuck Ramsey was commissioner in Philadelphia one of his favorite phrases that I used to love was, he would say, "I love it when I can get other branches of government to spend their money to solve my problem." And I think part of the challenge is not their lack of capacity but just a lack of direction in working together so that they can know where to spend those resources that actually benefits the broader system.

Chris Magnus:

Yeah. No, I think that's right. I think the problem is so many of these services are so siloed, whether it's in government or even whether it's in the private non-profit world. It's almost as if there's a disincentive for them to work together because they fear that they may lose influence or donors.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

[crosstalk 00:22:31] for me a second. A disincentive?

Chris Magnus:

Let me give an example of this and how we changed it but how difficult it was. There's a model called Family Justice Center. The idea is that for victims of domestic abuse, instead of having to go to a domestic services program or maybe services for sexual assault or for legal aid, it turns out that if you need help as a victim of these types of crimes you can be going from one place to another all over a city or county. It is incredibly complicated if you have children, or if you are economically disadvantaged it becomes even worse.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, we like to victimize people multiple times.

Chris Magnus:

Precisely. So one of the answers to this is this Family Justice Center model where you get all of these different service providers, they're not necessarily linked together by the same funding. They're really distinct non-profits or even a combination of governmental programs and non-profits. But the idea is they operate under one roof, and they work together with one focus in mind, and that is to serve victims.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Chris Magnus:

Now, this sounds like it would be so logical and so easy, but the challenge is that to keep something like a Family Justice Center operating it has to have its own funding stream, which means all those agencies have to work together to do that. They all have to contribute something, but they also have to give up something in order to govern together and to work effectively.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because money that goes there doesn't necessarily go to those, to the motherships.

Chris Magnus:

Go back to their own agencies, precisely. I give this example because this model, this Family Justice Center model, has worked more effectively, but we have not seen a comparable model for coming together to provide services to folks with substance abuse, mental health, and homelessness.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I remember seeing Jeremy Travis from Arnold Ventures giving a really interesting presentation I think about million-dollar men, a few people who in a city had cost a million dollars in terms of not just policing but also emergency room, mental health provision, courts and a jails, et cetera. And these are individuals that are costing cities an absolute fortune.

Chris Magnus:

But part of that is because there's no one clearinghouse or resource to provide overall case management of these folks. They're not on parole typically or probation. There's not one sort of controlling entity. So you have hospitals. You have police. You have social service agencies. You have mental health providers, all who may be in their own separate way interacting with any of these individuals, but it's not done in a coordinated way. It's very siloed and fragmented.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you also run into different ideologies about how people should be treated?

Chris Magnus:

Absolutely. And in fact, that's a great question and a huge challenge. Let's just take, even in Tucson right now, you have a very well-intentioned non-profit that is linked up with a gospel rescue mission. And they've raised massive amounts of money to convert an old Holiday Inn into a services center for homeless individuals.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How do you tell the difference? Don't you just change the sign on the outside?

Chris Magnus:

They've had to do a little more than that. But it's interesting-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm sorry, Holiday Inn. I love you. You're great.

Chris Magnus:

Yeah, no offense there. But here's the thing, a center like this has its own rules. They're privately funded so they can do whatever they want. They don't have to collect data. They don't have to evaluate their program. They can be very limiting in terms of if you come to our center families cannot be together. Men and women have to be separated, for example. Or perhaps you have to be sober. They have their own rules.

I get it. I'm not trying to diminish even the value of what they're doing, but I'm just saying, this is a siloed approach to dealing with a clientele that this may not be the best fit for them, and it may not really improve their [crosstalk 00:26:43]-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, you say you get it, but I actually don't. I'm actually offended by that, because just the very idea that you can provide all these services without any kind of a valuation just because it's privately funded, that could be inherently harmful. They could be making things worse, but they're drawing people away from places where, and possibly resources

especially if they're getting external funding, could be drawing people away from places where they could actually improve the quality of their life.

Chris Magnus:

No, right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm not saying that they're not, but-

Chris Magnus:

Well, when I say I get it, I get it because like so many efforts of this type it is well intentioned. They sincerely believe in what they're doing. And there is a clientele that they're serving. Is it better-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But it's the fingers crossed approach-

Chris Magnus:

It is the fingers crossed approach.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

... to crime reduction.

Chris Magnus:

For example, when we looked at housing this population, we know there is data that shows a housing first model has better outcomes. Getting people into stable housing with wraparound services, not easy to do. Easy to say. It sounds so easy to say. But again, that is a better model to get long-term better outcomes. However, it also requires that agencies really have to step away from their silos. Even a community like Tucson where we have a lot of services and a lot of smart people, we are not as well connected to do this type of work as we should be. So you end up having a lot of this sort of effort like you're describing where it's a wing and a prayer and you're hoping that it leads to better outcomes but you have no reason to know for sure.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That piece about ideology also plagues the criminal justice system. You'll run into judges who refuse to engage in evidence-based programs, who keep sending people-

Chris Magnus:

Well, because they believe they know what's best.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The fingers crossed approach.

Chris Magnus:

And the thing is, the entire criminal justice system seems to be so much of this. We do so much as cops because it just intrinsically feels like it's the right response. We just believe that we've been doing it forever. That's how we were trained.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We know best.

Chris Magnus:

We know best. And we see that from prosecutors. We see that from judges. We see this from service providers. So how do we get people to a place where they start considering evidence, really evidence, not just as a slogan, but evidence-based outcomes where you are gathering data and discovering what works, and sometimes more importantly what doesn't work-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Hugely important.

Chris Magnus:

... so you can change systems to do this? We're trying to do this more and more within the police department, and I will not say it's easy. I will concede you meet a lot of resistance. But I think we are making some progress, especially around certain issues.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think evidence-based policing. And you're right, in too many places it's a slogan. That's all it is. It becomes like saying that you do community policing.

Chris Magnus:

I was just going to say, it's like the new version of community policing. Everybody does it because it means anything and therefore everything. And that's really frustrating. You really have to be smarter about doing things that lead to different kinds of outcomes. And part of this has to involve educating the community as well because they come to expect that a measure of good policing success is how fast, for example, a cop comes to take the result of their shed behind the house being broken into some time last week.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's becoming the core of what policing is. We have so much evidence about things like hot spots policing. We have no evidence about dealing with these vulnerable populations.

Chris Magnus:

Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There's such a limited body of evidence. So what we're vulnerable to is, in the absence of evidence, the opinion of random members of the public at council meetings and city hall meetings and members of city council is unfortunately just as valid because in the absence of an evidence base we can't say, "No, that's not actually the case."

Chris Magnus:

Right. And so then what you also see happen is the sort of throw everything at the wall type approach. And I've been lucky; I don't have this so much in Tucson, so I'm pretty fortunate, but I've certainly seen it a lot of other places where crime starts to creep up or complaints start to come in about issues, for example, with homeless encampments or other things. And it becomes the, "Okay, well, just do something. Do something." And so the police are then put into this circumstance where they have to react with really no consideration of, "Well, will it work? Is it sustainable? Does it do anything more than just temporarily disrupt or relocate the problem?"

Police has problem solvers in the field, but even police leadership are not given enough time to even really try something to give it a chance to properly succeed or fail. And even when something fails, you want to be able to have the time to figure out, well, why did this fail? So we don't keep doing it over and over again, right?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because of course when it becomes an issue finally for city council they are pushing for a solution because it's become a crisis.

Chris Magnus:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They never wanted to deal with it a year ago, five years ago, because they were dealing with crisis from five years ago. But now this is the crisis so we have to do something immediately, even though it took a decade to get here.

Chris Magnus:

Precisely. So we often end up spending far more money than we even would've if we'd handled this more thoughtfully and over a longer period of time. I think this is one of the biggest challenges for police chiefs is to be able to show the courage to say, "We're not going to do that," and to be able to educate community, including electeds, about here are the alternatives to this, and this is why it's important to consider these alternatives and to support us in doing that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is the need for more time something that you think is really important?

Chris Magnus:

I think it's incredibly important. Almost all of these problems, they are complex and multi-faceted. They require partnerships, building partnerships and trust. Again, these have become buzzwords that mean almost nothing in a lot of places. But to really build a true partnership, a true relationship that allows you to solve a problem or at least make headway with it takes time.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

These become wicked problems that have multiple facets to them.

Chris Magnus:

That's right. You can't just do it overnight. And if you do, you're probably going to do it in a way that is really not sustainable.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How does a chief do that? Because elected officials, their brains work in election cycles. They need to do something. They need to show the benefit so they can get re-elected. We can see that in national politics as well as anything else. How then do police chiefs find a way to articulate for the need for more time and nuance and complexity in responses when we're dealing with people in city councils, before they were elected they were realtors. They drove trucks, you know?

Chris Magnus:

Look, I'll say this, and maybe at my own peril with some of my colleagues, but I don't think we approach the political world with the respect that it deserves. I think in policing we have reinforced with each other the idea that politics is dirty, and our goal is to stay as far away from it as possible in everything that we do. I've heard people say, "The politics is the worst part of the job. If I could just do this job without the politics."

Now, see, I look at it a little bit differently. To me, the politics is the best part of the job because the politics is where the action is. I'm not talking about politics with a capital P, the Republican or the Democrat or any given person who's running for office, any of that. I'm talking about politics as a process for making change and getting things to work differently. We are in a political world. Politics is what informs our budgets. It is what informs the way that we're staffed. It is how we get people to understand what's important.

So I think we need to get more sophisticated. And it can't just be the chief or a couple of people at the top. It has to be a broader group of people in the police department, sometimes right down to the line level, who are really involved in working with elected leaders but also sort of the power brokers in the community, which can include neighborhood leaders and others. This has to be done day in and day out.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So what you're saying is even though when you speak to most police officers of any rank, they would sooner remove their own appendix in the back of a patrol car than go to a community meeting. They need to refrain that kind of perspective and think about the community meeting as being the place where they can achieve some of the goals they can't otherwise achieve.

Chris Magnus:

Right. I would actually even take it to a next level. I think we have a lot of cops ... Okay, maybe a lot is a hopeful exaggeration on my part. But I think we have quite a few officers and supervisors who would say, "I don't mind going to a neighborhood meeting. I like the people in the neighborhood I serve. I enjoy talking to them." But by in large what their idea of engagement at a neighborhood meeting is to read off a bunch of crime stats or tell a few anecdotes about a success here or there. They don't see the potential for really getting neighbors involved as a political force to make change.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Some of the community meetings that I attend and go along and observe, the overarching theme of all of them seems to be lack of focus. What is the point of the community meeting there? I think if you asked 10 cops you would get 11 answers because by the time the 10th person has answered the first person has changed their mind. I don't think anybody really has got to the core of what is it the police department is trying to achieve with community meetings?

Chris Magnus:

No. That is dead on. That's our fault as police leaders I think. It is very unrealistic to think that we're going to send cops out to neighborhood meetings. And I think they should be part of those meetings. But if they don't know what is the purpose, what are we working towards, how could we work together to do something different? What are the pressure points even to apply? Sometimes it's applying the right sort of pressure with elected officials, but sometimes it's applying it in different places in the community beyond just that. Right? We lack the sophistication and the communication skills to do that.

Cops are such good salespeople. When they believe in something they can have such a compelling impact on a community or on others. We so under-use the capabilities that cops have to create change in a way that could be beneficial to a community or a system.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It often ends up being the amorphous go to the meeting and build a relationship. And I immediately have two questions with that, and the first of which is, do you have any evidence that you are actually improving and building a relationship? Because we often don't survey people. We don't see if there's actually an improved relationship.

Chris Magnus:

Right. And then towards what end?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's right. What are you doing with this?

Chris Magnus:

What's the point? What do you want with that?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When you have this relationship how are you going to leverage it into something for the community?

Chris Magnus:

Right. What's the point of it? Right. And I think this really comes full circle to what we're talking about, because whether it is crime reduction or whether it is addressing some of these factors that contribute to crime, if we don't have some specific strategies in mind and ideas about, what do we want you to do to help us, then it does feel like an exercise in public relations, not that's always entirely bad. To be honest, I would draw a parallel to we have a raised bed garden at home during much of the year.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Much better on the lower back, right?

Chris Magnus:

Yes, exactly. And during much of the year it needs to be fertilized with compost and other kinds of stuff. Nothing's really growing at that point. There are many months, frankly, in Tucson where nothing's going to grow in a garden. The sun would kill it all.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It already sounds terrifying. I'm going to be honest.

Chris Magnus:

It is not that bad. Tucson's a lovely place. But I'm saying, you are composting a garden, and there's value to doing that. You're enriching the soil. I think of that in terms of that in terms of cops going to these meetings and just getting to know people and creating a level of confidence between the public and themselves. If we're not taking it any further than that, again, what's the point? Are we just wasting people's time? But this is tough work. It really is. This requires culture change both in the police department and in the community, and culture change requires time.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In the reducing crime book there's a vignette from a chief inspector from Scotland who says the same thing. Investing in this relationship when things are going well so we can tap into that relationship when things go south.

Chris Magnus:

What has always fascinated me, attending more council meetings than I'd like to lay claim to over the course of my career is how all it takes is, shockingly sometimes, a handful of people, maybe even one or two, from the community to come and say something and completely move things in a different direction. Now, on the one hand, that could be really frustrating if you thought you were already moving something the right way and if now that's being disrupted by people who know about what you're talking about.

On the other hand, if you have community members that really understand what needs to be done and are in your corner, they have more legitimacy than you do as a police professional to come. And council pays more attention to them than they do all the department heads in the world.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, I've seen some videos from your city council meetings. So can I just say that I'm superbly impressed that you make any headway whatsoever? You've got singing women and banjo-playing guys.

Chris Magnus:

Tucson has a very diverse population, and they express themselves in many creative ways.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was wonderfully put. Well, Chris, look, this has been a pleasure. I don't want to drop you in it with gazillions of visitors, but [inaudible 00:40:51] police chief would benefit from coming and seeing what you guys are doing, what you and Colin and Eric and Chad and everybody's doing in Tucson, because I think you're really pushing the boundaries and dealing with some of these tricky areas and really just thinking about how to move the department forward. So I hope I don't set you up for a gazillion visitors, but I think people would benefit from really seeing what you guys are doing.

Chris Magnus:

Well, we always welcome visitors, but we are really fortunate because despite all the fear you've put into people's hearts about the deadly environment-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, just don't get out of the car.

Chris Magnus:

Yeah. Not true. But all of that aside, we're lucky because we really do have an environment where we can take a little bit more time. We have electeds and a city manager who have said, "Okay, let's try to reinvent government a little bit and go forth and do good." And that is very rare. So we're maximizing our chances to do that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Good stuff. Chris, thanks ever so much. I appreciate it.

Chris Magnus:

You bet. My pleasure.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've been listening to episode 20 of Reducing Crime, recorded in Chicago in October 2019. Other episodes lurk at ReducingCrime.com or the usual podcast-y places. New episodes are announced on Twitter at [@ReducingCrime](https://twitter.com/ReducingCrime). Be safe, and best of luck.