

#28 (DEBRA PIEHL)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

This is Jerry Ratcliffe with Reducing Crime, a podcast featuring influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Debra Piehl has been an innovator and leader in the development of crime analysis for over 20 years. We chat about the value of crime analysis to police leaders, the importance of data quality, crime analysis in Compstat and DDACTS and the emerging role of analysts in evidence-based policing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Welcome to another episode of Reducing Crime and another theme tune from a classic cop show. And I assume you know this one. I've done Ride Alongs in unmarked covert police cars in Camden, New Jersey, where the lookouts for street level drug operations use the name of this cop drama as a warning that police were around. If those kids knew it, you should. Last month was of course, Starsky & Hutch. A few episodes ago, I chatted to Hans Menos in the park by Independence Hall in Philadelphia, where the Declaration of Independence was signed. This month, I met Debra Piehl in the iconic National Mall in Washington, D.C. Debra has been a leader in crime analysis for over 20 years, and she has the distinction of having worked with small agencies at the state police level and she spent five years working for the NYPD. While working with the New York City Police Department, she pioneered and led the development of a new civilian crime analysis role, developing, recruiting, training, and supervising dozens of new analysts across the city.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

She has extensive knowledge at the national level of both Compstat and DDACTS, the Data-Driven Approaches to Crime and Traffic Safety, a partnership between the Department of Transportation's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Bureau of Justice Assistance, and the National Institute of Justice. Debra received the International Association of Crime Analysts, 2017 Presence Award and she was the first recipient of the Bryan Hill IACA Memorial scholarship in 2019 in recognition of her efforts to support and mentor crime analysts around the world. Bryan was a smashing bloke who, like Deb, worked tirelessly to promote excellence in crime analysis. I'm sure he would have been delighted by the IACA's choice.

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Debra Piehl:

This is very much my first behind the scenes look at podcasts.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, you're about to see one of the most important parts of it, which is me change the batteries. That's the classy bit. That's the bit they've been teaching in podcast school. Check the batteries.

Debra Piehl:

It's no different than giving a presentation and you've got everything set up and nothing is working.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And there's nothing worse than when you've got a room full of students or people who are taking the class, and there's you trying to demonstrate that you really do know how PowerPoint works, when all you can see is they have no idea where on their hard drive that presentation is. So I'll try to get there early for the six P's, because Proper Preparation Prevents Piss-Poor Performance. And then you watch academics do it endlessly throughout their career because academics are the worst presenters.

Debra Piehl:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They have the most practice and they're still crap at it.

Debra Piehl:

I have real challenges with academics.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You think you have challenges with academics.

Debra Piehl:

So you may notice.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Christ, you should try working with them.

Debra Piehl:

I try to be a little more out there on Twitter.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I don't recommend it.

Debra Piehl:

Well, I know, but it's also my first major engagement with some of the EBP people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That means basically seeing practitioners and academics, yeah.

Debra Piehl:

And I do feel a bias against crime analysts and I do think we can be friends, but I also get feeling a little alone out there because there's rarely ever another analyst that will pipe in.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Analysts tend to be a tad introvert. I'm not sure I see that same bias against analysts. Where are you seeing them?

Debra Piehl:

Well, I think someone did a presentation about comparing this year to last year is not appropriate.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was me.

Debra Piehl:

No, it wasn't you. You were there, but it wasn't used specifically. Certainly it's not inappropriate to do that only, but when you are on the ground, sitting this close to your chief every day and your chief simply wants to see that, he just wants to see that. You can elaborate on that and articulate to him what that means in the context, but he wants it. So you have to get it. And then.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And from an analyst perspective, he's the client or she's the client-

Debra Piehl:

Yes. Then you build on.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

... and if that's what they want, you've got to say, this is why this is not any good, right?

Debra Piehl:

Right. Well, you say but chief, blah, blah, blah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That could be a new term by the way, just to call everybody-

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Debra Piehl:

Butt chief.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

... butt chief.

Debra Piehl:

Because.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm sure there's quite a few analysts already calling their chief the butt chief.

Debra Piehl:

Well, sure.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've worked not just with NYPD but you've also worked with tiny agency. Newton was, how many police officers and sworn roughly?

Debra Piehl:

175 and I thought that was [inaudible 00:05:16] when I got there.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And you were there for a number of years-

Debra Piehl:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

... as working in the analysis side, and then you also worked with the state police in Massachusetts as well.

Debra Piehl:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you've seen agencies at state level, small municipality and the NYPD, which is... I've heard of them, they're not a rural police department. How many members do they got? They're like 30,000 plus sworn?

Debra Piehl:

37,000 [crosstalk 00:05:35].

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, that's a few folk. Yeah. That's a few people.

Debra Piehl:

And 50,000 total working there. It's its own empire.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. So what was it like working on the Compstat side from an analyst perspective?

Debra Piehl:

I love NYPD. Certainly, NYPD has things they can do better, but in general, it is light years beyond almost any other agency in terms of the things that they consider and think about in what they're doing. And Compstat is such a big and valuable part of that. It's not perfect and I don't know that it can never be replicated again because it's 25 years in the making of consistency in this structure and format. And it's more than just a meeting once a week. It's the way that the agency lives and breathes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Elaborate on that a little bit. What do you mean by that?

Debra Piehl:

Everyone from the very smallest precincts up to the very largest and most violent and Brooklyn and the Bronx, everybody prepares for Compstat every week like they are going to be behind that podium and are going to have to answer the critical questions.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How often does a precinct come back to Compstat?

Debra Piehl:

So there are eight patrol boroughs and the boroughs rotate, but if something big happens in the week, you could be called back if you were just there last week.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And the normal rotation would be?

Debra Piehl:

About every six to eight weeks, give or take, a borough comes back. So when the borough is called back, every precinct in the borough comes with it. And there are no surprises. The precincts that are under the gun know that on Monday that they're going to be, could be behind the podium. And they also get a sense based on what their numbers look like, what's going on.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You hope they do, right?

Debra Piehl:

They have between Monday and Thursday morning to prepare. They're told the cases that are going to be focused on. I mean, everything's fair game.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When you say cases, are we talking about individual cases like a shooting or a robbery?

Debra Piehl:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They're not looking at just the overall numbers?

Debra Piehl:

No, not at all. And that's where I think people lose the importance and the value of Compstat. Compstat is very case-focused and very investigative-focused, but it's very much about what should have been done that wasn't done, and what are you going to do about preventing the next shooting?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So isn't that micro kind of case level a bit too micro-level for an inspector or a captain is running one of the precincts in the NYPD?

Debra Piehl:

Sure. So the CO, the commanding officer of the precinct is there. They give a brief opening statement of, hello chief, this is where we're at over the past 28 days. This is what's evolved. Kind of a warm up.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Can try to take up as much time as possible.

Debra Piehl:

Yes, they do. And then that's pretty much, that ends the CO's role. The rest of it is the squad commander, meaning the detective commander for that precinct. It might be whoever's leading narcotics, vice. It could be the precinct CO might have to answer something. It's more the next level down that have to be prepared to answer.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

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One of the criticisms of Compstat that I'll be upfront, that I've leveled at it is it tends to be very short-term focused. So there's an absence of looking at long-term problems that have existed for a year or two and there's very little space in Compstat for the development of problem-oriented policing, for example.

Debra Piehl:

I don't think that's the case. The focus is always on the 28 days. So it's called the period, but it's focused on the 28 days within the context of the recent history of that borough and precinct. So everything is recorded. Everything is reviewed. Then Chief Shea got a lot of publicity about sleeping in his office to prepare.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Chief Shea is?

Debra Piehl:

Chief Shea is now the police commissioner.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Indeed.

Debra Piehl:

At the time he was chief of Crime Control Strategies, which is responsible for Compstat.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So this was in the last few years.

Debra Piehl:

Yes. And he did really bring concept to another level. He's a brilliant police-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Tactician, yeah.

Debra Piehl:

... tactician. Yes. So quick and his mind is like a vice.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So that sounds like it's awfully dependent on his personal charisma abilities and characteristics. So how do you then translate the benefits of Compstat to other agencies? Because I know you've worked with other agencies on Compstat, yet retain that capacity, because I do worry that Compstat can end up being very short term.

Debra Piehl:

Sure.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And that's precisely what I think communities have recently complaining about police not doing long-term community building problem-oriented policing, but just focus on numbers and pad stops and short-term activity that can be very proactive, but at the same time can be perceived negatively.

Debra Piehl:

A good Compstat is a major commitment. It doesn't come easily. And I think the key for the chief of any size agency is the fact that Chief Shea, for example, knows all the answers to the questions he was asking. He's asking if you know the answer. He's prepared in that way and the whole point is to bring forward the others to what needs to be accomplished. So no chief anywhere should enter into a Compstat blindly. So I encourage every analyst, whether their chief wants to do this or not to send their analysis to the chief out of time. Ideally, the analyst and the chief will go over it together. So the analyst can point out some things, but at the very least, the analyst should say, chief, here's my analysis for Compstat. Please let me know if you want to get together and go over these things. So the chief should not see that at the same time that everyone else sees it, so that he or she can prepare questions and have a longer term view.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The questions that the chief asks in Compstat meetings, really sue set the tone for a department, don't they?

Debra Piehl:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They really dictate the type of activities that are going to happen on the street.

Debra Piehl:

Right. But let me say that in the context that what distresses me at point in my profession is that so many agencies can't even get those numbers prepared. They don't know with any degree of accuracy, what's up and what's down and.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Are we really at the stage in 2020 when there are lots of departments out there that have no idea what their crime numbers are?

Debra Piehl:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's quite terrifying.

Debra Piehl:

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Mm-hmm (affirmative). Terrifying is a good word for it because there's no excuse for it. There's reasons for it that I understand. The technology can be challenging, vendors can be misleading, IT people can be very guarded and protective of things. There's lots of reasons to understand why it happens, but it shouldn't happen.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, I think there were a lot of police departments out there working with legacy systems that are much more designed to manage individual cases, not to get aggregate kind of numbers out.

Debra Piehl:

Right, still in 2020. And it stresses me out that quality report writing and quality data collection and analysis are not viewed as critical to public safety, because the other thing is NYPD's obsession in a good way with patterns. So they define a pattern as only when you believe it's the same proper group of reps that have committed that series of crimes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So this seems to be a new area where crime analysis is going into the era of social network analysis and looking more at groups rather than not just hotspots.

Debra Piehl:

Maybe one level below social networking, just in the sense that a pattern starts with recognizing that there was a level of activity that is outside the norm.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Seems to be the loudest motorbike in the whole Washington, D.C. right now. It's like a crotch rocket.

Debra Piehl:

Going by us, so.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, it's a crotch rocket going past right now, yeah.

Debra Piehl:

So robberies, for example, up in the 28 days, up a little, one standard deviation is a condition.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But how would you explain to a chief what a standard deviation is? That sounds like, that's like algorithms. The first rule of algorithms is don't talk about algorithms.

Debra Piehl:

You don't, you just say chief, the stuff in yellow looks like maybe there's a problem developing, the stuff in red, we got a problem.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. That I think is lost on a lot of analysts is, their unwillingness to translate what they do into a language that can be understood by the decision-maker who's reading it.

Debra Piehl:

So the analyst would then go, look at that and see, what are these? How close together are they? What do they have in common? Do we have anything that suggests it's the same suspect? Do we have any video? Do we have suspect descriptions? And there is a very sophisticated process and format for how a pattern is identified, made official and then the detectives are obligated to act upon it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So that's in the NYPD, but for most of the agencies out there, I worry that those kinds of standards for what becomes known as a group or a gang or an organized kind of, or relatively disorganized in many cases, crime group, the standards of what counts and what doesn't count aren't really well established.

Debra Piehl:

Sure.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, you've had to work on it in the NYPD but in other agencies, it just seems very ad hoc and the analysts are just kind of making stuff up as they go.

Debra Piehl:

Yes, that happens. But we're not even talking about gang activity or any organized group. This is more-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Ad hoc networks.

Debra Piehl:

... 18 to 24 year old who goes out and breaks into cars or does something. And occasionally he or she may do it with a buddy. And they don't shy away from two hit patterns. We even joked about the one hit pattern, where you're reading an incident report, and you can just tell, this is not the first time this guy has done this. So, obviously it can't be a pattern by itself, but you might go look back at past incidents, to see was there something that fit this and.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You're looking for a PMO type stuff.

Debra Piehl:

Not just for the sake of the pattern, but identifying a pattern gives patrol and detectives a mission.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So that seems a really important distinction because if we're a profession in the 21st century, if we're just telling people to jump in a car and go out and answer 911 calls, we're reactive police departments at that point. If you're sending people out with a mission, then it's a profession and they can be proactive. Somebody wants to put it nicely that at the very least, an officer should know when they're driving out of the yard, at the beginning of the shift, whether they're turning left or turning right. Because if it doesn't matter, then they haven't got a mission and they're just a reactive department.

Debra Piehl:

That's exactly it. And I think we proved back in 1972-ish that that didn't work.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. But I think some people still got to catch onto that, right?

Debra Piehl:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's taken a while for that research to filter through, right?

Debra Piehl:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You have seen a bunch of other agencies through your work with DDACTS and you've been a trainer and a taking a lead role in that. Tell me a little bit about DDACTS.

Debra Piehl:

DDACTS is Data-Driven Approaches to Crime and Traffic Safety. So it's very much about efficiency.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What's the underlying philosophy of the DDACTS.

Debra Piehl:

It's a place-based philosophy. So the idea is that where people congregate in your average city or town, they are going to be victims of various crimes, and there's likely to be various types of traffic crashes, traffic violations. Almost every community of any size has these areas where crime and crash hotspots overlap. So if you can identify those areas and just be strategic about how you respond, make sure that your traffic guys are aware of the crime issues in that area. Make sure your general patrol guys are aware of traffic and crash issues that are in that area.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because generally these things have been seen as very much separate.

Debra Piehl:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If you have a reasonable size agency, you're going to have a bunch of traffic folk and you're going to have everybody else or a bunch of other folk in patrol, and they.

Debra Piehl:

And never the two shall meet, communicate, they don't talk.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Communication, please. They certainly don't do that. I mean, I can remember from back in my time, back in the 1980s, being on patrol in the East End of London and going to see crime victims, and they're saying three police cars drove by. And I didn't have the heart to tell them, because we had a traffic Garrett just around the corner and they were a completely different radio network. They just did their own thing. And this is, DDACTS is an attempt to overcome that.

Debra Piehl:

And it's an attempt to add value to traffic enforcements. That's the Department of Transportation's piece in it, because generally, in this country, we don't do traffic enforcement or traffic crash prevention very strategically. You just have some guys that are assigned to it and they issue some tickets every day.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, generally they hunt in the areas where they're going to get the most tickets, but those aren't necessarily the areas where they could also have a preventative role for crime.

Debra Piehl:

Right. And crashes because crashes hurt people, kill people as much as crime does. NYPD is around 330 murders a year, give or take and around 250 or so fatal crashes every year. But there's a huge operation dedicated to crime and not so much to crashes. So if you're going to assign people to traffic enforcement, why not do it strategically?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What's the evidence of effectiveness of DDACTS. Are there studies out there that show that there is a community safety benefit?

Debra Piehl:

There is. There is a lot of research out there emphasizing the value of place-based policing and just identifying those places. So in a general sense that covers both addressing crashes and crime.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Hotspots policing is one of the most effective strategies of policing and we've known that for 20 years, yeah.

Debra Piehl:

And that is the heart of it. But very few analysts are focused on identifying those crash hotspots, and then also digging in further to look at the causal factors of those crashes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is it a philosophical difference that they're just not thinking about it or is it because there are technical difficulties in terms of different databases type of thing?

Debra Piehl:

I think it is a philosophical and cultural difference. Some people like traffic, a lot of people don't want any part of it. And then there are the technical issues. The state of quality and crash reports is even more abysmal than crime reports.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, it's sexy to work in crime and you get overtime at court, but you don't get any of that with traffic, right?

Debra Piehl:

No.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Even though it can make a huge contribution to public safety.

Debra Piehl:

Just the ability to stop someone who has committed a clear traffic safety violation, not a administrative violation, but going too faster, going through red lights or failure to yield, is a big one in terms of injuries. And just engaging with that person about what just went on can give you a realm of intel to begin with, but also, just having that level of communication, it's another opportunity to engage with the citizenry, make them aware of these issues, make them aware of those crash hotspots. You don't have to give them money ticket to everybody.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So we can actually, through good analysis, it can lead to a problem-oriented policing solution rather than just a single enforcement one.

Debra Piehl:

Very much. Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay. So that can be some public reassurance and there can also be some prevention.

Debra Piehl:

In my role in all this is very much about the analysis, but in trying to make it clear to the people attending how much quality data collection matters and why the misspelling of a street makes such a difference. So the misspelling of someone's name or the wrong date and time, and they often just don't know, number one, but I also emphasize, cops have so much to think of that when they respond to a call. What am I going to? What might it really be? Will the people speak English or will they speak some other language? Will someone be hurt? Will I need to get an ambulance? Will someone have a weapon? Will I have to make an arrest? If so, what are... All these things they have to think about.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, I've been looking at Philadelphia Police Department data, and it's amazing the number of calls that come in as, well, it seems to be health and ends up being a crime incident or the stuff that comes in being a crime call and you get all officers get all kind of tense up for that, and then it ends up just being a mental health or a community safety type of issue. I think that increasingly we have no idea what officers are turning up to when they take the initial call. So you're absolutely right. There's so much to think about.

Debra Piehl:

And it's real ramifications if they forget something or don't do something that they should have. So I try to stress that to analysts and that's where that technology piece really matters. We need to make it as easy as possible for them to collect the data that we need and for the systems to work for them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What are the sorts of questions that police chief should be asking of their analysts that in your experience they're not asking?

Debra Piehl:

It has to be in the context of what the agency can accomplish at that moment in time.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's a very good way of putting it.

Debra Piehl:

Most police chiefs now know that they should be using data in one way or another. They might not know exactly what that means, but they usually know they have a computer-aided dispatch system and they have a records management system. So they'll hire an analyst and expect that analyst to do something with all of that. They don't know what.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm being biased here, because I've done some of the similar type of consulting with agencies. I don't know if your experience has been the same, but I tend to find that police chiefs are unwilling to go to the analyst and say, what is it

that we should be doing that we're not doing? They have a tendency to ask for specific analysis, not ask, what can you do? What could we do better in this area? They don't like to ask the open questions, they like to ask the micromanage questions.

Debra Piehl:

Yes. That's very, very true. And I think it's a little bit of a clash of well-meaning people because analysts like myself tend to be well introverted and willing to be in that support role. So there is the natural inclination to say yes chief, sure. And then the chief is coming, not entirely sure what to do with this person that they've just hired. And so they'll ask a question or two and walk away.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think they're also unwilling to admit they don't know how to use an analyst. I mean, it's not like any chief makes it to chief on the strength of being indecisive.

Debra Piehl:

No, but they're also not always sure that they want to have anyone digging further for any more bad news. They've got enough issues to deal with, and now what if this person uncovers all this stuff.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's why I always respect to people like Chuck Ramsey, the former Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. Metro, because he was all about digging into the data.. Because his approach was, look, I don't mind, bad news, I just hate surprises.

Debra Piehl:

Yes, exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Aren't surprises more likely now that more and more agencies are putting their data online? So now a journalist can download a pile of data and start asking really searching questions.

Debra Piehl:

Yes. I think certainly for some agencies, there is that fear, but it's just as possible that some agencies have been coasting a little bit on inaccurate data. So it's easy to put some numbers together and format it in such a way that it makes a really nice presentation, but who's going to be able to dig into it and determine how true that is?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And now with more and more open data, there's more chance of somebody coming, calling bullshit on your stuff.

Debra Piehl:

Yes. And I think that's a little bit unique to policing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Does that increase the value of analysts, do you think?

Debra Piehl:

I hope so. In every crisis, there are opportunities and I think this current crisis will create some opportunities for analysts to be more valued. It's just still so often such a struggle. So many of the analysts I work with have to spend so much time cleaning the data because of the systems they have to work with. And the fixes aren't always so complicated and don't always cost money, but no one fixes it. They get this jumbled mess of exports and they got to go cleaning it all up. And by the time they finished cleaning it all up, there's almost no time to analyze and it's a new week and they got to start that whole process again.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So many analysts I've spoken to say, I don't need more software. I don't need more fancy databases. I need more time to do good work.

Debra Piehl:

Yes, yes. And they need to be supported in that effort, and not just for their sake. I try to emphasize that because these are documents that ultimately end up in court. That is what really matters. We talk about NIBR coding errors, for example, National Incident-Based Reporting System. So the newer version on the uniform crime report, yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So our attempt nationally here in the United States to try and nationalize standards for crime reporting, the kind of thing that other countries have been doing for 20, 30 years.

Debra Piehl:

Yes. We've managed to make it incredibly complicated.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We're number one, we're just catching up. If you're a crime analyst, getting a job now with an agency of a couple of hundred officers, or more than that, or working in a larger agency or working in a district, what are the skill sets that analysts need to have now?

Debra Piehl:

I would prioritize just a comfort level around data. I am almost looking for that analyst to, often like myself, sometimes likes data more than people, because you're going to spend a lot of time digging around in that data.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So pretty much any academic then?

Debra Piehl:

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The people I work with, I always joke, I like to tell other analysts that on a rainy Friday night, if I have decent wine and some popcorn and a big pile of data, pretty happy.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You have a very low bar for happiness. It can be achieved pretty much.

Debra Piehl:

A rainy Friday night.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, okay.

Debra Piehl:

Yeah, not just any Friday night.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Move to Britain and every Friday night is going to be your idea of heaven. There's a reason I left.

Debra Piehl:

So just that comfort level. And I have found through hiring a hundred analysts that some of our quality institutions do not necessarily instill that in people because they're dealing primarily with an already formatted spreadsheet of data. So they just push some buttons and it appears on a map. And then they tell me, I know how to use Excel. I know how to map. And they don't.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I learned when I was doing my PhD in geography, that analysis is 80% massaging the data, 10% doing analysis and 10% trying to understand what the hell you just did.

Debra Piehl:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I worry now about universities because so much data is online and it comes cleaned that students have no experience of dealing with the reality of it. In a previous episode of this podcast, my old mate, Geoff Alpert and I were complaining at some length about people who are doing analysis of police data with no understanding of what the data actually really means, the context of how it's collected, what it means. You see a crime event, but there's almost a lack of connectivity with the idea that that's an apartment building. Or there's somebody there who was weeping on the officer's shoulder, trying to convey information while they lost their life savings, or they lost something really important to them. And that lack of context, when you just remotely step away from policing and just download a dataset.

Debra Piehl:

And I'm worried about that in research too, because I feel as though there's a lot of research produced by people who haven't spent much time inside a department and don't know where that data comes from.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You mean every economist then?

Debra Piehl:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There are a lot of discussions around where analysts should be located because there's always a kind of organizational challenge. Should they be closer to the frontline offices to get that quality information that enhances that data? Or should they be closer to the headquarters and the chief to have more influence with the analysis they produce? And you can't say both?

Debra Piehl:

No. What I first look for in new analysts is that rare gem that has spent some time working their way up from smaller agencies to larger agencies, because in the smaller agencies, they will have no choice, but to be close to the cops on the street so that they have a sense of that. But so often now that doesn't happen. And so then I think what is most critical is that they be closest to the people who are asking the questions. And then you can dig your way down and try to get a better understanding of that. But it's very hard to dig your way up. I want analysts to have some influence. I always feel bad when you see these analysts struggling. Maybe if they change the font they use or the color of the heading of their weekly report, or if they host it on the intranet, rather than email it, maybe that'll make a difference. That's not the stuff that makes the difference. If all of the officers of all ranks are held accountable to responding to the analysis, then the analysis is going to be valuable.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I had dinner once with Mark Lowenthal, who's a former deputy director in the CIA, and very astutely he said, you know an analyst has really earned their pay for that day when a different decision gets made, that would have happened if you hadn't delivered your analysis. If you deliver an analysis and you end up with a different decision, go home. You've owned your pay for that day.

Debra Piehl:

That's what I always tell analysts that they should strive to achieve, is that one way or another, a cop is going to see what you put together and then they're going to go, I'm going to watch for that. I'm going to look for that. I'm going to head in that direction, something they would not have done prior to seeing your analysis, then that's good, actionable stuff.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We have to think about retraining because the university system is the complete antithesis of influencing decision makers. It's all geared towards here's my literature review, here's my data, here's all the analysis I did. It's a huge justification for how I get to my last paragraph. But a cop is about to jump in a car and wants to know whether they should turn left or right out of the yard needs that last paragraph upfront, and maybe none of the rest of it. But nobody wants to do that. Everybody wants to justify how hard they've worked.

Debra Piehl:

Yes. And I'm also a big believer in not every patrolman needs to know the intricate details of everything.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So they don't need to know about what a standard deviation is?

Debra Piehl:

No. They don't need to know Z scores. We don't need that. What they need is that there are some expectations about what they're going to accomplish in between responding to calls, something.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

A mission.

Debra Piehl:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But they don't need to have read the book with all the intel behind the mission?

Debra Piehl:

No. And the more it will work out for them, they'll rise up in levels where they need to know a little bit more to better define that mission.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So is that the kind of foundation behind your idea that it's more important for the analyst to be working with the chiefs and the decision makers?

Debra Piehl:

I think so. The slog up is too much, and I cringe when analysts are asked to produce a little bit of work and then we'll put it out to everybody and see what they think. That's why I value Compstat so much because it's a whole different experience if those commanders are asked to actually respond to it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, what you're doing.

Debra Piehl:

They don't have to like it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Sure.

Debra Piehl:

They have to use it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But what you're doing there is really breaking down the barriers between the decision-makers and the analysts. I cringe when I see analysts produce something for sergeant who's in charge of a crime analysis unit or an intel unit who doesn't know a damn thing about crime analysis or intelligence. And the analysis has to go through so many filters of people who don't know what they're talking about before it gets to the chief that half the time good work gets lost. And we've all had the experience of producing some work and had absolutely zero impact and nothing's ever come of it. And that's disheartening for anybody, isn't it?

Debra Piehl:

Very much, very much. And it's also hard to train people for those scenarios so.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I see these big distribution lists and I think the larger the distribution list, the less the influence. If you're going to give one thing to one person, if nothing happens, you know who's responsible for nothing happening. If you sent an email out to a hundred people, nothing's going to happen with that because everybody's going to think 99 other people.

Debra Piehl:

The case of after somebody else.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There's 99 other people who will do that.

Debra Piehl:

Yes, yes. Commissioner Bratton used to say all the time, every analyst has as much of a chance of saving a life as anyone else here, too.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That Bill Bratton kind of knew what he was talking about, didn't he?

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Debra Piehl:

A little bit, yeah. Yeah. Especially about stuff like that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What was it like working with him?

Debra Piehl:

He doesn't know this, but he's a big reason how I got into this. When he was a candidate for the Boston police commissioner's job, the Boston Globe did a spread of the five finalists, I think. Their picture and a little bit about each one, and a local chief friend of mine said this Bratton guy, he's got some good ideas. He thinks that if you count things and you keep track of how crime goes up and down, you could actually respond to it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No shit show.

Debra Piehl:

And he had a [inaudible 00:34:32] that spread across the hood of his car. And I remember thinking, oh, that doesn't sound that revolutionary to me, keep track?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. When Moses, in the 1840s. Well, don't worry. Bratton's still probably about now, cause I'm sure he doesn't listen to this podcast. I'm amazed.

Debra Piehl:

Probably not.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm amazed anybody does.

Debra Piehl:

But I became a huge Bratton groupie. He's from Massachusetts, I'm from Massachusetts. So I followed his career and he was always very, very gracious to me.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm going to ask you one more thing because I'm interested in your response here. With the rise of evidence-based policing in the last 10, 15 years, but certainly much more focused on it within policing. Now we have an The American Society of Evidence-Based Policing, that's started up in the last few years. This is a new role for analysts, isn't it?

Debra Piehl:

Yes, very much. One of the things that I think is unfortunately, but is very new to crime analysis is just the evaluation piece. So we do focus a lot on that in detox workshops, because it's so critical to know if what you're doing is having an impact. And typically, analysts don't do a lot with police activity data. See where your cops were in relation to what was going on. Are they in the right areas? Does it need to be tweaked? Is your level of dosage? Appropriate

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Dosage is a great word because I think that's something that's lost on so many people. It's not about how many cops you have, it's about what they do. If they park up in a car and they slide the seat back and they start catching up on Facebook, does anybody catch up on Facebook anymore? I'm probably in a Tik Tok or whatever is not being banned yet. Yeah. They're not doing anything.

Debra Piehl:

No.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But if they're actually rolling down the window, they're speaking to people, they're rolling up on people and saying hello, they're out of the car, that's a very different level of activity than just sitting on the backside.

Debra Piehl:

Yes. And you can see that in the data. So many times a really good plan will go awry right out the door. Just this minor tweak can mean the difference between having an impact or not. And the analyst can see that and can find that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I love it when I go to an agency, they say, well, we have these hotspot grids. And I say, well, what do you do differently in the hotspot grids from anywhere else? Can I actually tell the difference? Because you've got workers and you've got shirkers. Are you sending the workers in there to actually do stuff?

Debra Piehl:

It's not always that they're not doing the right things. It's just sometimes without the data, success is lost. There are usually elements in there somewhere and analysts can find where things have been done really, really well. And they can say, look at this, we did X over here and it's clearly had an impact. Let's do more of X. And cops are mission-driven individuals. So if you can show them that there has been some success with X, they will do more of X.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So the clues are really hidden in the data.

Debra Piehl:

It is.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's like national treasure. You're the Nicholas Cage of crime analysis.

Debra Piehl:

It's not complicated.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm not sure that's a compliment actually.

Debra Piehl:

Well, no, I don't know, but there there's so much in there and I love finding that success.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And we rarely tap into even a tiny proportion of it.

Debra Piehl:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So what does the future for crime analysis. If you've got experienced crime analysts out there listening to this or chiefs or police officers who work with analysts, what's the next big thing analytically on the horizon.

Debra Piehl:

So I think there's going to be more opportunities for crime analysts because of this current policing crisis, because we still have more agencies that don't have analysts than do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And they need to know what they do.

Debra Piehl:

They do. And there's always new tools, new ways to look at things, things to learn just from the evidence-based folks, just in terms of what are people looking at? What are people thinking about? What can I do next for my agency?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think you're right. There's a whole realm of evidence-based policing that a lot with analysts are not really up to speed on yet, and I think that would be great for them to really become a part of that whole movement.

Debra Piehl:

I think the real challenge now is that it takes a long time to get to a position as a crime analyst where you're making some decent money. And if you are good with data, there's so many other better paying opportunities out there. And

so there has to be this passion about policing. I'm not so passionate about law enforcement by itself, but that the whole realm and science and profession of policing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, if you think about the skill set required for an analyst it's data management, is GIS, it's spatial analysis, it's writing reports, it's public speaking, it's talking to decision-makers, and the amount that some of them get paid is just shocking.

Debra Piehl:

Yes. It's heartbreaking.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, on that cheery note depth to it, should we back off and go get the drinks somewhere then?

Debra Piehl:

Yes. Works for me.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, thanks very much.

Debra Piehl:

It's been a real pleasure. Thank you.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was episode 28 of Reducing Crime recorded in Washington, D.C. in August, 2020. As always, transcripts of every episode are available at reducingcrime.com and new episodes are announced on Twitter @_reducingcrime. Don't forget the underscore. Be safe and best of luck.