

#69 (ALEX PIQUERO)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Reducing Crime features conversations with influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers.

Alex Piquero is not only a prolific criminologist, but he recently spent a year as the director of the Bureau of Justice Statistics. We talk about the role his mentors have played in his career, the role of universities to challenge and provoke, his time with the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the importance of being a public intellectual.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Welcome to Reducing Crime. I'm your host, Jerry Ratcliffe.

My guest this month is Alex Piquero. Alex is a professor in the Department of Sociology and Criminology and an arts and sciences distinguished scholar at the University of Miami. A couple of years ago, he spent a year as the director of the Bureau of Justice Statistics appointed by President Biden. There he oversaw a budget of more than \$90 million and more than 50 personnel. He's an internationally recognized quantitative criminologist with a prolific publishing rate. He's authored more than 500 articles and several books examining criminal careers, criminal justice policy, crime prevention, and the intersection of race and ethnicity and crime. He's a fellow of both the American Society of Criminology and the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences. In 2020, he received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Division of Developmental and Life-Course Criminology of the American Society of Criminology.

Now, we could have caught up in Philadelphia or Miami, but being hardworking researchers, we managed to find time in our busy schedules to meet in Florence. No, not the one in Alabama. Nope, not even the one in South Carolina, but yep, the one in Italy. A summer's day at a conference in Florence. I highly recommend it. It was just me, Alex and Alex's Aperol Spritz socks.

Actually, as you're about to hear it wasn't as idyllic as it sounds, not least of which is because the Florentines, yeah, I had to look that up because I was going to call them Florentians or Florentinians. Well, anyway, they haven't yet fully embraced air conditioning.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Honest to God. I think it's the heat rotting my brain. This is a little bit like Britain in that nowhere has really got air conditioning. Not in a reasonable fashion. I mean, not in the rooms here.

Alex Piquero:

It's terrible in my room. It barely comes out. Oh, yeah. Is it coming out and Nikki's like, "It's on." I'm like, "It's not fucking on." And we can't make it cooler. So it stops at 19. We can't go to 18 or 17 or 16.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And even here in the conference location, none of the rooms here have got air conditioning. Three or four of them have.

Alex Piquero:

It was hot.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No, in Britain, I understand it because Britain is really not set up or designed for hot weather. It's taken everybody by surprise when it's actually bearable.

Alex Piquero:

When we moved to Boston, we were at Northeastern. Nikki sent me to go find a place to live and I didn't know enough. And so every place I looked at didn't have air conditioning. And I told her, she goes, "No, we can't not have air conditioning." So we ended up getting one with air conditioning. When we moved there, it was like 90 degrees for four days. It's brutal hot, but no one has AC.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Have you enjoyed the conference that you've seen of it?

Alex Piquero:

For what I've seen of it today, it's been great.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, that's a very political answer.

Alex Piquero:

I've seen about an hour and a half.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You have a conference in Florence, one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

Alex Piquero:

No one's going to be here.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Why did you bother booking any rooms for the presentation? Everybody's going sightseeing.

Alex Piquero:

There was 30 people in our presidential panels, nobody there.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's good stuff. So what's the story? You're annoyingly still young and you've fucking done everything in criminology there is to do, haven't you? I mean, you've got an H-index through the roof. You've got citations through the wazoo. You've had awards and done everything. What's left?

Alex Piquero:

There's always another article to write or another student to mentor or another puzzle to solve. And so like you, Jerry, when you love what you do, it motivates you to think about what the next question is or how to do something differently.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Can I put a caveat? I absolutely love what I do and I still have a mortgage.

Alex Piquero:

So do I. So do I. And that's why we know we're lucky to wake up every day and to be able to say, what do I want to do today? What do I want to study today? What time do I want to do that today within certain confines? And having that flexibility and autonomy to chase ideas and whatever hole you go down, it's pretty special to have the opportunity to do that every day of one's life, that's for sure, considering how my parents grew up and what they had to do to sacrifice to get my brother and I to be in a position to be successful.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because the more I look around people in academia, I think the more it surprises me how few people a little bit, I mean, I don't have anything like your background, but neither of my parents went to university, went to college, and increasingly look around academia and that's really unusual.

Alex Piquero:

Absolutely.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But your parents didn't even start in this country.

Alex Piquero:

No, they fled Castro's Cuba when they were teenagers. They dated in high school. My dad was on his way to be a professional baseball player, had a contract for the Washington Senators baseball team. And then when Castro took power, fled the country with his couple of his siblings. He ended up in Harlem in the early 1960s, which is not the Harlem of today, as a bus boy at a bar called Toot Shoe where a lot of the old Yankees players used to come after games. And so he grew up listening to them on the radio, baseball player. So he got to actually serve these players.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

He never got to play?

Alex Piquero:

Not in the US because he had to make money and send money back to Cuba. My mom came to Miami, then to DC, but they literally both walked onto their modes of transportation with the clothes they wore. Came to this country not knowing anybody, not having any money and didn't make excuses and taught my brother and I work hard and work harder, and if you think you've worked enough, work harder, there's only someone else working harder than you.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So they didn't decide to label themselves as victims.

Alex Piquero:

Not at all. In fact, just the opposite. It's almost like they said, you know what? These are the cards we're dealt with and we're going to find a way to make it happen. So growing up it was never, oh, well, the system was doing this to me or I didn't have that opportunity. I turn on my word screen just like everybody else does. I just sit down and do it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It feels like that alternative approach, that more victim centered approach, it seems much more prevalent now. Am I mistaking that?

Alex Piquero:

I think that a lot of people feel that they're owed something or that they have certain things that are going against them. That's true for some people, that's definitely true.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Are we more aware of just injustice?

Alex Piquero:

I think we're being primed to sometimes look for more of it. That's not to say it doesn't exist.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Sure.

Alex Piquero:

But if you constantly fuel something in people, they may come to believe it. I was constantly fueled by education, family loyalty, hard work over and over again. And it was great because growing up as a kid, I was playing sports and my dad always said, play against people who are better than you. And I've translated that into academia. I've always tried to challenge myself by being around better people, smarter people. So I always have something to learn from what I'm doing. I even wrote you that email about the article you wrote where you put out all the calls for service and you had them all in different squares on a box.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. How much time police was spending on that?

Alex Piquero:

I thought that's the song I wanted to write, and now I got to figure out how to write the next song. And so that challenged me to think about, okay, well how can I do that in a puzzle I might be working on five months from now or a year from now? So I think that when you are open to being challenged, and it's okay if you lose. It's okay if something didn't work out. There's always another day. There's always tomorrow.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So who are the people that you sought out? Who are those people that have challenged you to some degree?

Alex Piquero:

I was very fortunate in grad school to be mentored by Ray Paternoster. And Ray was a very unique human being and a very unique scholar. And he pulled no punches and he didn't hold back. Actually, we played tennis together. He would kick my ass all the time. I'd watch his dog, we'd hung out, we'd done lots of stuff together. And he never said, "Let me walk you around ASC and introduce everybody in the world." He said, "You know what? Go meet these people that you study." So I walked up to people and I remember meeting Travis Hershey the first time in my life. I was a second year grad student at ASC in Miami. And I walked to him after his presentation, I said, "Hello, Dr. Hershey. You don't know who I am. I'm a student of Ray Paternoster. I really enjoy your work." He goes, "Come upstairs and let's talk." So we went upstairs to his room, I swear to you, and there was a bottle of vodka.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm worried about where this is going-

Alex Piquero:

And a bottle of Vodka. And we talked about the general theory of crime for an hour and a half, and he gave me the time of day. And I thought you didn't have to do that. And so I met people like Nagin and Bloomstein and Decker and Green, and these are the people I read in grad school and I looked up to, these were people who were setting the agenda for the field. They didn't hand anything to me when I started working with them in Farrington. It's like, "Okay, let's see what

you got and then maybe work on a couple of things together." And we still write together to this day, Farrington and I, for example.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, and he's a publishing machine. It's disgraceful.

Alex Piquero:

He's incredible.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, absolutely.

Alex Piquero:

And a good human being.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes. That's half the battle with this kind of stuff, isn't it? I'm getting old these days and I just want to work with people who are not assholes.

Alex Piquero:

Well, you know there's so many people who have certain views of human beings and you hear people say stuff like, "Well, you have no idea who I am." And it's like, oh, you can't be that or you can't be that. I'm like, well, whatever. I mean, you know what? There are a few people I hold close and everybody else, they're going to think whatever they're going to think and life goes on.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. We can't please everybody, right?

Alex Piquero:

No, not into it to please people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When you talk about these are the people who are setting the agenda for the field, where is the agenda right now because it feels weird.

Alex Piquero:

It feels awfully weird. We've had this conversation once or twice and we're in a bit of an hourglass of a discipline. If you think about criminology PhD programs that started literally in the early seventies, that generation of people are going to retire or have moved on to other things in their careers.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

A lot of big names-

Alex Piquero:

A lot of big names.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There's going to be a window where a lot of big names have retired in a very short period of time.

Alex Piquero:

And that worries me because where are the next people, present company excluded, who are setting those agenda? And I worry a lot, Jerry, that people are focused on methods and let's use the most advanced thing to answer something, whatever. Whereas what's the research question? Is it an interesting one? Can you answer it yes or no? And it is interesting regardless of how it comes out?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I did an earlier podcast interview with Ron Clark and he said his early work in the British Home Office was surrounded by people who are methodologically really quite bright. They were smart people, but it was just boring because they weren't answering big questions.

Alex Piquero:

I think the big questions that are around today, the theoretical questions, we don't have new theories. It's really hard to come up with new ideas. I think where we're going now is situational, applying theories in certain situations because human behavior is situationally dependent. We just got a really good research in psychology that shows that. So understanding how our theories work situationally and then across demographic groups is very interesting.

The other part of our work that needs much more attention is in my mind, police courts and corrections, especially in courts. We know very little about how judges make decisions, how prosecutors decide what to do because we're not in those rooms when the magic happens. That's a black box that we know nothing about. And then what we know about policing, people focus on police use of force and arrests. The majority of police, behavior has nothing to do with those two things. People never think about, oh, the good things that police do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think you just came up with a criminology swearing at that point. Nobody's ever interested in focusing on what are the good things that police do and improving and advancing those. Right now it seems every organization with exception to the National Policing Institute, every organization with policing in their title is just about less policing. They're not about better policing.

Alex Piquero:

I completely agree with you. And it's not what the police do, it's how they do it and how we want them to do it in a certain way. During Covid, I sat in a Miami Police Department meeting outside during Covid because everything was outside. And I watched an officer talk to a 13-year-old kid for one hour and he wasn't on the clock. That is never recorded.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No.

Alex Piquero:

How many instances of that occur in the United States that we just don't know the answer to?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I was doing a ride along a while back with a couple of Philly cops and we get called to a big box retailer. They said, this kid, he's got a knife and was it shoplifting or something like that? It was all a bit convoluted. Anyway, he was a teenager. I mean, he was a big lad too. So anyway, they arrested him, brought him into the police station, ended up chatting to him, bouncing around between friends' homes, problems with the parents, this, that and the other. And then a couple of hours later, all the bookings done and everything like that. I see the cop go to one of the ATMs and get some cash out and just hands him \$40 of his own personal money. I said, "What's the story?" He says, "He's not a bad kid. He hasn't got any money, got nowhere else to go to. This might get him something in return for sleeping on his friend's couch or something like that." He just gave him 40 bucks of his own money and of his own time, gave him a lift home.

Alex Piquero:

That's great.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Nobody ever sees that.

Alex Piquero:

The report that I co-authored to the president a few months ago on policing statistics. I mentioned in a meeting once, I said, "We should be thinking about instead of also police use of force, why don't we think about police commendation of data set? How about when citizens actually report to the police department, thank you for doing that?" There's records of that. That's important to know. Accountability is just not negative in this world. It's also positive.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It seems like the fields that have got a lot of problems in them. I look at things like surgery in the medical field, medical misadventure and accidents are not insignificant. We have no idea what's going on in courts. They need to follow the example of policing and we need to see more cameras and we just need to make this a little bit more transparent.

Alex Piquero:

I think transparency is good to a degree. I'm not sure how many doctors or dentists or airline pilots want to wear a camera around their neck or eyes. There is a healthy tension between how much transparency is a good thing and how much transparency needs to be guarded because of PII, personally identifiable information. So I'll give you an example. In the federal government, which I just left, there are 13 statistical agencies. And if you had a data point that said, male, 53, Hispanic, you would identify me even if you didn't have my name in a row in a column in a data set. So that's personally identifiable information. And in this day and age, with just a couple pieces of information and some very good statistical models, I can come very close to identifying someone. PII is extremely important.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But we're still able to protect people when we have pretty much open access to body worn cameras for the police.

Alex Piquero:

That's right. But remember, it goes both ways. I've been on ride-alongs where officers wearing a camera and the citizen goes, "I don't want to be taped." Wait a second. You can't just have the officer being taped. If you're not having a good day, you can't say, "Don't tape." So we got to have this relationship where it's equal. You can't just control when and when you want to be taped, just like the officer can't control when he or she wants to be taped. So citizens have to bear in mind it's not just about others' behavior, it's also about their own behavior.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And that's always the tricky part about policing because I did a little bit of community policing work and I did a lot of foot patrol and actually enjoyed foot patrol because you got to meet regular day-to-day people. As soon as I got in a car, all I would spend my time is dealing with people who were stressed. They were either victims of crime or the suspects in crime. Nobody when they meet the police on the whole is having a good day. So we only ever see them at their worst.

Alex Piquero:

I love that analogy, and I use that analogy when I talk about police behavior in a classroom and I tell citizens, "Okay, you get a phone call from your friend and it says I'm in distress, period." That sometimes is what an officer has.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's as much you have to go on.

Alex Piquero:

That's it. And so between that and the two minutes that he or she gets there, a lot of stuff could have transpired. You don't know what's on the other side of the door. And so when I told that to their friends, it's like, "Oh, I didn't realize all of these other things could be occurring." And so I think the more people sit back and have an appreciation for things aren't as easy as people think they are.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No. And officers have to make split second decisions. And I think as I'm learning as a society, we're certainly less tolerant of genuine mistakes.

Alex Piquero:

I agree with you on that completely. It's not like in football where they can go to the replay and call a timeout for 30 seconds. Officers can't say, "I'm in 30 seconds. I got to go check the rule book." That doesn't exist.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think judges and surgeons are good examples of people who are in situations where they have to make the kind of decisions relatively on the spot that can be easily criticized by Monday morning quarterbacks, to use an American expression.

Alex Piquero:

And oftentimes, Jerry, they're making decisions without all of the information. This is driving on a highway and someone doesn't have their blinker on, but they're veering your lane. So you're trying to process what that person may or may not do. You don't have the ability to take 10 minutes to make a decision, especially when people's lives are in danger. I think about all the times when police officers could use force, but they don't. The force averted information is just as important. And more often than not, they don't use force. The standard is high for people in professions where there's a life on the line, but we don't hold other people in the world to the same standard.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you think that we'll ever get to the situation where we get more insight into the judicial black box?

Alex Piquero:

I think that you have to start locally in small jurisdictions who are willing to be a Guinea pig and you will find some jurisdictions that are willing to say, "You know what? Come see what we're doing. And if we're not doing it well, tell us how to do it better." It takes a real strong public defender or state attorney or series of judges to be willing to do that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

One of the things that I've noticed over the last few years with your career, not that I've been stalking you because that sounds creepy and weird, is that, and this is before you went to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, which we'll talk about in a minute. You've been engaging in much more public criminology, more engagement in public policy, and speaking about bringing criminology to a broader public policy arena. So you've been speaking out a lot more. I'm right in that you've been doing that?

Alex Piquero:

Yeah, a lot. Early in my career, when I went to grad school at the University of Maryland, it was a very theoretical program, very methodological program. The only person really doing public criminology was Larry Sherman. I remember taking a class with Larry and he was rehashing the original 1984 domestic violence study in Minneapolis that

had a six-month follow-up and he said he took a lot of criticism for being out there about it, writing about it, op-eds about it, public engagement.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Funny. I got the same thing for the Philadelphia foot patrol experiment. People are saying, you're out there a lot. People are going to know about this. This is good work.

Alex Piquero:

That's exactly right. And if we're not out there telling the story, then people are going to make decisions based on nothing. I'd rather have them something that guides their decision-making rather than nothing. And so that stood around me for a while in my head, but I needed to build an academic record. I needed to have some sort of decent reputation. So when I got out to talk to whatever agency or when I fielded a media call, I knew something.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You weren't just a guy who'd published two things.

Alex Piquero:

Right. And I wasn't just saying what I thought. I knew what the evidence said. And moreover, I also knew when not to take that call or when like I've done for you. I said, "Hey, by the way, I'm not available," or "I can't speak to that, but I know who could. Here are three or four people." And when I was at Dallas, I got involved with the police department and I got involved with some of the criminal justice people there and the mayor asked me to be involved in his task force. That's when I really got involved. So I did a lot of work locally and then a lot with the Dallas Morning News. And then when I moved to Miami, the first thing I did, this is July 2020 during Covid, I went to the Miami PD, the Miami-Dade Police Department, state attorney and the public defender, and I said, "I want to meet with you. I just want to introduce myself and if you ever need anything, let me know." Building relationships, they might call me and say, "Alex, this article just came out. I don't understand. Can you help me out?" And that's happened several times.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Where do you think somebody should do this in their career? This doesn't sound like the move that people should make when they're a brand new assistant professor because you don't have the credibility, you don't have the publications at that point.

Alex Piquero:

You don't. I mean, I'm very gun-shy to tell people what to do and not to do. But I certainly wouldn't feel comfortable one bit at all to do this in the first 6 to 10 years of my career. Because your job is to contribute to the knowledge base and to focus on one's teaching and to focus on one's service.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Get the craft of being an academic right before moving into starting to tell other people what to do.

Alex Piquero:

That's a really good way to point that out because what we're doing, we're crafts people in a different kind of craft. We're not painters or musicians, but writing articles is a craft. Responding to reviewers is a craft. Learning how to engage police chiefs or Department of Corrections officials, working with mayors, those are crafts and you have to feel comfortable, but you also have to know what you're talking about because the minute you do something wrong or have a misquote or guide someone bad, it's not going to be helpful for one's career. And your university certainly won't like that at all. But it took a while to get to that point, and I feel much more comfortable now doing that. Jerry, I also love it because I'm learning too what people need in the outside world. When I talk to reporters, and you've done this too, sometimes you spend an hour talking to a reporter, they may never quote you, but you're helping them. And some reporters are actually really good. They want to know and they're really good at it. Sometimes they have a story, but that is what it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There seems to be more of a tendency for there to be an agenda before you get the call.

Alex Piquero:

And you have to know that, which means you have to have experience under your belt. And that takes time, and that takes time.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Are we getting public criminology right?

Alex Piquero:

Changing policy is extremely complicated and difficult. If I am able to get the science in front of someone, that is a win. And I remember testifying once at congress, a senator who I won't name, told me one day we were walking in the hallway, he said, "Alex, if it has a paperclip or a staple, no one's going to read it." So I started thinking about, okay, well how do I message this in a way that's useful? I have opinions like everybody else does, but if they're not grounded in something, I really don't really care. What I worry about some people who are doing some of this stuff is they're just saying stuff that doesn't have a really good evidence base to it. And sometimes there's not a lot of evidence or sometimes the evidence is conflicting. And so you have to be nuanced in how you explain that to people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I sometimes wonder that people don't appreciate the risk, which is it's great to be able to have influence over policy, but there's always this blanket assumption that we have good intentions, therefore the policy will be better than the previous one. And it's not always the case.

Alex Piquero:

That is certainly not always the case. I mean, we don't control what city commissioners do or what mayors do because they go into a room and something happened.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

A little like a jury. They might have a Ouija board in there, who knows how they're making decisions.

Alex Piquero:

You might have the best possible evidence in front of you and it may not matter. So that's a lot of head banging against the wall, but our job is to inform and to educate. That's our job.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, I worry to some degree I'm seeing more of a creeping advocacy versus as opposed to science within the field. Am I getting old man feeling?

Alex Piquero:

No.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Just kind of grumpy old man.

Alex Piquero:

Somewhat old. No, I'm the same way. There's a place for advocacy.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Evidence-based advocacy.

Alex Piquero:

Evidence-based advocacy, and there's a place for science. We always need to lead with the science. And the way I tell this to people is, when you go to the dentist, do you want your dentist to be an advocate for something that has no bearing on what he or she's going to do on your teeth? Or would you want your dentist to read all of the latest scientific research to ensure that he or she does the right thing under your tooth and doesn't hurt you? Well, there's an obvious answer to that. Use what the science says. So when you put things in public health terms, I think sometimes people have a more appreciation for what it is we're trying to do. But I worry about advocacy without information.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Social justice, but with an asterisk that says when there's science to support it.

Alex Piquero:

Science is the most important thing we are in the business of following.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Are we doing a good job of that in criminology?

Alex Piquero:

Our touch point is best in the classroom. And when we get undergraduate students and then graduate students, we need to expose them to everything and to challenge them as much as they humanly can take it. And sometimes they can't take it. But that's exactly what a university is designed to do. It's designed to challenge and to provoke, not for everybody to agree with one another. If that was the case, there's no need for a university.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Doesn't that end up bearing a risk for professors or young professors doing that when course evaluations and feedback is so important to their career?

Alex Piquero:

I think that students will appreciate being treated as adults, that their opinion is heard, but also that they may not be right. So oftentimes in an undergrad classroom, I ask people are their opinion on something and I say, "Great, on the final exam, you're going to argue the other side," on purpose. And the look on their face is one of shock.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I've done that in graduate classes.

Alex Piquero:

It's great, it's fun for me.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You have to learn how to argue from the other perspective.

Alex Piquero:

And that's exactly what they should be doing. They should argue the exact opposite point of view to understand how when they get out there, there are both sides. And compromise is the art of everything in our business. No one's going to get what they want. So where do we find commonality and go from there and put the differences aside. There's variability in the field about how we educate people and social justice is important, but data and evidence is extremely important.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well put. You just spent a year as director of the United States, the US's Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Alex Piquero:

Correct.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you made this interesting shift that I don't think many of us saw coming from academia into government. What the hell were you doing?

Alex Piquero:

So, I've always-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Why did you do that?

Alex Piquero:

That's what all my academic friends ask. I've always admired BJS from afar because I've used the data and used the product. Several of my students have worked at BJS and so on and so forth. And so when I got the call, the call was, what can I do in BJS under the time I'm at BJS that I think BJS needs to do for our field?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So it's worth pointing out that you took over as the position of the director of the Bureau of Justice. Let me try that again in English, the director of the Bureau of Justice Statistics. See, that's what jet lag does for you. Lovely coming to Italy, but your brain turns to a foggy mush. And that's a presidential appointment.

Alex Piquero:

Correct.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So when administrations change in the US government, such as when Donald Trump's presidency ended and Joe Biden started, you see a complete change of the top tier in all of these federal agencies. And the Bureau of Justice Statistics is one of them.

Alex Piquero:

That's correct. So there was a director for four years under the Trump administration of BJS, and then when that director left the position there was an acting director, then I was appointed, but I wasn't appointed until about 18 months into the Biden administration. So almost halfway over. And that's a problem with the presidential appointee appointments for lots of agencies, not just BJS because you don't have a lot of, time's not on your side. But I thought very carefully about what I wanted to do. And it wasn't about Alex, it was about what do I need from BJS? What does Jerry need from BJS? What do our colleagues need from BJS? And how can I position BJS within the government to matter?

And most importantly, people are the legacy at BJS. So I recruited a lot of people. I was fortunate enough to get extremely talented people in positions of leadership and decision-making. And that makes me happy because the direction of the agency is going to be science and data first as fast as possible, as correct as possible, and in ways that are accessible to human beings.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And what was your experience of working in government?

Alex Piquero:

So to be quite honest, I thought academia was difficult in the sense of bureaucracy and so forth. But the problem I had, and I think this is true of every problem director of any agency, was the sometimes lack of willingness to experiment.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And we don't mean experiments as in...

Alex Piquero:

Randomized control trials.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Randomized trials. We mean just to try different things.

Alex Piquero:

We've done this for 30 years, so let's not do that anymore and let's try this. And well, we've never done that before. I'm like, so what? That does not a reason not to do it. And that's the thing about academia. We're risk-takers in a sense. We're asking things that no one else has asked.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, we should be.

Alex Piquero:

We should be asking things that no one else has asked and doing things in ways that no one else has done them before. And that wasn't the case. And so when I came in, I came in with a, what does the field need BJS to do and how does it need BJS to do it? If we're not out there on the conversation talking to people, someone else is. So when people do Google searches for crime statistics, they should be coming to BJS. They shouldn't be going to lots of other people or entities. And there's nothing wrong with those people and entities, but they should be coming to us.

One of the things that I started doing, Jerry, towards the middle to end of my tenure at BJS was create a pilot for Real-Time Crime Reporting Center, where we would try to be a repository for data that's drawing open source data in from various agencies, and of course cross walking the offense codes, which is not very simple, seeing how people populate different data sets, linking them all together, producing a nice little page. That will be in process going forward. But it's not like updating your Apple iOS software overnight. There's a lot of painstaking time that's involved in doing pilot work.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I also suspect that there is a need to cross-check and make sure everything is exactly right because it is after all, this is the formal product of the government.

Alex Piquero:

When you release government statistics, they have to be accurate, reliable, and credible. And sometimes that takes time. BJs is housed within the Office of Justice Programs, which is housed within the Department of Justice.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's not complicated at all.

Alex Piquero:

No, it's just a lot of layers.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And a lot of lawyers.

Alex Piquero:

A lot of layers, lawyers and meetings. The NCVS, for example, comes out much quicker. The National Crime Victimization Survey, which is a great analog to the crime data.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Celebrating 50 years in existence, which is incredible.

Alex Piquero:

50 years in a few weeks. And that's a wonderful occasion. We're able to turn that around much quicker because we control that process as opposed to 18,000 agencies sending things in whenever they decide to send things in.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We were having a drink the other night, you and I, and obviously I think this conference should be sponsored by Aperol.

Alex Piquero:

Aperol Spritz.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Aperol Spritz.

Alex Piquero:

Or Campari Spritz as is your case.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I have both, one shouldn't narrow one's experiences.

Alex Piquero:

No, no, not at all.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And you have the socks too. Unbelievable. But I was hearing that you discovered the famous government, the pre-meeting meeting.

Alex Piquero:

In academia. We have as few meetings as possible. That's on purpose. And I remember someone said to me, "We're going to have a pre-meeting." I'm like, "I don't know what that means. What's a pre-meeting?" And it's a meeting before meeting to talk about what might happen at the meeting. And I thought, that's the way government operates and I have to respect that. But I also find that we create, we need time to create. People need time to do their work. And I've always found, even in academia meetings, if they're informational, we can have an email, if there's something that they decided, let's have a meeting, let's talk it all out, we make a decision, we move on. All of the memos we wrote, we wrote them as a team. I've never believed in this one person's going to direct the world appeal.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you probably left in time before you had not just the pre-meeting meeting, but then the debrief afterwards meeting.

Alex Piquero:

That's right. I left at the beginning of the new academic year and I left because I absolutely, desperately missed academia. I missed everything that makes us happy, which is creating knowledge, working with students, and having the time to decide what I want to study. That's not to say I didn't enjoy what I did. I learned an immense amount. I think I left a very good footprint. People felt empowered to do really good work.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you think that there is a model here for more people to do what you did? It's noticeable to me that people go relatively early in their track. We know a lot of the same people. They go the academic route or they go the government route, and that's it.

Alex Piquero:

I think it's useful for both sides to understand the other part. I learned about how seriously dedicated a lot of people at BJS are and I learned about what BJS needs. There's something right now being considered, right now in the federal Register called the Trust Regulations. The Trust Regulations are extremely important because they govern all the statistical agencies. They basically enhance the independence of a statistical agency, the autonomy of a statistical agency.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Now why is this important?

Alex Piquero:

It's important because a lot of agencies are located in parent agencies and parent agencies just may not operate the same way a statistical agency does. Statistical agencies need to be autonomous, they need to be independent and they need to put out the work that they do on their own terms.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Now what you're talking about is independence of political control.

Alex Piquero:

That's correct.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And oversight.

Alex Piquero:

And I never experienced any of that. I never experienced anybody telling me, "Oh, you need to change this word," or "You're not going to release that statistic," or "You're not going to release that figure." I never had any of that control. BJS puts out pretty good regular statistics in different kinds of ways. I experimented, and still to this day, we have an entirely new publication series called Justice Stats. We had a naming contest because I wanted to have the team make up a name. And the idea was that people saw a figure and a title and they knew the answer literally within 10 seconds. And people took so well to that. But it was useful for an academic to see that world. And it also would be useful for a government employee to spend a year in academia. I think that that's healthy for everybody.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What is the role that an academic coming into a government organization couldn't fulfill that may not necessarily already exist within that group?

Alex Piquero:

To defend the organization? The thing with a lot of government agencies, BJS is an example. NIJ is an example, and so on and so forth.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

National Institute of Justice.

Alex Piquero:

National Institute of Justice and so forth, is that they are run by career employees. People who are in the federal government forever. They might go to Census or they might go to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, but for the most part, this is their career.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They're on the GS track up to as far as they can go.

Alex Piquero:

As far as they can go. In academia, we might move around universities over the course of our careers, but academia is what we're a part. But for most of those people, they're going to be at that agency forever. So they may not have the ability to stand up or argue vehemently against something or for something. I never held back from stating what my opinion was to anybody.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's not necessarily the ability, it's the freedom.

Alex Piquero:

The absolute freedom. And I was able to do that, Jerry, because I had something to go back to. And it wasn't just because Alex wanted to throw his weight around. It was like, no, Alex's number one job is to protect the agency, what it stands for, and its people. And if there was ever a time where someone or a decision was going to get made that was pushing up against, I had no problem at all defending what we did. And I had team members tell me, "Thank you for doing that."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you ever worry that if there's a change of administration everything can get undone?

Alex Piquero:

Absolutely.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's always seemed to me since I moved to the US that it's a chaotic way to run government, where projects that clearly take longer than administration to really get up and running can just be undone in a heartbeat.

Alex Piquero:

In a heartbeat. And that's happened plenty of times. So the consistency we need in BJS for the National Crime Victimization Survey, that has to continue forever. And there's debates about whether or not that should be a line item or not.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So when something's a line item in the federal budget, it's ring-fenced, that money's there.

Alex Piquero:

Forever.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But the NCVS, none of that work is-

Alex Piquero:

Every year we have to argue for X amount of dollars for the NCVS.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

For a survey that's been going for 50 years, that provides this incredible longitudinal knowledge.

Alex Piquero:

And senators and congresspeople cite it frequently, as does the media. And that's one thing, Jerry, when I got to BJS is I needed to increase the BJS's media footprint. We lambasted the media to pick up BJS stuff. And so I created a press release that we would just target over and over and over again. No, we're going to notify Congress. And that was never done before. But you're right, it's a change in administration, a change in leadership, things could go awry. And that's a problem. And that's something that the Trust Regulation hopefully will defend, statistical agencies can have more power to determine their longevity and what they do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you've had this incredibly successful academic career that continues. You've worked in government, you're doing more public criminology. You are one of the most highly cited scholars in the field. What's your advice? What should new scholars in the field be doing? What are we training people to do well? What are we not training people that they should be doing?

Alex Piquero:

One of the things that I think has helped me in my career is I read all the time, and I remember studying for comprehensive exams. And I remember Doug Smith who taught me statistics, said, "Oh, just go read everything." We didn't have reading lists when we were in grad school. And I still don't believe in giving people reading lists because you have to read everything. You have to go to the mountain, you have to read, and you have to think. And a lot of people don't read and think.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, also the practice of reading. How to read an article quickly.

Alex Piquero:

How to read.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You don't have to read the whole thing if it's not exactly what you need, but you'd have to be aware of it.

Alex Piquero:

And I was a nerd in grad school. I actually went to the library. I walked around the stacks. I read public health journals. I read political science journals. I read anything just to see what, because people are publishing crime research everywhere.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I used to have books of things that I'd photocopied.

Alex Piquero:

So do I. I still do. That's funny. So reading as much as possible, never stopping to read. I write every day, even it's 15 minutes a day. It could be a paragraph. It could be interpreting a table. It could be writing a variable description. It could be writing a policy implication paragraph. Writing is a craft, and I got so much better as I go along, but I continue to do it over and over and over and over again. And some days are good, some days are bad. But this is what we do for them. This is our craft. And so that's really important to me.

We see Serena Williams and LeBron James for two hours on television. We don't see the countless hours in the gym, on the tennis courts hitting balls, in the weight room getting training. We don't see all of the work they put in. We see the output, and I think an appreciation for the work that has to get put in to be able to have success broadly defined.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And there is no secret to it. Everything we've done that's useful in academia has been written down, I think. It's there. You can, well, the majority of it, it's there to read. The answers are there in black and white.

Alex Piquero:

And a lot of people oftentimes think they have the, "I've just come up with the most original idea in the world." Well, there's a lot of smart people probably thinking about the exact same thing if they're reading the exact same journals or book chapters or books.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, he recently retired. But having Ralph Taylor, who I know you know well, as a wonderful colleague, you would go to him with this odd idea. And he went, "Oh, that sounds just like...," and then he would tell you some citation he knew. "Bob Smith wrote that in 1932. Here, read this. Here you go." Oh, shit, I thought I had a good idea.

Alex Piquero:

We're also human beings outside of what we do for a living. We're normal. We're not crazy. So you fly airplanes. I don't fly airplanes. I fly in them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You go to Formula One and-

Alex Piquero:

I go to Formula One all over the world.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Have a large collection of tattoos.

Alex Piquero:

And then I put a tattoo on my body.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've got the weirdest range of tattoos because it's all Formula One tracks.

Alex Piquero:

And there's also a Cuban flag and a Dali print right here. And then this compass. And that took me a while to get to that point. It's like public criminology. It took me a while to get to a tattoo, but one is too many and two is not enough. So it's been fun, but there's never been a day that I've regretted being an academic. It's the absolute privilege to do what we get to do for a living because what the job allows us to do and how it allows us to do it in the format it allows us to do it. And having a great spouse helps a lot.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. So you have a spouse, Nikki, so obviously your partner is the chair of the department at the University of Miami.

Alex Piquero:

That's right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Having a spouse in the field, a net gain?

Alex Piquero:

It's helped my work better. It's challenging, of course, when two people are in the same career in the same discipline.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

See, you can't escape work.

Alex Piquero:

The timing of that when we're talking about Nikki. But she's been really great at telling me, "No, that's not right. No, that's too long. Oh, you write too much. It's too wordy. Too many words on a slide." So she's being critical, but helpful. And sometimes I need someone to not just say, "Oh yeah, that's right."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I think maybe that's something that a lot of people in academia need, which is if not a spouse, but a critical friend.

Alex Piquero:

That's exactly right. And when I went to BJS early on, Jerry, it was interesting because everybody was like, "Well, you're the director." I'm like, "No, what do you think we should do?" So Nikki and I are a collaborative team.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There is a freedom to do stuff.

Alex Piquero:

Except Geoff Alpert telling me to take a tray of chocolates when I was a young grad student. That's a true story. So I was, my first semester of grad school, I didn't get funded, but Doris Mackenzie funded me to work on her boot camp project. So Geoff, of course, is a consultant on this project.

So Geoff comes to the University of Maryland and we have lunch one day at the Rossborough Inn Faculty Club. So of course, I'm putting the chairs away after the lunch and we're getting ready to walk back to Maryland's LeFrak Hall, which the Crim Department's at and Geoff's like, "Oh, bring that tray of chocolates." I'm like, "Oh, okay." This is Geoff Alpert who wants me to bring a tray of chocolates.

So I bring it back, a phone call comes in and says, "Did you all take the tray of chocolates?" And Geoff is sitting there laughing at me and I'm like, "Aye, aye." He's got five pieces of chocolate in his mouth, chocolate all over his shirt. That was my first introduction to Geoff. But Geoff and I ended up working together on various things. He's always been a real good counsel of support and comicalness and I always end up somehow buying his drink at the end of the night. So I'm going to get him on that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's another part of the craft of criminology, craft of being Geoff. Terrifying, it is. This has been great fun. I enjoyed chatting to you. It's amazing. We've caught up a bunch of times, but it's nice to come all the way to Florence to do it.

Alex Piquero:

Likewise. Thank you very much.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Cheers, mate.

Alex Piquero:

Yeah, it's great.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was episode 69 of Reducing Crime recorded in Florence, Italy in August 2023. Did I mention it was in Italy? I think I did. New episodes are announced on Twitter @_reducing crime, but it's much easier if you just subscribe at SoundCloud, Apple Podcasts or pretty much anywhere so you don't miss an episode. If you teach with the podcasts, DM me, I have resources that can make your life easier.

Be safe and best of luck.