

#54 (JEFF ASHER)

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Jeff Asher has an analytical background with the CIA and two police departments. He's now a go-to person for the national media on issues around national crime trends, data reporting and crime statistics. We discussed the spectacular failure that's been the launch of the National Incident Based Reporting System and how we might be able to fix it.

Welcome to Reducing Crime, I'm Jerry Ratcliffe.

If you've recently tried to make sense of how much crime happens in the United States, well, good luck with that. For as long as you've been alive, unless you're Geoff Alpert, nearly every police agency in the United States has reported crime figures to the FBI in a format called UCR. That is the Uniform Crime Reports. And then when it was long past useful, the FBI would publish that data about nine months after anyone cared. Well, now we have a new system called NIBRS, that is the National Incident Based Reporting System. More nuance, more complexity, more data. And so it should be awesome, but it's not. It's a cluster shambles of biblical proportions. At the moment, we really have no idea from the FBI whether the crime was up or down in 2021. And we probably won't know about 2022 either.

Yeah, it's that bad. So to make sense of it, I spoke to Jeff Asher. Jeff is a nationally recognized crime data analyst and co-founder of the data analytics firm, AH Datalytics. Jeff spent years as a crime analyst with both the city of New Orleans and Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office. And prior to that he worked on Spook Street as an analyst for the Central Intelligence Agency and Department of Defense. Jeff's analyses have appeared nationally on data journalism website, FiveThirtyEight, The New York Times, The Atlantic, and many more. Jeff holds an MA from George Washington University and a BA from the University of Texas.

REDUCING CRIME PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

I caught up with him at the annual conference of the International Association of Chiefs of Police in Dallas earlier this year. As you'll hear in the middle of the podcast, it happened to be right in the middle of a game of his much-loved New Orleans Saints. Terrible timing on my part.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This is your first time having a booth at IACP. It just took me a week and a half to walk across the entire exhibition hall and then to track you down and find you.

Jerf Asher:

Well, we want the dedicated clients. We want the people that-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh my God, if I had warrants out for me, the best place to hide is somewhere in the exhibition hall at IACP, because honest to God, it's impossible to find anybody in there.

Jerf Asher:

The eighth of 77 rows is quality.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. Depending on where you are, as you say. If you come in from one side, you're close to the front. If you come in from the other side, you are way in the distance that nobody is ever going to get to.

Jerf Asher:

It's nice because either the person coming is someone you know, or the person coming has chief on their badge and you're like, "If it doesn't start with C, chief, commander, captain."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I see so many of these people and as I'm walking past and they're looking at my badge, they have that sort of expect and hope look. And then they see professor, they go, "Oh, he's got no fucking money. It's like, "Just ignore him."

Jerf Asher:

"Why is this guy here?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. Well, good stuff and it's nice to finally catch up with you, because we've been trying to sit down and do this for a while. Your career has been really interesting, because you've ended up doing data analytics and really providing important service, but you never started here did you? How did you end up with the secret squirrels?

Jerf Asher:

Well, it has been I guess a non-traditional career path. I was a senior in high school on 9/11 and I kind of got a service bug in me. And so I went to college at Texas and knew I wanted to do some sort of government work. And so I started

with DOD, was getting my masters in DC, was fortunate enough to work for CIA for five years and then kind of got the service bug out of me.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Government work has that effect, doesn't it? It's like you're all idealism until you actually work for the government and go "Holy shit. How much paperwork is involved?"

Jerf Asher:

It was great, it was fun, but it was difficult. Either you're doing it for five years and then you're getting out, or you're doing it for 40 years and you're retiring. And I sort of made the call that it wasn't going to be everything and my government work and my 20s were both over. I wanted to start a family. I wanted to be near my family so dragged my fiancé and then wife down to New Orleans and have a very analytic skillset, because in DC you have sort of this skillset that every person has, this master's degree, they've taught me how to write, they've taught me how to think, they've taught me how to analyze.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And did they turn those skills onto anything useful? Were you working on anything fun?

Jerf Asher:

Yes. We're not going to go into any of that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh spoilsport.

Jerf Asher:

Get the bleeps ready and I'll start talking.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. As we are IACP, somebody's got to be listening here at some point. Yeah.

Jerf Asher:

And I came home to New Orleans and New Orleans is the opposite of DC, in that, that's just anecdote, anecdote, anecdote throughout the government and nobody had my skillset, as opposed to DC where every person has my skillset. So I managed to finagle a job with the police department, which was a good intro I think to this line of work. They hadn't had a crime analyst, an actual crime analyst that wasn't just some random person that they called an analyst in decades, didn't really know how to use one.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So often it ends up being, and I don't mean this in a disrespectful sense, whoever is bouncing around doing sort of clerical work in the police department takes the job of crime analyst, because it's a pay bump from where they are, but they don't have the skillset for it.

Jerf Asher:

They can put the papers together, they can put together a couple of slides and it's very tactical. It's almost like a detective assistant. I want to know where all the vehicle burglaries in the district are.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And it's heartbreaking because you then see that they get lumped in together with all the really highly qualified crime analysts that are out there with good degrees and really strong analytical skillsets. I think it makes a struggle for organizations like IACA in terms of moving the field forward, because everybody is at a different level.

Jerf Asher:

And so much of it as I've learned, is just about the hierarchy. Where is the analyst within the hierarchy? Are they in a broom closet where they do nothing? Or are they bureaucratically stationed next to the chief and they can add analysis and analytic value? And I think so often, especially in agencies that don't have established crime analysis programs, it's the broom closet.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Were you also with New Orleans Police Department? Was that during the consent decree?

Jerf Asher:

It was the very beginning of the consent decree.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How much did that change things?

Jerf Asher:

For me, I don't think any. I think with every agency that goes into a consent decree, there's that initial thought of "Well we're going to change a few letters on our policies and it's going to be over and we'll be out of this in 18 months."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, that's not how it works.

Jerf Asher:

It's like the soldiers marching to World War I and saying "We'll be home by Christmas." And so I was at the very beginning, there was a lot of hesitancy. After I left, they created a crime analysis program. My friend and partner now Ben Horowitz-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Professional work partner we should say.

Jerf Asher:

Yes, business partner. And so Ben was their first ever director of analytics, which is kind of what I had expected to be able to start up when I went there, but they weren't there yet. And it wasn't until I left that they got there, and so started working on my own. I worked with Sheriff's office in the suburbs of New Orleans part-time, had my first kid. And so then all of a sudden my wife wasn't such a big fan of self-employed consultant that doesn't have a lot of big clients and is trying to build a business.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Carries a lot of risk.

Jerf Asher:

Yeah, it does.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I don't think people really understand that it's real nickel and dime stuff at the beginning when you're trying to start a business.

Jerf Asher:

Yeah. It was very difficult. It took a good two or three years to where I had enough clients where I could stop working for anybody else. Was really working with the New Orleans City Council as their public safety consultant, doing a lot of dashboard building, writing reports, analyses of the criminal justice system in New Orleans. And then in 2019 Ben left NOPD and we started our company AH Datalytics. And now we basically do what we did for police departments and really what I did for CIA, in terms of that ability to write and analyze. And we give that to mostly small and medium sized agencies. I just started giving my bit.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No, no, no, no, it's fine. I get it. It's interesting because you are now at the forefront of an area I think carries with it great benefits, but also great risks, because dashboards I think are really important for transparency of data and transparency of information. But they also come with a risk, because I see agencies that get way too fixated on what happened yesterday and the day before. Where were the dots yesterday? And I'm sitting there saying, "I don't care where the dots were yesterday. Show me where the dots have consistently been for the last six months and for the last year." Can you build that kind of more strategic capacity into data systems that people can understand?

Jerf Asher:

Well, that's our entire objective is not to build dashboards for dashboards sake, but to build dashboards that do storytelling. That are sort of complex, they look pretty. Too often. You see agencies will put it out and they did nothing to change the default colors. And it's like lime green and-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Whoever designed Microsoft Graph the basic default colors, they need to be beaten soundly.

Jerf Asher:

But people take no interest in just how it looks. And I think that building something that looks pretty and also you've put a lot of thought into what can this do? Is it just a dashboard that's showing one thing or is it a dashboard that you can break down by timeframe, by police district, by shift? And so you can sort of pick out what are the fun stories. We have a traffic camera dashboard that we built for the city council. There's one camera right off of the interstate and the camera catches, there's like, it starts really high when they first installed the camera. And then you can see a big gap with this giant pothole developed across the entire street and nobody could go 35 over it. So you went from like 20 a month to maybe one a month for three or four years. And then there's this big six to eight month gap where they fix the street and then people could then speed over it. And it's fun to be able to see that in the data. But it's also the type of thing that I think you're absolutely right that people are too dashboard centric in that dashboard is a solution rather than what you can say from a dashboard I think can be a lot more important.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. But what I'm taking away from that is in New Orleans you fix your potholes in three to four years. And that's a sort of target level that Philadelphia can only dream of.

Jerf Asher:

Well that was one pothole. There's way too many where that doesn't exist. And this was an egregious one that you couldn't drive over.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, that's still Philadelphia potholes. We got potholes that you drive into. They have their own microenvironment and climate and different kind of wildlife and an escarpment at the far end. You climb them to get to the traffic lights. At some point we got to get around to fixing the infrastructure, but we've got a gun violence problem in the meantime to fix.

Jerf Asher:

Yeah, absolutely.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How do you deal with clients that want you to include things in your dashboard and you're thinking that's not a good idea because it's going to drive your decision making in the wrong direction.

Jerf Asher:

That's a very difficult part of it. And we get that, I wouldn't say that often, but we get that occasionally. And-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

City councilors who think they know how to do analysis.

Jerf Asher:

Yeah. And also sometimes the police chief has an idea.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah I'm scared. I'm scared already.

Jerf Asher:

Yeah, I don't want that on our dashboard. I don't want us analyzing that because I think it's bad. Not inherently immoral, but sometimes not the thing that a police department should be doing. So that's a conversation where sort of have to move them off the X and point them to other shiny things. It's difficult and uncomfortable to think to have those conversations.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But you have to have them right?

Jerf Asher:

You have to have them because for us it's our product. And like to think that my analysis is usually of high quality and if it's not, then why is it going out there?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I've been reading some of your stuff in the New York Times and more in the national media. That's a very different kind of work.

Jerf Asher:

It is. It's usually me writing about 1500 to 2000 words then an editor slicing it to about 700 words. I've got every detail in there that I think is important and sometimes you don't get all those in. A year ago I managed to scoop the FBI on their UCR numbers and the Times wanted to print it and make a big deal out of it because we were first to report that there was a 30% increase in murder in 2020.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

People keep telling me that it's nothing to worry about.

Jerf Asher:

Yeah, well-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's only a few more thousand people murdered right?

Jerf Asher:

As the writer though. It was me writing everything that I could put in there and then you get criticized for things that were taken out. And it's fun to do that. I think helps to build a profile. But it also is something that there's not a lot of

national writers that go into the data. And I like to think I do it in a nonpartisan, dispassionate way. The same way I've been taught to write and analyze things.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What sort of reaction do you get with some of this stuff? You're putting yourself out and your analysis out there and your interpretation of what's going on, on a national stage. It's got to attract some crazies.

Jerf Asher:

Well yeah, you get crazies, especially a lot of emotions around reporting that there's 30% increase in murder. That I thought was a big deal and I think most people agreed, but Twitter is not real life. I get very positive praise from my family and my mom and dad are very proud.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There you go. That's the metric we're going for.

Jerf Asher:

My Uncle Herb loves them. So that's the type of praise that I like.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Give us a shout out to Uncle Herb.

Jerf Asher:

Uncle Herb. He just turned 90. So it's very rare I think that crime data is a story. For me, I think a 30% increase in murder is a big deal.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Jerf Asher:

But you can't say that it's a big deal. You can contextualize it. If it's a 0% increase and there was no change or there was a 30% increase. The point of my writing is to factualize what the data says. And sometimes there's a lot of passion I think that comes with a lot of people that aren't able to conceptualize that somebody could say something without judging it. Even if my judgment would be that, yeah, this is-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah it's a big-

Jerf Asher:

...This is bad.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

As former vice president Joe Biden said, "This is a big fucking deal." A lot of people are getting murdered.

Jerf Asher:

It is. And it's not one or two places. And in the '90s it was all New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. They were like 20% of the murders nationally.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Jerf Asher:

Now they're like 6%. So it's so difficult to compare to the '90s, yet everyone wants to do it. When I think about the Saints, my favorite football team, how are they doing? You don't say, "Well, in 1981 they were one in 15. So the fact that they're two and four now is not a big deal. Because they have twice as many wins." You compare to where you want to be. Not to the worst you've ever been.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes.

Jerf Asher:

Who cares what the '90s were like. It is today.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, I mean I think probably half the police departments, most of those cops weren't born then.

Jerf Asher:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's not in their lifetime. There's a lot of discussion about whether the increases are due to covid, due to post murder of George Floyd, they happened around the same time. Is it possible to disentangle those?

Jerf Asher:

So I think you can sort of disentangle based on the timing. We know that through the first quarter of 2020, murder was up about 7%. You know as well as anyone that that could be noise or it could be something.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Jerf Asher:

It's maybe suggestive that there was some sort of covid relationship, but it wasn't enormous. And then you look and May, June, July, it was up substantially and it's been at that level ever since.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Even though we are coming out of, it's another discussion about whether we should be coming out of sort of covid restrictions, but we're clearly coming out of them. We've got a conference here where nobody's wearing a mask and we've got tens of thousands of people here. So people are coming back to a life that resembles some semblance of normality. But the homicide rate's still high.

Jerf Asher:

Well, the homicides rate's still high. And so you want to point at, I know that there's a lot of discussion about this concept of de-policing, police pulling back, but even that was somewhat short lived in a lot of places. A lot of places where it didn't happen or you can't prove it happened that saw dramatic increases. So David Graham with the Atlantic had a great idea that I sort of attached to that we can sort of point to what a lot of the factors probably were, what the ingredients were. But I don't think that we can rebuild the recipe yet. And I think that the role of police pulling back very plausible as a factor. I do think that this concept of trust in police, that if people don't trust the police, they're more likely to take things into their own hands. They're maybe just more likely to have a firearm on them in the first place. And murders are such a low base rate crime. If you get 1,000 more murders just because 1,000 people were carrying a gun instead of a knife, then you've suddenly explained half or a third of the increase. So many more firearms available. You have all of these ingredients and more people are carrying firearms.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I know that in Philadelphia, the number of stops that the police department are doing has dropped precipitous. It is a small fraction of where it used to be, but the actual raw number of guns they're recovering is increased to a large number than they've ever had. Either they've become geniuses, at finding guns or just everybody's carrying guns.

Jerf Asher:

Well, and it's not just Philadelphia. And that's what we found. We had 10 cities where we had the same effect. And so I do think that if everyone's carrying guns, and we know that this last year in 2021, 80% of murders that were reported to the FBI were via firearm compared to 10 years ago it was 65%.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So I'm about to make everybody who's listening to the podcast switch off because this is a terribly statistically nerdy point. But when you do a thing called zero inflated regression, and yeah you can just hear everybody reaching for the volume control or the off knob, but you've got a two stage, which is if you are looking for some rare event, what are the factors that drove it from not happening to happening? And then what are the factors that drove it to happening a lot? And they're two different stages. So going from not something happening to happening can be one set of factors. But then once you've got it, what sustains it or what makes it increase in volume can be a different group of things. And that may be where we are.

Jerf Asher:

I think it is. And we really don't fully understand what happened in the '90s and murder going down, and especially murder sort of sustaining from 2000 to 2016, really. So we're so close to the event. I think that for now, the best we're going to be able to do is contribute what some of the factors are. And I think that the closer a person is to studying it, the less certain they should be. And I know that's really hard for people to express uncertainty in a way that acknowledges what we know and what we don't know. The more somebody who just came on the subject and wants to write a 3,000 word blog on why murder went up, that person is not going to acknowledge any of this uncertainty.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes. And then they're arguably not qualified to understand the nuance. They're almost outing themselves as a Dunning-Kruger.

Quick editorial side note here on Dunning-Kruger, I'm using the phrase as a derogatory term to be honest, to refer to a person with low levels of expertise, but who thinks that they have more insight, skill or knowledge than they actually have, you know, like just about everyone on Twitter, it has its origins in the work of psychologists, David Dunning and Justin Kruger from 20 years ago. Google the Dunning-Kruger effect. It's quite interesting.

And then they're arguably not qualified to understand the nuance. They're almost outing themselves as a Dunning-Kruger.

Jerf Asher:

Yeah. And I know you want to talk about NIBRS, like we're talking about a system where our data is so flawed.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, believe me, I don't want to talk about, I don't want to talk NIBRS.

Jerf Asher:

You feel obliged to talk about NIBRS.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I feel obliged to talk about the mess, the cluster that is NIBRS at the moment.

Jerf Asher:

Anybody taking in any data that doesn't acknowledge just how bad it is doing themselves a disservice.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We've got this change from UCR, which has been the way we've done things. It's bad, but it was reliably bad for decades to this whole new system. For the three listeners from outside the United States who have stuck with us after talking about zero inflated regression. I'm going to regret mentioning that. Take two seconds to explain what UCR is for folk and then we'll talk about the wonderful shit show that is NIBRS.

Jerf Asher:

So UCR is the Uniform Crime Report. It is the standard by which agencies report for 49 states to their state program and the state programs get all the data together and send it up to the FBI. The FBI puts it all together and puts out a report. Traditionally it's been under what's called the Summary Reporting System, SRS, which they've measured seven crime types. They had 18,000 police departments, law enforcement agencies across the country that usually they got between 95 and 97% participation rate. So you're missing a couple. But-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Pretty much everybody was fat, dumb and happy for decades. This is how we do it. It's not great, but it's reliably bad. But you know what you're getting.

Jerf Asher:

Yeah. We have it year after year since 1960 and for some agencies it's back to 1930. So there is a value in that consistency.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But now...

Jerf Asher:

Now. So in the eighties they came up with system NIBRS.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

NIBRS stands for?

Jerf Asher:

National Incident Based Reporting System. So they introduced it in the '80s. Agencies began reporting really in the 1990s. And they're at 30, 35% participation.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So it's been around since the '90s.

Jerf Asher:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But like everything unfortunately around this, it's voluntary. The states essentially run it and they have their agents, they have police departments report to them and then they report the figure centrally to the FBI. So this really is run by the states.

Jerf Asher:

Yeah, it's run by the states, other than Mississippi, which doesn't have a state UCR program.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Marvelous.

Jerf Asher:

Yeah. Could do a whole different podcast on Mississippi. But I don't think anybody would be interested in that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

People from Mississippi but also it, yeah. Yeah. Even then...

Jerf Asher:

Maybe, maybe not. So they have this system, it's voluntary, and in 2015 they basically make the decision, this is going to be the system. If you haven't reported it by the start of 2021, you're just done. We'll give you money, we'll give you training, we'll do our best. But it's voluntary. And for a lot of agencies, especially small ones, but some big ones as well, it's really expensive and complicated because instead of collecting a couple dozen data points, you're collecting over a hundred.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So does this requiring them to think about just buying new RMS systems and data recording systems? Is that-

Jerf Asher:

Yeah for a lot of agencies that they need a new RMS.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Record management system.

Jerf Asher:

Yeah. They need new equipment. They have to train up all of their people. It's not just Sally in your admin department that needs it. It's every agent. Every officer.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Poor Sally. She was just about to retire as well.

Jerf Asher:

She was, she was two weeks from retirement. Every officer in your agency needs to know how to input the data correctly because you're collecting so much information. So if you want to know how many kidnappings at a Michigan Day care center happened in 2020, you could do that with NIBRS.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

See, I know you care about daycare centers because you're a bloke with what, four kids?

Jerf Asher:

Four kids. Yeah. Only three still in daycare though.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, but triplets, right?

Jerf Asher:

Triplets. Yeah. Four year old triplets and a six year old.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How do you even just turn up to work?

Jerf Asher:

Send help listeners, send help. So they've got this system, but they're starting with 35% of agencies are reporting. And in 2015 it was going to be meant they had six years, agencies had six years to transition. And in 2021, only 65% of the US population was covered by an agency that reported via NIBRS compared to 97% under the old system.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. But as a college professor, I know that it doesn't matter whether I give my students a deadline of a week, a month, or in this case six years, they will do the assignment the day before it's due or on the day.

Jerf Asher:

Yeah. And a ton haven't. New York Police Department hasn't. Los Angeles Police Department hasn't. Chicago Police Department did seven months.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So we are basically getting zero data out of some of the largest cities in the country.

Jerf Asher:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's all going swimmingly well.

Jerf Asher:

It's not just a big city thing. It's small towns, small counties. It's everywhere. They haven't done it for different reasons probably. But there hasn't been this pressure. They only had 52% of the US population was covered by a law enforcement agency that reported 12 months of data. Philly did not do 12 months. I think they did seven.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Believe me, that's not the worst of the problems we have to face.

Jerf Asher:

No, no.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You know we're changing the city motto? Yeah. It used to be The City of Brotherly Love and now it's, "Oh shit, what was that?"

Jerf Asher:

Sounds like New Orleans. We have a lot in common.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Jerf Asher:

Despite our differences. Saints lost. Awesome. Sorry. You can edit that out.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No, no, that's fine. You do tweet an interesting mix of data. And how bad are the Saints right now.

Jerf Asher:

They are apparently pretty bad.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Now is that an emotion call or is that an objective call?

Jerf Asher:

They're probably better in my brain than in my heart right now.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Eagles are on a roll right now.

Jerf Asher:

They are there. They're good.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Jerf Asher:

Fortunately we gave you our first round draft pick next year. It's bad. All right, this interview's over. Let me get serious again.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Let's come back to NIBRS for a moment. Is it worth the pain? When we get there will it be worth it? Will we ever get there?

Jerf Asher:

I'm a believer that we'll get there. I still think it's conceptually antiquated in that if you follow a baseball game within a split sec, you can tell everything that's happened on the field in every stadium, in both major leagues and minor leagues. And with NIBRS the best case is still going to be nine or 10 months delay. It'll be good for researchers, it'll be great for researchers. But it'll take a decade or two where you have enough years of 90 something percent reporting.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's never going to be during my professional life. That's good to know.

Jerf Asher:

Probably not. In theory you could-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes I know I have youthful good looks, but that's only because I'm preserved by alcohol. But bottom line is, that yeah, if it's going to be a decade and a half, I'm going to be on a tropical island by then.

Jerf Asher:

Well, I think they'll probably hit the 80, 90% in the next three or four years. I hope. The problem is, if you have one year of data, the advantage of SRS was you had 60, 90 years of data the exact same. And if you only have a few years of data, you can barely make out a trend. But we come back to the point of what is the point of data that's released nine or 10 months after the year ends?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. So here we end up with this challenge, which is data that's good for trends and strategic use comes out way too slowly, but it's arguably a farce. And then what we get is just endless bombardment with dashboards and instant updates every single day about what happened with a particular tree. It's almost like there's no middle ground that allows good strategic thinking in a reasonable timeframe to actually use it.

Jerf Asher:

That's kind of the thought process. We have a year-to-date murder dashboard.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I have thoughts on year to date.

Jerf Asher:

You do have thoughts on year to date. I'm aware of your thoughts on year to date and the listeners can't see the hole in my head that your eyes are burning right now. But I think the advantage is that when we have 90 cities together

through reasonably similar timeframes, we're able to develop a picture of what is happening nationally in a way that you can't through any other, you have to wait months or years.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Where I hate it is where people say, "Well let's compare where we are in January to last January." No, show me a whole year of that. Show me what's been happening. The trend over the last year, not compared January to January.

Jerf Asher:

What we do, we don't even publish in the first couple of months of the year. I think April was when we first gathered the data. We have a graph showing just how off you're going to be if you have 50 cities of data. And really it's the months that end in R. Once you get to those, you're going to be reasonably close.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. So you do a lot of this work by going to departments websites. Do we need NIBRS? I have to thank a conversation I was having with Shelley Hyland about this. Is open data going to replace the need for NIBRS? Is it going to become essentially more valuable?

Jerf Asher:

Now we're on the same team. If you had 500 cities that produce standardized open data from their RMS where you're not relying on the PDF that they put out once a week, but that you had-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh please stop putting things out as PDFs. I know it's awful isn't it?

Jerf Asher:

Scanned in PDFs are by far the worst.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

With Sally's handwriting all over them.

Jerf Asher:

Exactly. Yeah. 14 murders is that four or nine. But if you had this standardization of CAD data, calls for service data, 911 data or RMS data from enough cities and they could do it. Enough cities do this, they just don't do it in a standardized way. And you had it publicly available so that someone like us or a researcher could put it all in one place so that you could see crime trends in the top 500 cities.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If there's like 21,000 murders, do we care for where it's plus or minus 10 at the end of the day?

Jerf Asher:

Exactly. And we've got this system where we want to track.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It tells you the strategic big picture trends.

Jerf Asher:

And it tells you in near real time, because we have the technology that using a free software, you could put 500 cities together and build a 12 month rolling average of murder in those 500 cities. It would take a little bit of effort, but give me NIBRS's budget and I'll produce a much better data product.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well give NIBRS's budget and I'll move to that tropical island a bit earlier. Is that the future of NIBRS? Should NIBRS just start scraping from public websites and data sources in cities?

Jerf Asher:

They should bribe police agencies to report RMS data in their open data feed and train them to do it in a standardized format. And with a couple hundred agencies, you can say the national trend and if they can do it in major league baseball, we can do it nationally for crime.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. But they have a financial incentive in Major league baseball.

Jerf Asher:

Well, but we have government resources.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. But they have a financial incentive in major league baseball.

Jerf Asher:

Our financial incentive though is that we're wasting money on a bad system.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Has anybody ever been fired for wasting government money?

Jerf Asher:

Probably at some point if it gets criminal. I assume.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I just love the fact that you're ever so slightly hinting that the incompetence around NIBRS is borderline criminal.

Jerf Asher:

No, I don't think it's criminal. I think the people did their best. But you go back and you look at 2019 FBI's saying we're going to get 80% of people reporting.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Wonderfully idealistic.

Jerf Asher:

And covid happens and they don't push it back. And it was clear that they weren't going to get anywhere close. And they put out these estimates. And these estimates are rough. I mean there's a huge cost to estimating from 97% participation to 60, 65% participation.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The confidence intervals, it's nerd city now. But the confidence intervals just start to balloon.

Jerf Asher:

They gave a murder estimate and it was either up 4%, down 7% or up 12%.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Were they drunk?

Jerf Asher:

So those were the close estimate. Those were the small, you had property crime where it was I think like up 38% or minus 50%. And that was-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is it ever going to get better?

Jerf Asher:

I think once you get 90%.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But some of these departments are just not up to this.

Jerf Asher:

I think most departments will get there. But the issue is that at this critical moment right now, we've had a 30% increase in murder. We'd like to see policies that reduce it. And you've got this system that won't tell you whether or not what you're doing is working.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

From an evidence based policing perspective the data is useless right now.

Jerf Asher:

Right. It is. It is. And we constantly, as consultants get questions of what city should we look after where what they're doing is working and you're like, "Oh, well this city saw 12% decrease after a 40% increase. Is what they're doing working or is it random noise?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. And we can't tell.

Jerf Asher:

We can't tell. And we'll never be able to tell because by the time we get good data-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Everything's moved on.

Jerf Asher:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

To drag away from all the problems. Because we could probably speak for three or four more episodes on that. What do you like about NIBRS's data? Where do you think are the opportunities for people to really learn what's going on.

Jerf Asher:

The opportunities are that you can understand every incident that happens in your city to a degree that you couldn't before. They are going to add nonfatal shooting injury as a category. So as a checkbox essentially. So that's going to be in 2023.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So right now we are not really clear about shootings. They're still lobbed in with aggravated assaults and robberies and-

Jerf Asher:

Yes, and they still will be, but you'll be able to check this incident. There was one non-fatal shooting victim.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay. It's a shame we don't have that right now given the awful increase in gun violence we've had.

Jerf Asher:

That's another thing where open data could bridge that gap. Philadelphia Police Department does an incredible job of producing shooting data.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We have a lot of shootings.

Jerf Asher:

Then you've got great data with it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Who's going to use this? Who do you think are the potential customers for this data that could really turn it into something useful?

Jerf Asher:

Well, in theory cities, once they've made the transition should benefit and they should have more knowledge of what's happening within their agency.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But that requires analysts.

Jerf Asher:

Well it requires analysts and it requires having made the transition. The agencies that got a head start, the ones that have been doing this for years are probably the places that people are going to benefit the most. NYPD, which is the crazy thing. NYPD has this data available on their open data. I can tell you how many murders there were in New York in 2021.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah their open data seems pretty good. I've used it.

Jerf Asher:

Yeah it's great.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Jerf Asher:

They have shooting data, it's great. But they can't tell the FBI and the FBI won't publish how many murders they had in 2021. And that's the problem.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What's going on?

Jerf Asher:

Because they didn't report via NIBRS and they're only accepting data that's reported via NIBRS.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh my goodness. What are the lessons to learn from this? If you were in charge of the whole thing, what would you have done?

Jerf Asher:

If I was in charge, I would've thought bigger about what other possibilities exist. I think that the mistake is that we've got this 1930 system that we're thinking about as the improvements to the 1980s system. We're not thinking about how do we build a 21st century data collection system.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I started in policing in the 1980s. Yes, I'm that old. Thanks. Nobody had computers. Nobody was thinking in the 1980s about, well we'll just have all data will all be online and we can just go and download it from cities.

Jerf Asher:

No, not in the 1980s, but in 2015 you could have thought that. And so I think that they reached this point where either I assume they wanted to either use NIBRS as the system or get out. And I think that they maybe chose the wrong path there. That you've kind of got things sort of plodding along and plodding along. But it doesn't solve the fact that the data is useless until 10 months after the year ended. And you can't use it in near real time.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Theoretically, you should just be able to plug the data in and just turn it around. Why is it taking nine months?

Jerf Asher:

They give agencies, I think until March to report the data. The data doesn't go straight to the FBI. It goes agency to state UCR program to FBI and then they have to audit everything.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I feel like they've shifted the onus to some degree onto the frontline officer to do better data entry at the point of entry. Because I think a lot of departments I've seen, they have kind of like UCR departments that clean up their own shitty data before they push it forward. But this seems like it's harder for them to do that now. And this is more about the point of entry data.

Jerf Asher:

Well, yeah, now you're talking about a hundred different data points rather than five data points.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you're really really hoping that the officer put, and the supervisors are monitoring this.

Jerf Asher:

Well yeah and they have to be trained. They have to know how to do it. They have to know what to do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because there are cops who will skip call. This is the same thing, but it's not just policing. But if you are asking me to fill out a massive form and I start skipping a few rows and you never call me on it, I'm never filling out those rows again because I've got other shit to do.

Jerf Asher:

Especially if you're a new agency, you've never really received the training on it, it's a new system, and it's a difficult new process.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And you've never recorded that stuff before. So you're not automatically thinking that when you go to a burglary to record all this other stuff.

Jerf Asher:

Yeah, and I think it certainly adds a degree of difficulty that never existed before. And then you pull it all up and you've got a degree of difficulty on the FBI and BJS and RTI, the contractor that they worked with to build the estimates. And the estimates were clearly troubling.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Should they have not published them?

Jerf Asher:

I think that that would probably have been better.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They should have just left well alone for a year and just tried to and just muddled on.

Jerf Asher:

Our year to date dashboard at the end of the year showed a 6% increase in 99 cities I think of data. Other places showed between five and 6%. And we know that if you take big cities, they tend to overstate the national trend. So a 6% nationally, I think I said was a three to 5% likely increase nationally that I probably should have been sufficient. That we knew that. I don't know that saying that there were between 21,000 and 24,000 murders last year says a lot.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is it easier just working in baseball or football?

Jerf Asher:

Probably, you get a math wizard with a computer. They solve all your problems and show you strategies. Here it's like life or death stuff, literally. And we have the world's worst data collection system.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And chances are probably because we don't know what's going on. We don't know what to do about it. Probably people are dying unnecessarily.

Jerf Asher:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well that's a nice cherry thought to finish with right?

Jerf Asher:

And the Saints lost, so.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. And the Saints lost. On the plus side. Look at it this way. How old are the triplets?

Jerf Asher:

The triplets are four.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And what are the names again?

Jerf Asher:

Jacob, Grant and Vivian .

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Now, by the time they're adults, we might have NIBRS up to 90%

Jerf Asher:

And by the time they're adults, they will be out of the house and I will be able to relax a little bit.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, I'm amazed at how much you actually get done considering. You must come to work for a rest, don't you?

Jerf Asher:

I do. The weekends are tough. The weekdays when they're out of school are the easy parts where I just get to work.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Have you learnt to just work in the small windows when there's relative peace and quiet in the house?

Jerf Asher:

On weekends usually we do quiet time for a couple of hours.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Does that work?

Jerf Asher:

And they sit on iPads now. They've reached that point. It's challenging, but I'm going to have how many kidneys to choose from as a donor soon. So...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There you go.

Jerf Asher:

You got to look on the right side of these things.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Marvelous. Hey look, I know you are running a booth here at IACP, the International Association of Chiefs of Police Meeting, but for taking a bit of time to come out and speak to me. Thanks very much indeed mate, I appreciate it.

Jerf Asher:

Thanks for having me.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And for people listening in before we disappear, if you go to reducingcrime.com/podcast and look for the entry for this episode with Jeff, I'll put up links to the articles that we've been talking about. Thanks for joining us.

That was episode 54 of Reducing Crime Recorded in Dallas, Texas in October, 2022. Transcripts of this and every episode, lurk at reducingcrime.com/podcast. New episodes are announced on Twitter @_reducingcrime. Subscribe: why don't you? At SoundCloud, Apple Podcasts, or pretty much anywhere so you don't miss an episode.

Be safe and best of luck.