

## #42 (JUSTIN NIX)

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### Jerry Ratcliffe:

Reducing Crime is a podcast featuring influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers.

Dr. Justin Nix is a distinguished associate professor of criminology and criminal justice at the University of Nebraska Omaha. And this year's outstanding young experimental criminologist. We chat about his research on procedural justice, police legitimacy and the use of deadly force.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm Jerry Ratcliffe, and welcome to Reducing Crime. Justin Nix is a rising star in policing research and experimental criminology. He's a distinguished associate professor at the University of Nebraska Omaha and his research on procedural justice, police legitimacy and officer involved shootings has received a great deal of attention. Justin has published over 60 peer reviewed academic articles and other publications in these areas. One study in the Journal of Experimental Criminology on causal effects of civilian demeanor on police officers, recognitions and emotions, is particularly noteworthy. And we discuss it at the start of this episode.

He's a National Institute of Justice LEADS Academic was the recipient to the American Society of Criminology's division of policing early career award last year. And is this year's outstanding young experimental criminologist awarded by the division of experimental criminology. He has his undergraduate masters and a PhD in criminology and criminal justice from the University of South Carolina, where he succeeded despite being mentored by Jeff Alpert. Don't worry, Jeff will never listen to this....

We caught up after a couple of drinks at the American Society of Criminology conference in Chicago, November, but at least we chatted before the night completely deteriorated into what I can only vaguely remember involved midnight yoga in the bar? It's all a little fuzzy, to be honest....

### Justin Nix:

It's surreal too. I don't feel like I belong in with the cast you've put together so far, but being an imposter.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Oh, please, speaks the guy who is the young experimental researcher of the year for the division of experimental criminology?

**Justin Nix:**

That was quite a surprise. My colleagues, all credit to them, Justin Pickett, and actually Renee Mitchell, who've you had on the podcast before I believe.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

She lurks around every now and again. She crops up here and there.

**Justin Nix:**

We wrote that paper on compliance, non-compliance and what we call "in between", experimental survey with an agency in the Southwest. We revisited some of the classics on demeanor and police discretion and found that as - probably no surprise to you - when people are assholes, police are more frustrated and angry, it changes their emotions and their cognitions. And so that we argue is what explains some of the differences in their behaviors.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And it's something that seems lost on so many people. One of my formative experiences as a young cop in the east end of London, somebody came in with an arrest. The custody Sergeant said, "What's the charge?" And he explained, "This guy basically talked himself into arrest." Because the officer had the discretion to go either way. It's a perfectly legitimate, legal, lawful arrest. The idea of using discretion on somebody who was just so venomously obnoxious. My colleague had tried to give him every opportunity, wind his neck in; it's that lack of understanding of human nature. If I treat you like an asshole, you're going to get annoyed and probably treat me like an asshole?

**Justin Nix:**

It's the so-called golden rule. Treat others the way you would like to be treated. I've heard it said, treat others the way you treat your family. And I do question that.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Right. You can pick your friends; you can't pick your family.

**Justin Nix:**

That's right. It's a consistent finding throughout the literature, that demeanor has a significant effect on how officers behave. And that really should come as no surprise. I don't know who was the first to talk about it, whether it was Sikes or Alpert or-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Alpert, will be the first, because he's the oldest. I hope he's listening to that too.

**Justin Nix:**

I got a few jabs in last night at the panel, I was proud of that. But they talk about the authority maintenance ritual and the back and forth that goes on during these transactional encounters. And it's all really fascinating to me. I think too often we get obsessed with that final frame, with deadly force incidents. There are a lot of things that happen leading up to that often. But often is the case, these are prolonged encounters where there's a back and forth. There's an exchange of deference or, a lack of deference. And both parties are attuned to that. As you know-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

There'll be a lot of cops listening and will go, "No, shit." But I think it's also important that we demonstrate some quantitative evidence of this in what cops know anecdotally. But also, I think it's important that this just gets stated because there's a whole bunch of people who are very happy to comment on policing, who don't know shit about it. They never actually go on ride alongs or experience the system, but they sit often in ivory towers or sometimes as politicians and they prognosticate from afar. I think there's a lot to be said for putting some real numbers and evidence behind what is often just known anecdotally.

**Justin Nix:**

Like you said, it's easy to say, "Well, of course, I knew that already." Did you though? I mean think about how often you've been surprised. It does happen. I think it is important, like you said, have some actual evidence.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Hindsight bias.

**Justin Nix:**

Yeah, exactly.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I think it's also reassuring for scholars. You can read a qualitative piece of research that speaks to a few cops that might say that, but now you're actually seeing it's a much wider, broader issue.

**Justin Nix:**

That's right. And because it was experimentally designed, we know that it's the changes in those vignettes that we induce that caused the changes in the reported emotions.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Explain how you did the research?

**Justin Nix:**

Yes. We got an agency in the Southwest to agree to invite their patrol officers, to take a survey where we had embedded three different vignettes about routine police, citizen encounters, one involving a littering offense, one involving a traffic violation, one involving a suspected carjacker.

## Jerry Ratcliffe:

What I love about this is, that first one's littering. Nobody in Philadelphia has ever been stopped by a cop for littering, any time in living memory. They don't call it "Filth-adelphia" for nothing! [laughter] I'm not really a good ambassador for the city. [laughter] I love Philly. Honestly I do. It's been nothing but good to me.

## Justin Nix:

Fair enough. I guess we were going for very minor infractions where there's a wide degree of discretion, but where there is a clear violation of either a lawful order or some type of offense, where an officer would be justified in issuing a citation or perhaps even arresting. And we randomized within the vignettes, whether the person was respectful and deferential, whether the person was non-compliant but still neutral in terms of their demeanor or whether the person was an outright asshole. And the assholes invoked the most emotional and cognitive responses in officers.

## Justin Nix:

We just asked them, how fearful would you be in this situation? Or, how frustrated would you feel? How angry would you feel? Unsurprisingly, I think the respectful deferential person almost never raised any red flags. The folks who were non-compliant, they were in between as we call it, they weren't being A holes, but they were still not following orders. And then the people who were downright rude and nasty and swearing hostile toward the officers, proceed that as a dangerous signifier. If this person is going to cuss at me, when I'm giving them a lawful order, what else might they do?

## Jerry Ratcliffe:

A lot of their experience will tell them this is a precursor to them kicking off physically.

## Justin Nix:

And you know what's funny is, I pilot tested this with a separate agency and we had built into the vignette. Though it doesn't appear, the person will be resistant or combative. He's cussing, he's getting emotionally charged, et cetera, et cetera. One of the officers actually called me up and he said, "You say that he's not going to be combative or resistant, but then you go on to describe literally what a combative and resistant suspect would do." This almost seemed incompatible with each other.

## Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's a fantastic reason to do pilot studies. That is fantastic. Were you administering these vignettes? Because, I don't remember all the details of the paper.

## Justin Nix:

Jerry, you didn't read the paper?

## Jerry Ratcliffe:

I never read anything these days. I don't have that level of attention span. I'm just happy to get up in the morning, and remember what order my socks and shoes go on. Were you administering these to the cops electronically?

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**Justin Nix:**

Yeah. This was virtually, we did it through, I believe SurveyMonkey. It was all online and it's nice because that handles the randomization for you. It resulted in a lower response rate, somewhere in the 30% range. Not too bad.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I do remember some details of the paper.

**Justin Nix:**

Sure.. sure. [laughter]

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

The bar's open. Cut me a break. [laughter] How did you get into doing all this work? You don't have a policing background?

**Justin Nix:**

I don't. I have an older brother. He's 11 years older than me. He was a cop.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Me too. My brother's 12 years older than me. I was also an accident. [laughter]

**Justin Nix:**

I hope mom's not listening. [laughter]

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Sorry, Mrs. Nix. [laughter]

**Justin Nix:**

He was a cop for 11 years and I had a lot of family members who worked in law enforcement. And so when I went to the University of South Carolina for my undergraduate degree, that was always the plan, was to work in federal law enforcement. This was around the time that the great recession took hold. I remember we couldn't even have a career fair that year, because nobody was hiring.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It was a mess.

**Justin Nix:**

It was bad. I don't think people remember how bad it was. One of my professors said, "I think you'd be great for graduate degree." I started on the master's track, worked with folks like Alpert, Jeff Rojek, and they put me on the research and that's where I realized this is a much better path for me. I just became fascinated with reading the old classic ethnographies and more recent research being done and just wanted to be a part of that. I just consider myself very fortunate.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

The research that you did on that paper is almost like a technological update of Van Mannen's "The Asshole".

**Justin Nix:**

That's exactly what we were going for. We noticed that a lot of that work, good as those studies are, there's still methodological holes there still, I think open questions as far as what mechanisms are at work and that's what we were after with the experiment.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You work with Jeff Alpert and Kyle and some of those guys, just going back and revisiting some of the core assumptions, some of the work that you've been doing on disparities of police use of force and stuff like that. It's starting to undermine almost like the accepted truisms because you're looking at it very rigorously. When you're coming up with data and findings that doesn't necessarily go along with what people think you're getting some pushback?

**Justin Nix:**

Yes

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Okay. Thank you. That was the end of that question.

**Justin Nix:**

Brevity, right?

No, it's gotten pushback from I think both sides of the political aisle. At times, I think, maybe that's a good sign that I'm not pandering to one side or the other. I am truly trying to just follow the data and the evidence, but it was actually interesting, a couple of weeks ago, I had two separate Twitter threads getting some attention from very different users of Twitter. I had the one paper on elevated turnover, post Floyd, there was getting a lot of likes and retweets from police practitioners and evidence based policing folks. And then I had the thread on racial disparities and police shootings where the population was the benchmark. And I got plenty of pushback on that, but also shares and retweets from folks who would describe themselves, I believe, as abolitionists or certainly proponents of defunding the police or reforming the police. But it was funny because those two threads were not talking to each other there at all.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You've done work in the past, looking at the importance of the denominator. What is the underlying population? The populations that police are actually interacting with. Tell me a little bit about that.

**Justin Nix:**

In that paper, we refer to the iceberg phenomenon. What we see in the police data is the iceberg that's above the surface of the water. But they're classic pictures of the, the huge chunk of ice that lurks beneath on scene, and that's

the denominator. The perfect denominator in police research when we're looking at, for example, use of force would be everyone who police observed and either stopped or did not stop. And we don't track who they don't stop. The best you can do is to go back to the entire population. And we know that's loaded with flaws and strong assumptions.

### Justin Nix:

My thinking has changed on this. I think using arrests, for example, introduces biases into your model where you've now blocked out any bias that might have operated before the decision to arrest. I think any denominator we choose, it's not perfect. The best we can do at this point, to just be transparent, just say, "Here's the denominator I use, here are the assumptions, and here's what it is. And I think you use multiple benchmarks and you show here's what the data would look like.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

People still don't understand all the problems that are inherent with including a city's population. Because due to racial bias in everything, from healthcare to education, to red lining of properties and loans, 40 years ago, decades of unequal access to opportunities and all the benefits of society has really set the black and the African American community. In some degree, the Hispanic community back a long way, the corollary that is they end up being high crime places. We send the cops to the places where the crime is, because we hope they're going to have an effect on it. Policing happens where the police are. And so the denominator of a whole city's population is unrealistic because we're essentially focusing the police in black and Hispanic communities. Every time I see people using the population of an entire city as the denominator, are they ignorant of this fact or are they deliberately doing it because they know it's going to portray policing in an unrealistically bad light.

### Justin Nix:

And I think there's probably some of all of that to go around.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

Not that I'm completely defending some policing, there's clearly some problems of policing we should always be reforming and changing, improving.

### Justin Nix:

It's funny. I got asked to response to an article and I was trying to think through, what's a good metaphor for this denominator problem? What other things do we try to study where it's important to know who's exposed to this risk? We should all be attuned to that right now with the COVID pandemic going on. Who's been exposed to the risk of contracting the virus?

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

Some parts of the country don't think it's a real thing.

**Justin Nix:**

This is true. What I settled on was like, we're estimating the risk of maternal mortality. It's not all women, it's women who were giving birth. If you want to estimate the risk of who gets bitten by sharks, we need to know who's going into the water. We're not counting everybody who just sits up on the beach. People who can't swim or opt not to swim.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I've heard it's a big problem in Kansas.

**Justin Nix:**

Exactly. There's just no easy answers here. But as of now, the best we can do is to just be transparent and acknowledge the problems and all of the assumptions that we make.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That work on the population denominator stuff was getting liked by people on the left. And then the people on the right end of the spectrum were very positive about your paper on officer turnover.

**Justin Nix:**

Yeah. There were two very different universes of people who were not interacting. They were liking their separate threads. With the turnover paper, PERF has been sounding the alarms about this for years now. Again, this goes back to the great recession where agencies went through hiring freezes and they weren't able to get back up to their full capacity after the recession receded.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Unless they're really small departments. I don't think I know any department that's fully staffed right now. They haven't been for years.

**Justin Nix:**

So it's not a new problem. But this was a conversation post Ferguson, "Good cops are going to quit because they're tired of being beaten down in the media." And so forth. And it happened again after the George Floyd murder in May of 2020. And we saw anecdotal accounts in Seattle, New York, Chicago. There were stories in Philly, about a spike in resignations or retired.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Everything's fine in Philly. What I mentioned earlier about Filth-adelphia, I now have to redeem that by just "bigging up" Philadelphia, every time it comes up in conversation.

**Justin Nix:**

Okay. I'll take your word for it. Same kind of thing. A lot of talking, not a lot of data, not a lot of evidence to back it or at least not convincing data. We had a unique opportunity with an agency out west that had monthly data on retirements, resignations and involuntary separations.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Explain what that is. I mean, I've had a couple of those in my romantic life, but how does that work in policing terms?

**Justin Nix:**

There's some type of egregious misconduct.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I've had that in my romantic life. [laughter]

**Justin Nix:**

What is this podcast about again? [laughter] This is where the agency basically says, "You're terminated." Am I right in assuming that, that's-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That's where the analogy stops. [laughter] Obviously, can't get into where the bodies are buried.

**Justin Nix:**

And those are quite rare, but those are actually slowly ticking up as well. But the main finding from that paper was that, and we saw a 280% spike in resignation, but not retirements or involuntary separations. It's beginning exactly in June. Right after the Floyd protest. And this was a city where there were sustained protests for the Floyd incident, as well as a local shooting that had occurred. There was body-worn camera footage, local elected officials came out admonishing what they said they saw and the investigation was still pending police leadership. They begged elected officials to wait for the investigation and sure enough surveillance footage turns up and it shows that the suspect pointed a gun at officers before they shot, so illegally justified shooting, but it was too late at that point. And there were very serious protests that turned violent. It was a pretty ugly scene out there for at least 90 days.

**Justin Nix:**

In any event, a huge spike in resignations, we predicted that in 2021, resignations would continue to be elevated. At least through the first couple of months of this year, our forecast was pretty spot on. A huge spike in resignations is concerning for public safety. I know there's all this talk right now about how police don't matter. This is ridiculous. Experts debate the size of the effect, but you can't just cut your police department in terms of their sworn capacity, about 30, 40% and expect there not to be some type of immediate spike and violence and crime in the community. That's a ridiculous assumption.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

What's also interesting is that people are putting value judgements on why people are retiring and why they're leaving policing. That's just opinion. That's just guesswork because I know some officers who are retiring and they're great officers, but they're not leaving out as some snippyness. They're not leaving as they fuck you to the community. They're leaving because they're eligible for retirement. And they're just looking at this essentially, a hostile work environment that's out there, they don't have the community support. They don't have the support from politicians. And in some

cases they're concerned and I'm not talking about Philadelphia here, but in some cases they're concerned that the police leadership are unable to have their back as well. And in the same way, I understand why recruitment is down too, because if that's the general perception who would join policing at a time like this? Just people signing on the dotted line right now, I admire them to no end.

**Justin Nix:**

Kudos to them. We need good people to enter this very important profession. I agree. I've heard the same speculation about, "They're just throwing a tantrum."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And there may be a couple of cases of that. 'Cos there's assholes in everything, right?

**Justin Nix:**

I'm sure. I'm sure there are, right?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

This is the strength of policing. Police are drawn from the community.

**Justin Nix:**

That's right.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

The downside is that police are drawn from the community.

**Justin Nix:**

Exactly. Right, exactly. Right. There's probably a few people who are kicking and screaming who decide, "I can't do my job without violating your rights." Get rid of them.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Happy to see them go.

**Justin Nix:**

I think there's something to be said about good cops who are fearful of being falsely accused of misconduct or being a racist or, using force inappropriately. There's a disconnect between the way officers are trained to use force and what the legal standards say about when they can use force and what the public thinks about when they can use force. It's bad news because we're often talking past one another. You wrote, I thought an interesting post on your blog about how we could minimize, we could reduce shootings we should, but it's really hard to imagine a world, at least as it exists now, where we could get shootings to zero in the United States, in a country of wash with guns.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And I think we're not doing a great job of managing the community's expectations about where that can go. But the tricky part of course, is that with a thousand people being killed by policing gunfire incidents, we have to be realistic about how many we can probably work on. There's probably a couple of 100 that are in the lawful, but awful. There's probably 50 to 100 that are just awful, and probably not lawful, but if our goal is 25 or 30, that's not happening.

**Justin Nix:**

I agree. And it's sad. I would say every death is sad. The loss of a human life, it's always sad. Absolutely. But nobody wants to be the guy to say, "Okay, 500 shootings a year is okay."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Nobody's going to say that's acceptable. We'll give you a pass on that.

**Justin Nix:**

If you could tell me that we could cut police shootings in half in three years, I'd say, tell me more, how do we do that? We can always push for more, but like that would be a huge improvement over the state of affairs right now. It's attractive to say, we want to live in a world where zero people are killed by the police. I want to live in that world too. I don't think that, that's realistic.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yes. But I think we have failings in a few other systems before we get to the police. And police may be what we call first responders, but they're often the last resort when every other system has failed.

**Justin Nix:**

Yes, and I'll forget the exact words. But there's that Vollmer quote about how they've got to have the wisdom of Solomon and they've got to know all the laws and they've got to have the patience of, is it Job... a lot of Biblical references...

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I'm not really familiar with those. Every time I go into church, my skin blisters, so I have to run out the door.

**Justin Nix:**

And it was repeated, in so many words, the new Tangled Up in Blue book, I don't know if you saw it?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah.

**Justin Nix:**

Rosa Brooks goes and becomes a reserved cop in DC, which by the way, is sad, really interesting. I didn't know, in DC reserve cops are basically cops. They just work part-time. They have arrest authority, they do all the things that cops do, just not full-time. But there's a passage in there where she's just talking about how incredibly unrealistic and unfair

our expectations of police are. Maybe not unfair, but it's an impossible job, I think is what she settles on. The order that we've given them is impossible.

### **Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I don't know any other profession that has a camera on them all the time, over 30 years, they all make multiple decisions, every single day of their workday. And we have an expectation of zero mistakes. And I don't know any profession that is capable of that. The medical profession killed far more people considering how many interactions they have in terms of medical errors. They don't have cameras on them, absolute chaos, that's the legal system. Judges don't have cameras on them. We have no idea what they're up to and probation and prosecutors. It's amazing that we've decided to focus all of this scrutiny and effort on this one group. And some of it's merited because policing didn't get their house in order in the past, they brought this upon themselves to some degree. But some of it is also just so unrealistic in terms of those expectations.

### **Justin Nix:**

Right, I'm sympathetic to that. I think we do live in a democracy and as gatekeepers of this system, that's ripe with disparity. And part of it contributed by policing. I think we should hold officers and agencies accountable for when they don't live up to expectations. But to our earlier point, we should have realistic expectations, so that we can hold agencies accountable. I think body-worn cameras are here to stay. Surveillance cameras are becoming more and more common and society is awash and smart phones can record anything. This is the world we live in now and policing is going to have to rise to the occasion.

### **Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And it's going to have to own some of the problems of the past. But there are big issues in terms of, I think managing perceptions, managing the community relations, moving forward, because we are going to keep having mistakes.

### **Justin Nix:**

I've described it in the past these police shootings, they're rare in the grand scheme of things, but they also happen with sad and predictable regularities. They're simultaneously rare, but they also happen three times a day and they happen everywhere, big agencies, small agencies, cities, rural communities. I hate to tell you this, but there'll be another George Floyd sometime, maybe not tomorrow, but next year, five years, it's going to happen again. But will we be better in five years?

I always start my classes by asking, has policing gotten better in the last 50 years? And as you might imagine, there's a lot of variation in how students respond to that question. But I think on a lot of measurable things, they've improved. They shoot fewer people, they're better trained, they're more professional, but I don't know either. It's gotten really politically divisive.

### **Jerry Ratcliffe:**

But the country's become divisive anyway.

**Justin Nix:**

It's always been divisive.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It feels like it's got a lot worse.

**Justin Nix:**

I've said in the past that I think social media would be the downfall of society. And I stand by that at some point it's like, it was a mistake. It was a mistake to capture everyone's every waking thought and put it out for the world to see and get retweeted.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And I can be an ass on Twitter, so I'm probably contributing to that in some way. [laughter]

**Justin Nix:**

I've had to look in the mirror sometimes and say, "What, do I need to say this?" Probably not. I think we could all maybe do a little reflection.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Congratulations on your reward this year as the young experimental criminologist from the Academy of Experimental Criminology and the American Society of Criminology's...

**Justin Nix:**

Division of Experimental Criminology.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Experimental criminology. Well done. Congratulations.

**Justin Nix:**

Thank you.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You take an interesting approach to this experimental idea, because you're starting to do some really innovative work around crowdsourcing surveys and opinions and things like that. How would you describe yourself as a scholar in that regard?

**Justin Nix:**

I check the headlines. I try to watch the news, keep my finger on the pulse of what's going on in policing, where I know that there's data capable of speaking on some of the conversations that are taking place in the absence of data, I'm always as a curious person when I say, "Well, I know where I could go get that answer." I'm inclined to go get it. Actually

just at the reception earlier, one of my colleagues was saying, "What are you working on now? You seem like you've jumped around?" My answer was like, "I go where the wind blows."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Isn't academia wonderful for that?

**Justin Nix:**

It is. I get up. And I say, "What's interesting today and where could I help the discussion be a little more data informed?"

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

What piece of scholarship that led you to hear is the part that you're most proud of? The piece that you wanted to highlight to somebody?

**Justin Nix:**

That's a really good question. As academics, we fawn over the so-called top tier journals and we fawn over big publications. You're struggling as if you can say that Jerry, the full professor, but that's our currency in this field. That's how you go get tenure. And that's how you make a name for yourself is publishing in the so-called big journals. But I think what I'm most proud of is just trying to become more committed to open science. To getting my work out there so that... Because the whole point of this is to produce knowledge. And if we produce knowledge and then bury it behind a pay wall, what are we really doing here? So I'm started trying to publish in journals that don't put up pay walls. And I think that what I'm most proud about is every time I work with an agency, if they're kind enough to give me access to their officers, to do a survey, I'm going to be kind enough to put together a short report and tell them, here's what I found and here's maybe what you could do with this.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That is so important. It's one of the things I've learned and I've not enough skulls do this. Chuck Ramsey was always complaining about this, "Let me know what's happening, give me some feedback. And give it to me, in a way I can understand it." I've always tried after reports to write one or two page PDFs in English with some simple charts and graphics and some simple statistics that they can just read and understand. And I'm not trying to say the cops are done, but they're just busy and they don't need to know guru level statistics to do their jobs. We got to give it to them in a way that they can understand. And now they get something much more quickly than waiting two years for some journal article and some obscure journal that they can't access, because as you say, it's behind a pay wall.

**Justin Nix:**

And that they get bored reading anyway.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Absolutely. Well, I mean, I often get bored reading most academic research.

You've been spending more time advertising. I went, "you've", that sounded almost accusatory. You've been spending more time advertising and doing small Twitter threads - which are really handy - on your research. Have you found that as a good way to reach out to people?

**Justin Nix:**

I think it's a great way. I've actually had opportunities present themselves from tweets that I've put out. I recently published op-eds in both the Washington post and in the city journal. And these are audiences that I probably, would've never to reach with my article in whatever journal, but, you do a short Twitter thread, you explain in layman's terms what this was? Why you did it? What you found? What you can do with it? It can gain traction that way. Twitter's a weird thing sometimes.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It's a cesspool of hate and misery.

**Justin Nix:**

It is. There's a lot of bad. There's a lot of things to hate about Twitter, but for all of its headaches, it can be a great way to promote-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

There are some wonderful moments on it.

**Justin Nix:**

There are, yeah, ad it's a great way to follow research too. I learned it's a lot easier to keep up with what the field's doing and who's doing what on Twitter than it is by other methods that I've chosen.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It's certainly been great. As you know, we are only just now getting back into conferences. It has been an incredible way to keep up with what's been going on - and I think academics and you do a great job of this - Have to reach out with their scholarship more and not just sit back and complain when people don't come and find their obscure journal articles.

**Justin Nix:**

Science, including social science is cool, and it's for everyone. I've sat in on a few panels at this conference where I'm seeing some very brilliant work being done, but I don't know that it's going to be communicated in a digestible way to people who could actually make it matter.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

We don't train people how to do that.

**Justin Nix:**

We don't!

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I give my students, "Can you write 20 pages on this with some obscure statistics?" "That'd be fine. No problem at all." "Can you convert that into two pages that I can give the police commissioner that's in English that they can distribute?" There is wailing and gnashing of teeth.

**Justin Nix:**

It is hard. Writing is hard, right? Brevity is really hard. After we've had to write a dissertation, but if you can't say what you did in a sentence, then maybe you don't know what you did. But to your point, we don't train that. And I certainly get that. I think we have a moral obligation to get our work out there to the people who can use it.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I think especially if you're at universities that take any kind of public funding. If you're in the art history department, I can't speak to that. But if you're working in crime and you have knowledge that could help and improve crime policy, that could just stop one person getting their car stolen or worse, being a victim of violence, to not engage with that and not to consider that, to be part of your job is I think a flaw and a mistake.

**Justin Nix:**

I agree. I understand it, but it's unfortunate. And me personally, if I have the time, I'll pick up the phone, I'll talk to the reporters. If I find that a reporter goes and does a hack job with the story, I'll probably put that reporter on my "do not respond" list.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Maybe we should all circulate that list.

**Justin Nix:**

We should, we should. That's a great idea. You know there's a lot of good folks out there who are honestly in search of the truth.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

What I like about what you bring to the discussions, I follow you engaging with people on Twitter, back and forwards, and there's a bunch of people who are good at this, is to just keep bringing back to what the data and the sciences, not let them deteriorate into "well I have a fucking opinion". And this is what I think.

Let's test that. Here's what the data and the knowledge and the science say. And that's got to be fundamental to our role because otherwise, we slip from being social scientists into advocates. And the problem with people who are heavily engaged in advocacy is they're not willing to see the possibility of another side. I think when academics engage in that, they undermine the rest of us who are trying to say, "Look, this is what the data say, whether you like it or not". It's like Neil deGrasse Tyson has said, "The great thing about science is it's true, whether or not you believe it."

### Justin Nix:

Yes. I love that quote. And it's funny, you mentioned that I, I recently was accused in an email, someone read that story that we wrote in the Washington Post and took issue with the denominator that we were using. He threw my 'disparity doesn't mean bias' paper back at me. And he said, "Here's what you said in that paper, what changed?" And I said, "I stand by what I wrote, but I've updated my beliefs. There's new work that's come out." That's really challenged what I thought I knew and really made me think deeper about this issue, and that's okay. That's the whole point of science. You continue to learn and you update your beliefs. I was telling my students the other night, "As scientists, we have to be agnostic about what we find." It's okay to use the skillset that you have to advocate for justice and for reform where it's necessary. But like that line can get blurred very quickly.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think none of us would be in this field if we didn't support the value of reform. I don't think anybody sees that the criminal justice system's in any way, shape or form perfect. But this change should be data driven.

### Justin Nix:

I got to tell you, Jerry, I've seen arguments that we need to stop collecting data because of what it might show. I've had people straight up tell me, "No, we don't need to track all police shootings, if the data are just going to get misused." To tell me we shouldn't track this behavior of police officers using deadly force is insane to me and it's scary.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes. You're an NIJ LEADS academic. You actually have the opportunity to work through the National Institute of Justice's program. And I can never remember what LEADS stands for, but it stands for a whole bunch of things.

### Justin Nix:

Law Enforcement Advancement through Data and Science or something like that.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's a little torturous, but well done. You got there because it would take me a week to figure that out. You actually had the opportunity to work much more closely with the police than I think a lot of people do. I see a lot of people just downloading data sets and then just writing stuff. But you're actually working with the police now. How's that going?

### Justin Nix:

It's a fantastic opportunity. Even when the pandemic totally threw it off the rails. We haven't really been able to take off the way we'd hope, but they just funded three more LEADS academics to start. Even in the middle of the pandemic, when we haven't been able to travel and get together the way we would have, it's just been great to be dialed into that network of 60 to 80 mid-career police officers, some of the most passionate people I've met, who care about their communities, who want genuinely to do better. Who recognize the problems in policing and who want to do better. Bless them. Some of them have gotten PhDs, some of them have done RCTs in their agencies. It's incredible.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Does it change your perspective on policing at all?

**Justin Nix:**

I don't think so. Even back in my grad school days, I was embedded in an agency three days a week working with their crime analysis unit. I knew these people were out there, but I do think it could be an eye opening experience maybe for others who didn't go on that track. And you mentioned people just downloading data sets, maybe not understanding all of the complexities therein.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I'm talking economists. [laughter]

**Justin Nix:**

Your words not mine.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Some of them are getting a lot better actually. I'll give them that.

**Justin Nix:**

No, but I see it, it's clear sometimes that folks don't really understand what it is they're looking at. And every time I've worked with an agency, the custodians, the keepers of those data, they know them inside and out. And they can spot BS when they see it immediately.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

People like John Hall from the NYPD. He's embedded in his data and they put a lot of their data online. Stuff's getting published and talked about, and then you just get this one line on a tweet where John just points out all the flaws in it, devastating for that kind of work.

**Justin Nix:**

John's great. When something comes out about NYPD, I always pull up his timeline or shoot him a message, "John, what do you think of this?" Because, he's one of those people who, you can't get the BS past him. LEADS has been great, 60, 80 scholars. And that really does have so much potential because a lot of those scholars have been promoted to chief, they still have that same passion and drive that commitment to doing research. This really could be an opportunity to make policing more evidence based.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And as an award winning now, young experimental scholar ... and I hate you for your youth, I envy it hugely ... bastard... [laughter]. I think that's something that's lost on some people, which is if you're a young academic start building relationships with agencies and at the lower levels. In Philadelphia, when they had a hiring freeze for civilians and we

started to train the first crime analyst by taking sworn officers, Matt Deacon, was one of them. He's a captain in one of the busiest districts in the city now. Play the long game.

**Justin Nix:**

Yeah. I was doing a survey at one point in grad school and I went to the roll call meetings and handed out my survey, and one of the officers in the room, he raised his hand and he said, "Are we ever going to get to see this?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "I've done so many surveys where I'll never get to see what you found. You researchers coming here and you do your study and then you're gone." I made a pledge to him, "I will get you a brief." And he was very appreciative of that. They don't have to take our surveys. They could just tell us to kick rocks.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Or worse.

**Justin Nix:**

Yeah exactly. To build those relationships and nurture them. Because, they could be chief one day and they'll remember.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yes, they will.

What's disheartened you about how we use numbers? We use or don't use data.

**Justin Nix:**

It was odd to me and maybe I'm naive. But when the FBI data came out in September, we all knew what it was going to show. We didn't know exactly, but we all knew there was going to be a big spike and we all had our theories. But just the rush to downplay 5,000 additional murder victims, disproportionately black murder victims. Thousands of families affected, lost loved ones.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That's more than a 9/11. And look how much of an impact that had on the country.

**Justin Nix:**

Truly historic one year spike. Yes, we're still lower than we were in 1990, but why is the worst year on record the benchmark going back to the benchmark issue? Why can't we compare it to the best year on record? We'll argue for the next 20 years over what happened in 2020, but I think we can, all agree that, less murder would be a good thing. It struck me as so odd that if you talked about it, you were fearmongering.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

The politicization - and considering we've had a couple drinks in the bar, I'm quite proud of having got that word out, and I'm not going to try it again [laughter] - of data. It's possibly always there, it definitely feels worse.

**Justin Nix:**

Sometimes I wonder, are we prisoners of the moment? Maybe it's always been this way, but it's certainly more visible with social media. I didn't used to know what Sean in Bozeman Montana thought about policing and my research, but now I do, because he's tweeting at me.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

With his seven followers, but lots of opinions.

**Justin Nix:**

Did you see that Pew study just recently 23% of adults even have a Twitter and 25% of those users are producing 97% of the content? It's a lot of echo chambers. That was a good reminder for me. This is not reflective of everyone. This is just Twitter.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I think you see that when you see Gallup polls that contradict the zeitgeist and the sense of where you think, Twitter's going, obviously this is where it is. And then you go, nope, we have this national poll.

**Justin Nix:**

And there again, where one poll, I'd understand people who rushed to say, well, "It was a poorly worded question or it was loaded. And if they'd asked it this way, they would've gotten a different." But when it's dozens of polls with different question, wordings, different samples, when they all converge on this consistent theme, at some point, what are you talking about? Are you saying that the people taking the poll don't know what they want, because that's what it comes off as. And that's a bad look.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It's indicative of not enough education in social science and a little bit too much push for advocacy. The data contradict my position and it should be. I may have to change my position, but what it really means is I'm going to double down on my position and then try and undermine the data.

**Justin Nix:**

Couldn't have said it better myself.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Probably a good place to stop. Congratulations on your award. Thoroughly, well deserved. Well, get back to work. We're looking to read what you're up to next.

**Justin Nix:**

Thanks so much, Jerry, and thanks for having me. This is an honor.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Oh please. [laughter]

## REDUCING CRIME PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

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That was episode 42 of Reducing Crime recorded in Chicago, November 2021.

New episodes are announced on Twitter @\_ReducingCrime. Instructors can also DM for a spreadsheet of multiple-choice questions for every reducing crime episode. And as always, you can find a transcript to this and every episode@reducingcrime.com/podcast. Be safe and best of luck.