#40 (DON WEATHERBURN)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

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

This is Reducing Crime, featuring influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers. For over 30 years, Don Weatherburn was director of the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research in Sydney, Australia. playing a pivotal role in forming crime and policing policy at the highest levels of government. We talk about his experience and insights working in a high-profile public capacity.

Welcome to the podcast. I'm your host, Jerry Ratcliffe.

Well, we hit a bit of a milestone in the last few days. It's been a little over three years since the podcast debuted and you guys have now downloaded Reducing Crime episodes over 100,000 times. We have listeners from over 50 countries; from Iceland to Indonesia, and Singapore to South Africa. Yeah, it's not exactly Joe Rogan numbers, but for a specialized topic podcast, those numbers are not too shabby. And I really appreciate all your support. The guests and I love hearing from you and their Twitter handles, if they have one, can be found at reducingcrime.com/podcast. I can be found on Twitter @_reducingcrime or my personal handle @jerry_ratcliffe.

My guest this month is the irrepressible Don Weatherburn. Don is now a professor at the National Drug and Alcohol Research Center at Australia's University of New South Wales. But for most of his career, was executive director of the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research in Sydney.

When he stepped down from the bureau in 2019, the attorney general noted, "Don Weatherburn has provided successive governments with well researched and fearlessly frank advice that has helped shape justice reforms on a range of issues." Don completed an undergraduate degree and PhD at the University of Sydney. He's a former president of the Australian and New Zealand Society of Criminology and a fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia.

Among his many publications are two books; *Delinquent Prone Communities* and *Law and Order in Australia: Rhetoric and Reality*, which is a highly accessible and worthwhile read. He's a foundation director of research at the New South Wales Judicial Commission, and for his contribution to public debate around crime injustice, he was awarded the Public Service Medal in 1998. We Zoomed one evening or morning, in his case, and he talked about maintaining integrity,

the poor state of quantitative training in Australian criminology, and provided some key tips for academics working with policy makers. I get advice on how to handle claims of 'copaganda' and come out, finally, against tweed jackets with leather patches. Yeah. I know how to take the controversial positions. As you join us, I'm just finding out about his extracurricular activities out in the bush.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So, I'm just glad that I had a chance to actually catch you because you are more bloody active than I've known you in 20, 30 years. Tramping through the middle of the bush for days on end and then you capsize when you're in the middle of the ocean. What the hell? And you've been going on these multiple day trips, haven't you?

Don Weatherburn:

It's funny you call it tramping.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

All right. Bush walking.

Don Weatherburn:

It's all right. Tramping. Have it your way. Look, it's really nice getting out there. Mind you, I need to assure you, although these tramps are long, I'm not one that believes in any kind of suffering whatsoever, so there's always wine or scotch to take along. We don't take mung beans and lentils. We take as much good food as we can. Look, Australia's good for that stuff. There's still plenty of places in Australia where there's nobody around. So, it's a good break, and I enjoy it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So, I did gasp when I was reading on your Twitter feed that you capsized as well. It's nice to see you're upright and dry.

Don Weatherburn:

Well, it turns out that I'm a terrible sailor.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This is now coming as a revelation at this point in life. You just discovered this, right?

Don Weatherburn:

Well, it came as a revelation when I went to do training or learn how to sail. And I was there with 15, 16, 17 year old kids. And here I am 70 years of age, but they were very kind to me. I think I got the award for the most enthusiastic, which was coming last nearly every race. Look, what else are we going to do? Research is fantastic. Life is enjoyable even when the worst is happening. You might as well just kick on until you drop.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Help me out. You live in Sydney. Where is Sydney in lockdown right now?

Don Weatherburn:

At the moment, the situation is that we can't move more than 5 Kms out of our house. That's as the crow flies which is further than you might think, but not very far.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Can you get to the beach?

Don Weatherburn:

Yeah. As a matter of fact, I'm only two blocks from the beach, but Jerry, it's only spring.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, it's a rough life.

Don Weatherburn:

The water's about 17 degrees.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm going to need to convert that to something else to try and figure out what that means, but I'm guessing that's just a tad chilly, right? That's a wetsuit weather, right?

Don Weatherburn:

Yeah. I can't do the linear transformation to Fahrenheit, but let me have a try.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. That's 62, 63 degrees Fahrenheit. I'm not swimming in that.

Don Weatherburn:

It's cold.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But I mean, at least it's scenic, right? You get to walk on the beach, even if you don't want to – like - wiggle your toes in it.

Don Weatherburn:

Yes. Well, if you think I'm grateful to the state government for allowing me to actually walk on the beach, you'll have another thing coming, mate. This is not China.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How long is it likely to last for? Is there any-

Don Weatherburn:

Well, we're close to hitting 70% double vaccination. They say they're going to open up then, but the hospitals are full. I don't know whether they can take much more, but you've been through this whole thing yourself except that you had a president who didn't believe in it. No, no fault of yours, of course.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. Yeah. Please don't blame me. Thanks very much. I don't need that kind of hate now.

Don Weatherburn:

No.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's interesting because you spent, I would say, the majority of your career really working in policy in government positions. So, I mean, even though it's COVID and it's not specifically crime or crime prevention policy, you must be looking at it through the experience of your lens having worked in the policy areas of government. What is it like looking at all of this?

Don Weatherburn:

Well, it's a bit of a shock, I must say, going after 30 years working in government doing research and trying to defend your independence, but not having too much trouble making yourself relevant to a situation where there's no threat to your independence, but making sure you can do something that actually impacts on government is a big problem. And I think that's characteristic of Australia less so than the US.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In what way do you mean?

Don Weatherburn:

Well, in the US, one gets the impression that research on crime and justice has a more immediate effect on policy than the same sort of research going on in Australia.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I wish.

Don Weatherburn:

All right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I don't know where the hell you got that impression from, but I appreciate the optimism. Good God.

Don Weatherburn:

Well, let me put it this way. There's a lot more movement of scholars from university to public office in the US than there is here. Here, basically you're in one place or another and there's not too much transfer. It's increasing, but there's not too much transfer of talent between the government and the universities.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You were director of the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research for the New South Wales government. And for people who are listening from outside of Australia, New South Wales is the most populous. It's the largest state and it has the largest city. Sydney in it. So, it's the largest state in Australia. So, it's a significant role that you had. How did you end up in that policy role?

Don Weatherburn:

Well, I had done a PhD in mathematical psychology that was unbelievably boring. And I was casting about for something more interesting to do. And this opportunity came up to do some research on crime. Now at that time, crime or criminology was mostly run by lawyers who one anecdote was enough to issue a general principle. So, I was having a field day doing empirical research on whether what the law said was happening was, in fact, happening. And I thought that conflict between the law that was written in the book and the law that was practiced on the ground was a really interesting thing to do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When was this?

Don Weatherburn:

Well, I'm embarrassed to admit this, but we're talking here about the '80s. Let's not go into too much detail about when all this started.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I was the young cop in the east end of London at that time.

Don Weatherburn:

Yes. Well, look, I wished I'd been one at that time. I would've probably had a better opportunity to influence the police. They've been the hardest to influence. The justice department has come round to what we might call evidence based policy, but the police laws under themselves at the moment.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When you joined the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, it really didn't do much in the way of crime statistics even though that was in the title if I recall. How did you make that transfer to actually becoming the place that everybody goes to for impartial knowledge about what's happening in New South Wales?

Don Weatherburn:

It's probably worth knowing that the bureau was created to deal with a political crisis the government had faced when a police officer blew the whistle on the premier of the day for fabricating crime statistics. So they set up the bureau ostensibly to provide independent advice on crime and justice. When I arrived as director, they were still fabricating figures. They were still putting out press releases that really misled the general public. And because I didn't have kids and I wasn't married, I thought, well, I might as well expose all this.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You thought, at the very least, you can go back to your mathematical psychology.

Don Weatherburn:

Well, that would've been a bridge too far, but the police minister at the time was not getting on well with the police and to punish them, he transferred responsibility for crime statistics from the police to the bureau.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm guessing the police department or the New South Wales police service took that really well.

Don Weatherburn:

Well, the initial reaction was hostile, but it didn't take very long for them to become very happy with that arrangement for two reasons. Firstly, the police hierarchy no longer had to deal with the police union leaking crime statistics. The second thing that they liked is that they no longer had to deal with what they call “ministerials” meaning the minister of the day saying, "What's going on in Redfern or what's going on in this suburb?" Suddenly, they could just focus on policing and not worry too much, at least, at that stage. Things have changed now. But at that stage, they could just get on with what they thought was law enforcement.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Shonky people making up data and fabricating numbers. Police unions leaking crime statistics. Do you miss the '80s?

Don Weatherburn:

Well, look, my professional life in criminology divides into two parts. The first part was endlessly rising crime and I was the hero of the day and the media couldn't get enough of me. And the second part was when crime started falling and suddenly I became a nobody. So, the '80s were very exciting. The press conferences were packed, but by the time we got into 2010, 2011, people would just ring me up and say, "Is it worth coming to your press conferences? Anything gone up?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Now, that really is a "If it bleeds, it leads" kind of world. For somebody trained in academia, that's a completely different world to be in. Full press releases and media briefing and answering questions. That was quite a baptism by fire, wasn't it?

Don Weatherburn:

It was, but I quite liked talking to crowds. I find it easier than talking to one person, but it was also very exciting to be able to shed reasonable or rational light on what was going on. So, for the first time, it wasn't just a question of "Have the police done a good job? Is the law enforcement process working?" You could actually talk about the impact of employment. Talk about the impact of external factors like the price of drugs. And I think that for the public was really interesting too. There's a bigger narrative to tell than "Are we winning the war?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Finding that balance of maintaining some independence, but still having a capacity to influence policy. Is that still possible?

Don Weatherburn:

Well, they are, but as the old saying, if you give them an inch, they'll take a mile. So, what I tried to do was, first of all, I had a rule. No surprises. So, when we would design a study, I would take it to the client and I'd say, "This is what we proposed to do to answer your question. Are you happy with this? Because, otherwise, there's no other way of doing it." And then when there was a draft report, I would give them an opportunity to comment, but I retained editorial control. And then when it came time to release the report, I'd tell them exactly when it was coming out. If you don't ambush a politician, you get a much more sympathetic hearing. I mean, there were certainly times when they threaten me, but over the years, those threats, "We can't sustain your budget," blah, blah, blah. They just slowly disappeared.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Not as extensive as you have, but I had an opportunity to work with numerous police chiefs and police commissioners. And they're used to bad news or it comes with the gig, but you're absolutely on the money. They hate surprises because it means they have to start tap dancing and be reactive. What you've come up with is pretty much the same plan I have, which is, if I find something bad, I'll tell you. If I find something good, I'll tell everybody, but you won't get any surprises. You'll know what's coming.

Don Weatherburn:

Yeah. The other thing, of course, is don't tell the police how to do their job. Behind the scenes you might say, "Look, the evidence just doesn't support this," but sitting in a press conference if the journalist would say, "Well, what should the police do?" I would always say, "Look, I give you the facts. You want to know what to do about them? Go talk to the police." Now, that's a fine line to draw from time to time, but I'm not paid to reduce crime. I'm paid to analyze it, record it, et cetera. It's their job to say what they're going to about it. In another forum like a conference, you can talk completely openly about it, but I would never ambush them with, "Well, look, the police are doing a terrible job here and this is what they should be doing."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That must get harder when you do the evaluation work because sometimes people can be really wedded to programs that don't necessarily work. And that becomes a challenge because once you do you evaluations, you're basically saying, "Hey, this doesn't work."

Don Weatherburn:

Look, evaluation's a different story. What I've just been saying really applies to the release of crime statistics at an annual or quarterly press conference. If you're doing evaluation, you never ever mince your words. The media will spot it in a second. If you say, "Look, I've evaluated police searches. I can't really say whether they're working or not." I mean, it's just not going to cut it. You've got to say, "We did this. This is what we found." The thing is, they're going to know this before you say it. You've already briefed them. They already had time to work out what they're going to say. And of course, they're going to look really silly if they start criticizing me. So, they avoided that.

Don Weatherburn:

And sometimes the response they made was considered. Sometimes it was defensive, but the big disappointment for me compared with you is that it proved very, very difficult over the years to get them to engage the bureau in evaluating their strategies and policies. So, they weren't ringing up saying, "Don, we're going to run this operation. We'd really like to know whether it worked."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's still really difficult to this day to get regular buy-in to do evaluations of projects. Are you finding there's more interest in this in Australia now?

Don Weatherburn:

Yes. What's happened... You might have expected the initiative to do evaluation would come from universities, but in fact it's been the treasury officials who've been pushing it. Treasury has gone from worrying about the money to worrying about the outcome. So, the state treasuries and the federal treasury have been saying, "We don't want to just know that you've done the most efficient thing. We want to know whether it's the most cost effective thing." So they had put enormous pressure on line agencies, whether it be law enforcement, housing, whatever, to show that they're evaluating or have evaluated the proposals they're seeking funding for. And that's changing things quite rapidly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In a good way?

Don Weatherburn:

In a good way. Yes. I mean, there's still always going to be politics, especially when it comes to things like, "Should we appoint another 1,000 police?" They're never going to say, "Look, can you tell us whether this is going to work?" There's always going to be some degree to which you got to give the punters what they want. If they want tougher penalties, they're going to hand it out even if you tell them it's a waste of money.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How independent were you? I mean, you were government funded.

Don Weatherburn:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You're in this interesting spot. How did you manage to do that almost impossible tightrope walk?

Don Weatherburn:

Well, first let me say the Bureau was not independent in a statutory sense. I think it was probably more akin to the US Bureau of Justice Statistics. It had no statutory mandate at all. In fact, I didn't even have a statement of duties. It wasn't clear what my role was.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That sounds about right for just about every position in government anywhere, but yeah.

Don Weatherburn:

Well, look, the thing is, I just did not care. I didn't go through eight years of university to join the government and start telling lies.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think you're missing the point. That's the main reason that most people seem to go into government as far as I can tell.

Don Weatherburn:

As I say, in the beginning, they had tried on a bit. I remember one night having a police minister ring me up in the dead of night saying... And he must have been drunk. I can't obviously name him. But he suggested that maybe it would be a good idea to release the crime stats when the national budget comes out. "No, minister. I don't think we'll be doing that." It's just a personality thing. And I think it's the same. Even if you're in the head of a statutory body, what do you see yourself as doing? Towing a party line or doing what you've been trained to do, which is to tell the truth, the whole truth, et cetera.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How did you not get fired?

Don Weatherburn:

Tell you what. I don't put it down to any grace on the government or talent on my part. I think the original... You might remember I mentioned the fact that this police office had been sacked for accusing the premier of lying about crime

statistics. That turned into a national scandal and he had to fight a 10 year battle for compensation, and that so scarred the government. They were all frightened of what was called a Philip Arantz saga. That is, that there would be a huge scandal and they would lose more than they would gain by getting rid of me.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The whole area is kind of fascinating because in the US, there's a Bureau of Justice Statistics, but they can come under some degree of political influence, especially if the government of the day decides who they want to have as the director, which is a political appointment. So, it is interesting that the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research in New South Wales has maintained this capacity to sort of be above the fray to some degree.

Don Weatherburn:

As I say, it doesn't matter whether you're the head of a statutory authority as powerful as the National Securities Commission or whatever. If you don't stand up for what you believe to be right, you can be compromised. The pay is good. People just want to live comfortable lives. So, statute of independence helps, but I don't think it's a guarantee of real independence. That's down to your willingness to make the big calls.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What's the relationship between the bureau and the New South Wales police now?

Don Weatherburn:

So, we've always had extremely good relationships with the police on the beat. The local area commanders have always been incredibly helpful. I never had to crossword except on one occasion when I got it wrong. But police hierarchy, well, it varies enormously with the commissioner. There's, you might say, a fission. A kind of a high good to see gritted teeth of it. But after crime started coming down, as it did in the US, I couldn't put a foot wrong. And the worst thing was I was getting politicians crediting me with the drop in crime like I'd made up the figures so the government could look good. I remember sitting at a meeting with a police commissioner on one side of the premier and I was on the other side and he said, "Crime is dropping," and turned to me instead of the police commissioner. "Don't look at me. I'm not doing anything. I'm just counting."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, and also you're smart enough to know that if crime starts going up again, you don't want them looking in your direction.

Don Weatherburn:

No. And look, you know as well as I do that when we talk about crime going down, there's always exceptions. So, fraud is going through the roof. We've got a major problem with methamphetamine. So, it's not as if all the problems have gone away, but it's probably never been a better time to be police commissioner except till COVID came. But that's another story.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. You talked about the distinction between Australian academia and Australian policy research in the crime area. And you're a past, present of the Australian and New Zealand Society of Criminology. So, you have insights into both worlds. And what's the situation with criminological research for crime and policy in Australia?

Don Weatherburn:

Well, criminology in Australia is a highly variegated beast. So, at one extreme, you have people who see it as their job to campaign for human rights and to spend their time endlessly attacking police and the criminal justice system.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I wasn't aware of that. That must be unique. Nobody else does that anywhere else.

Don Weatherburn:

But there are a group of us who see criminology as a science, and are unashamed about the idea of subjecting it to the sort of procedures that are common in the more rigorous parts of social science.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Heresy. Heresy!

Don Weatherburn:

Heresy. So, I'm constantly criticized as a positivist by those who probably don't know too much about where positive is and comes from, but that's another story.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you want to start talking about Hume, and go back to the 18th century? I'm perfectly fine if you ask where you want to take this.

Don Weatherburn:

I know you would be because we've been brought up in the same Western intellectual tradition, and I'm no post-modernist, as you can tell. I guess my biggest frustration with criminology in Australia is I don't think the quantitative training is strong enough. And I don't say that because I want everybody to be a mathematical criminologist. The sorts of quantitative training I'm talking about is a capacity to read an article that evaluates a program and be able to intelligently criticize what's being done. So, I think that a lot of people coming out with criminology degrees are not well placed to advise government on what we're learning about the effectiveness of policing or penalties or whatever els. But having said that, there's quite a growth in people interested in situational crime theory and rational crime theory. And I think that's a great hope for a better relationship with the police.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It is interesting that there are good people working up at Brisbane, Mike Townsley and some of his folk.

Don Weatherburn:

Yep.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And of course, Lorraine Mazerolle, who's a previous guest on the podcast, but they don't seem to be the sort of experimental, empirically trained quantitative researchers coming out of Australia. Now, some of that, I attribute to the fact that I'm just not in Australia and not aware of it. But some of it, I see the same things that you are seeing. I just don't necessarily see people with the skill set that is actually practical in a policy environment.

Don Weatherburn:

I think part of the reason for that and part of the reason for the difference with the US is this that a lot of the criminology schools in Australia were founded in law departments where social science is if not anathema, at least not taught.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's certainly frowned on.

Don Weatherburn:

Whereas in the US, I mean, a lot of criminology comes straight out of social science faculties. So, the Institute of Criminology in Sydney is part of the law school. Crime Research Center used to be part of the law school in Western Australia. So, there just hasn't been the kind of institutional background that would be conducive to experimental methods, empirical research, more being in the European speculative tradition where you stand back and-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Ponder deep and meaningfully.

Don Weatherburn:

Deep and meaningfully, and identify flaws in the content from the standpoint of ethics and human rights rather than from the standpoint of what's true and what's false.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Lean heavily on the leather pads on your tweed jacket and stroke your beard.

Don Weatherburn:

Well, I think the tweed jackets have gone. It's more the safety pin through the nose and various other modern accoutrements. I haven't seen too many tweed jackets in a while. I don't know whether anybody can afford one these days in university, but there you go.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Perhaps some of the reason that there isn't this body of people who have got the skill set is because it's not in demand.

Don Weatherburn:

No, no. I think there is demand, but here's the irony. It's being filled by management consultants.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, bloody hell.

Don Weatherburn:

Because it's so hard to find people with quantitative skills in the universities in criminology. They're going straight to management consultants. Now, the problem there is that a lot of these coves coming out of management consultancies are very good at stats, but know nothing whatsoever about crime. So, they lack the substantive expertise. A classic example was... Oh, it could be defamatory to go into it. But for example, forecasting the prison population, building simulation models of the way in which the interaction between drug users and the criminal justice system. Finding out whether or not we're doing the right thing to reduce Aboriginal deaths in custody. I mean, all these questions are in hot demand to have answers, but they're hiring management consultants to do the answering.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's not going to end well.

Don Weatherburn:

Part of the problem was the inflexible funding arrangements of university. I don't want to bore your listeners with the detail, but at one stage, if you wanted to get a grant that would allow you to do research relevant to government, it only happened once a year and you had to wait six months to get the grant. And as you would know, the window of opportunity when some police officer or justice officials says, "I need help," you can't say, "Right with you. I'll be there in six months."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

A lot of agencies here have very infrequent grant funding calls.

Don Weatherburn:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And then they say it's going to take at least six months to review. And then you can't start the project until we've done all the paperwork till three months afterwards. So, it's turning around and saying, "I get if you're really interested in this, and we'll be right with you in 18 months."

Don Weatherburn:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think is actually the norm. It's chaotic. You can't do that in a public policy arena.

Don Weatherburn:

No. And another part of the problem caused by universities is that there's much more kudos associated with these Australian Research Council grants or National Health and Medical Research Council grants than there is with getting money from government. So, even if the money is on a table and it always is around about May, June. They desperately don't want to have their budget reduced, so they want to give money away. Even in those circumstances, people would prefer to go for an ARC grant or a CRC grant just because of the kudos associated with it. But again, I'm optimistic. I think that's changing and universities are now putting more premium on impact.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

As they should. Again, it's a perverse incentive system because those grants are competitive.

Don Weatherburn:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I've had the same thing when funding has been handed to me. It doesn't get any same level of respect as when I've had a nationally competitive grant.

Don Weatherburn:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Regardless of what the work actually did and whether it was useful to the city and the region.

Don Weatherburn:

Yeah. It's a pity in a way because from my standpoint, the money is a means to an end. You need the money to do the research, but it's quite clear to me now in university, the grant getting is independently desired.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Don Weatherburn:

In other words, you don't just count your publications. You don't just look at the quality of your research or your citations. You look at how much money you've raised. That's quite distracting. If you're a kind of person like me who just loves writing and doing stuff, stopping for weeks at a time while you persuade your partner to sign a letter that had some minor typographical error, it's just utterly frustrating.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I don't think people really appreciate how incredibly time-consuming writing a grant application is for something where they, perhaps, 10% or less chance of success. When grant season comes around, all the people who apply for grants and the mixed methods people just disappear for two months. We all emerge after the grant deadlines blinking in the sunshine.

Don Weatherburn:

Very good description of it. That's exactly what it's like. You're in a cave. You have no idea what's going on in the outside world. And suddenly you come out. And, of course, there's that honeymoon period before the answer comes back, whether you got it or not. But look, the world is what it is. And there are far worse places to be than working in a university. I'm very glad for the opportunities I've certainly been given and still have. So, I wouldn't want to spend too much time saying what a miserable life I've got.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So, what are you working on now? You're no longer with the bureau.

Don Weatherburn:

That's right. So, I'm now with the National Drug and Alcohol Research Center and the big project that we've just been planning is... And Jennifer Doleac will appreciate this if she listens to your podcast because I listen to hers.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We don't talk about other podcasts on this podcast.

Don Weatherburn:

I'm sorry.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm sure she doesn't bloody listen to mine.

Don Weatherburn:

Okay. Look, there are lots of studies where they go up to people who've been to prison and say, "Have you got a job? Are you sick?" All these terrible things happen. And of course, they report, "Yeah, I don't have a job and my life is miserable." And then they conclude, "Prison does terrible things." Well, I thought we really need a control group. So, what we're going to do is exploit the fact that judges differ hugely in their willingness to imprison people. So, we're going to take otherwise similar people, one half of whom or some of whom have been sent to jail and others who are otherwise similar who have managed to get a suspended sentence. And then we're going to track them and find out what the impact is of going to jail on employment, on housing, on income, on health and science, just so that we can get at least a clear idea of whether it's having a damaging effect, a good effect, or a mixture of both.

Don Weatherburn:

There was a wonderful study that came out of Norway recently where they found that when you lock people up, their health improves enormously, but you can imagine what everyone said. "That's Norway." It ain't like that in the Australia or the US.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's the point. We can't make assumptions that it wouldn't be like that. Why not? Why don't we... I think it's great that you're having a look at that.

Don Weatherburn:

There's no point doing research if you already think you know the answer. I think the really exciting part about research is asking a question and not knowing in advance what's going to happen. You press that button and it comes back and you think, "God, I didn't know that." Well, I love that moment. Whether it's good or bad, I love that moment when the results come in. But if you just went and did research to prove a point, it'd be dull as paste.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The best research project are the ones where, regardless of the answer, you're going to find something interesting, and that's great. Whether you are proving something or disproving something, if you can design a research project where the answer is interesting regardless of what the answer is, that's gold right there.

Don Weatherburn:

Well, look at the history of research on policing. For years and years, all we ever heard about was the Kansas City Patrol Experiment. Policing doesn't work. I used to listen to people saying that, and I used to think to myself, "We only need that one study. Is that it?" And now, of course, the wheel has turned. Now we know. Sure. Some things don't work, other things do work, but the progress we have made in getting an understanding of what you need to do if you want to reduce crime as a police officer has gone ahead in leaps and bounds, and necessarily there have been failures. Operations that just don't deliver the goods or only have a temporary effect. So, it's interesting, and so as other parts of justice.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. There is this growth in policing research.

Don Weatherburn:

But just a quick comment about economists. There's three groups of them. There's a group that are concerned about macro economists and the way the economy's functioning. I'm not really interested in what they're doing. My son is... That's what he does. There's another group there who are still in love with Becker and still cite Becker every time they start an article. I'm not really too interested. But there's a growing group who are very empirical and who are bringing to bear some quite impressive techniques to answer questions that you and I are interested in. And they are listening to you. I know that. So, they're not all bad. Some of them are good.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That is actually true. And they are bringing some really interesting and new methods. Oh, scary thought. I may even get one or two of them on the podcast at some point in the future. But I do appreciate that they're engaging with the crime field. They're really starting to understand the crime statistics a lot better.

Don Weatherburn:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I think if we can get one or two of them to sit in a police car, once or twice, and actually see where their data that they download originate from, I think we could actually bring a few of them across to the dark side.

Don Weatherburn:

Look, I think historically, part of our concern about economists was that they didn't seem to pay too much attention to where their data was coming from. As long as they had a row of numbers, they were happy. Nevermind what we call the data generating process. But I don't think that's true now. I mean, people like Kevin Schnepel, for example, and Simon Fraser [University], he is concerned over how the data is generated as any social scientist I've ever met. He looked at the situation where the police had suddenly decided that they were not going to charge people for minor offenses. It was in a natural experiment. What happens?

Don Weatherburn:

Well, turns out, not much. There's no increase in crime. There's actually a reduction. So, he's basically looking at natural experiments, which is what Cook and Campbell used to talk about. They weren't economists.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yep.

Don Weatherburn:

Look, I think we can get a few of them over. We'll never get the lot and we probably don't want them all.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They can keep the Beckerites, right?

Don Weatherburn:

Yeah. Look, I think in criminology, it is a hybrid discipline. It's a mixed discipline. We should be taking talent from wherever we can find it. As long as they're generally committed to empirical research to resolve questions of fact, I'm with them 100%.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We've had social psychologists. We've had mathematicians like yourself. I was trained as a geographer. I think the field of crime research and crime policy really benefits from having people with all these areas coming into it without a doubt. Yep.

Don Weatherburn:

Yeah. Well, geography has made an amazing contribution to crime. Who would've guessed it? Back in the '80s, he said, "I'm going to hire a geography." "Well, why would you do that?" Now, we realize that the spatial distribution of crime is critical to an understanding of what works in reducing it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

All these other people coming on board like geographers and social psychologists and economists. And we obviously want them to work with people in the field and work with policy people. What would your advice be for people to work in the policy arena with the police?

Don Weatherburn:

Well, step number one is, when you go to meet a police commander, don't do all the talking. Shut up. Let them talk. Ask the questions. Let them say their piece. You need to learn from them in the first instance. What challenges they're facing, how they're trying to respond to those challenges. There's nothing worse, I think, from a 15 years experienced commander to have some academic waltz in and say, "I've read a book, and I know you're wrong."

Don Weatherburn:

You have to build trust with officers that you're not out to embarrass them, humiliate them, ridicule them, tell them how to suck eggs. So, you need to build long term relationships with police and share their concerns. I mean, it's a tough job. It doesn't hurt when somebody has a bad day to ring them up and say, "Look, I saw what happened to you. I saw the way the government treated you. My sympathies. I've been in your shoes." Building that kind of relationship is the foundation for it.

Don Weatherburn:

The second thing is, understand some of the constraints police are under. When police are invited to do an experiment with you, they're open to the possibility that things might not work out the way they thought.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They shoulder all the risk because you get a result out of it as an academic regardless of the outcome. You get something to publish. You get something to show, but they're shouldering all the risk.

Don Weatherburn:

Absolutely. And what's worse from their standpoint, they are being judged in terms of their crime reduction. So, if some strategy doesn't work, they can't turn around and say, "Oh, look. I know it didn't work, but I was doing an experiment."

So, you really need to work on the hierarchy at the same time as working on the local area commanders and saying, "Look, we're going to try something new here. It may work. It may not, but we need to encourage this kind of experimental approach to things if we're going to find out what's optimal."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When I did the Philadelphia Foot Patrol Experiment with police commissioner Chuck Ramsey in Philadelphia and mayor Michael Nutter, I briefed the pair of them before the experiment. As I'm talking to them, I'm thinking about all the risks that they are taking because the randomization showed that the highest crime foot patrol in the experiment was selected as a control, not as a treatment.

Don Weatherburn:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I was thinking, "Wow, these guys have got balls of steel because this could wrong."

Don Weatherburn:

Absolutely. And I think getting the police hierarchy onside to develop a culture of trial, experiment, and improvement, that's definitely the way to go. And sometimes the government will muck it up. I mean the state government, for example, told the police, they want crime down by 10% by 2020. Well, I can't do an experiment now. My head's on the chopping block. So, I think that's really important, but celebrate their successes. And if they manage to succeed in implementation, don't just walk away and write your article. Get down there and congratulate them for the job that they've done.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How do you deal with a certain portion of criminology who will then criticize you for being embedded with the police or it's just your part of the 'copaganda' or your part of big policing and you've been bought and paid for? How do you be similarly supportive for your research partners whilst maintaining that degree of independence?

Don Weatherburn:

Well, do we care what they say?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's a good fucking point, actually. [laughing].

Don Weatherburn:

I mean, I've been coping this for 30 years. I once made the horrific claim that crime had gone up. Oh, that was completely unacceptable. At one point though, I think it's really important. When you want to mount an operation,

you're involved in 30 possibly 100 people, and there can be a lot of slipping between the idea and the action. So, this is where qualitative research becomes crucial.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, absolutely.

Don Weatherburn:

If you've all agreed what you're going to do, you really need to make sure it was actually done the way you intended. We had a study a few years ago where police were going to pick up fingerprints and DNA evidence in some patrols and not in other patrols. And we found no effect, but we had this qualitative researcher checking and the cameras hadn't been handed out, and the fingerprint machines hadn't been obtained. They were too embarrassed to admit it. So, what had happened here was a failure of implementation.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I had an experiment that didn't work out for a whole bunch of good reasons, but because we were doing qualitative work, doing observational work, just spending time in police wagons, we learned so much about just the whole process of how officers deal with people who are having opioid overdoses in the transit system that it hugely informed the next piece of work that we were doing. And the next piece of work now looks completely different than we'd originally planned because we basically understand the system so much better. We understand why would a failed in terms of implementation. And we've hopefully designed something better this time around, and the qualitative research, the observations, the field work, that stuff has been absolutely essential in really informing the next project to make it a lot better.

Don Weatherburn:

And you are saying that with the experience of actually having been a serving police officer.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I know a lot about the Philadelphia cops, the patrol officers that work in the city, but the transit system is subtly different in enough ways that it makes a difference.

Don Weatherburn:

That's right. I mean, I think one of the things we've got to learn is that a lot of the effectiveness of various strategies is hugely context dependent. That doesn't mean every situation is unique, but there are enough variations from country to country and parts of a country to other parts to not rest on your laurels when you found something that works in Philadelphia, assume that it's going to work in Georgia or some other place that's quite different.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I always think if you found these studies somewhere else, you're absolutely right. You can't assume they're going to work where you are, but that study is certainly grounds enough to think about giving it a try-

Don Weatherburn:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

... and testing the results.

Don Weatherburn:

Absolutely. No, I mean, it's too easy to say, "Well, it worked in Philadelphia, but my city's different." Well, the presumption now is if it worked in Philadelphia, why would you think it wouldn't work? And the only way to answer that question is to do the research.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I've always come away from a conversation with you happier than I went into it. So, it's bloody good to see you, mate. And thanks for spending a bit of time with me. I really appreciate it.

Don Weatherburn:

Thanks for having me on. It's been a pleasure.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was episode 40 of Reducing Crime recorded online in September, 2021. New episodes are announced on Twitter @_reducingcrime. Instructors can also DM me for a spreadsheet of my multiple-choice questions for Reducing Crime episodes. And as always, you can find a transcript of this and every episode at reducingcrime.com/podcast.

Be safe and best of luck.