# TheCrimAcademy\_69\_Abt

■ Tue, Mar 28, 2023 1:20PM ■ 51:02

#### **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

violence, people, evidence, abt, community, strategies, crime, terms, research, question, area, gun violence, focused, addressing, anti violence, programs, gun, approaches, big, meaning

#### **SPEAKERS**

Thomas Abt, Jenn Tostlebe, Jose Sanchez



Jose Sanchez 00:00

Hi everyone, welcome back to the criminology Academy podcast where we are criminally academic. My name is Jose Sanchez,



Jenn Tostlebe 00:20

and my name is Jenn Tostlebe.



Today we have Thomas Abt on the podcast to speak with us about community violence and public dissemination of knowledge.



Ienn Tostlebe 00:28

Thomas Abt is the founding director of the Center for the Study and Practice of Violence Reduction (VRC) and an associate research professor in the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Maryland. Abt is the author of "Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violenceâ€"and a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets" (Basic Books, 2019). His work is cited in academic journals and featured in major media outlets, including The Atlantic, The Economist, The New Yorker, The New York Times, The Washington Post, CBS, CNN, MSNBC, and National Public Radio. His TED talk on community violence has been viewed more than 200,000 times. Abt also serves as a Senior Fellow with the Council on Criminal Justice in Washington, DC, where he chaired its Violent Crime Working Group, a diverse group of leaders dedicated to addressing the most pressing challenges concerning crime, violence, and justice. Prior to the Council, he worked as a Senior Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy and Law Schools. Before Harvard, Abt served as Deputy Secretary for Public Safety to Governor Andrew Cuomo in New York, where he oversaw all criminal justice and homeland security agencies. During his tenure, he led the development of New York's GIVE (GunInvolved Violence Elimination) Initiative, which employs evidence-based, data-driven approaches to reduce gun violence. Before New York, Abt served as Chief of Staff to the Office of Justice Programs at the U.S. Department of Justice, where he worked with the nation's principal criminal justice grant-making and research agencies to integrate evidence, policy, and practice. While there, Abt played a lead role in establishing the National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention, a network of federal agencies and local communities working together to reduce youth and gang violence. Abt has advised hundreds of public officials on the use of evidence-informed strategies and influences anti-violence policy at all levels of government, both domestically and abroad. All right, Thomas, thank you so much for joining us. We're excited to have you on the podcast today.

- Thomas Abt 02:31
  Great to be here.
- Jose Sanchez 02:32

  So I'm just going to provide a brief overview of today's episode. So the first topic that we're going to talk about is just a general discussion on urban violence, the next topic will be on evidence informed approaches to addressing violence. And our third topic will be about disseminating information that might be helpful for policymakers. So with that being said, Jenn, why don't you get us started?
- Jenn Tostlebe 02:58 Great. Thanks, Jose.
- Jenn Tostlebe 02:59

So as we mentioned, our first main topic is going to be on urban violence. But before we jump into that, we have a question for you, Thomas, about your career trajectory more broadly. We know you've been a prosecutor, you've worked with politicians, you've worked for the US government. And so with these background experiences, that would at least in my mind, or our minds put you more in line with practitioners rather than a straight academic? What is it like kind of rubbing elbows with criminologists who aren't always on the ground putting policies into action?

Thomas Abt 03:36

Well, it's mostly great. I'm back in academia, I'm at the University of Maryland. Now, I was at the Kennedy School, I left and now I'm back at Maryland. So I wouldn't have done that if I didn't think it was going to be fruitful and useful. I really enjoy the academic discussion. And I think that policymakers and practitioners don't do enough to engage with academia and vice versa. There are some disconnects. I often find that in the academic community, there's a strong bias towards novelty, and a strong bias towards things that can sort of demonstrate methodological

competence and things like that sort of not surprising, sort of towards a publication bias. Whereas out there in the real world, what we're often looking for is replication. We're looking to say, Okay, this is an interesting study, but what about external validity? Are those results generalizable? So sometimes the thing that's most valuable for public policy is not the thing that's most valuable in the academic world. But I think we all know that and it's still a very fruitful experience being in academia, and I like sort of this crude Ambassador role that I've sort of evolved into over the years.

# No. of the last

#### Jenn Tostlebe 05:00

Yeah, I definitely think it's important because like you said, I don't think there's enough of the reciprocation either way. So it's cool that you can kind of fill that role, or at least one of the many that are needed.

- Thomas Abt 05:12
  - Yeah, need many more than just me.
- Jose Sanchez 05:14

Let's go ahead and kind of start moving into talking about Research on Violence, like, you know, your area of expertise. There was a report by the Council on criminal justice, which I know you have been involved with, that found that there was a 30% increase in homicides in 2020. We've seen another increase in 2021. You know, this increase in homicides from 2019 to 2020. It's pretty large, although some might argue, maybe not terribly surprising, given that 2020 Was this really odd year in terms of we had the onset of COVID-19, which then intersected with the George Floyd protests. So 2020 was a very eventful year, maybe not in the best of ways. And so yeah,

- Thomas Abt 06:04
  Maybe? Just maybe?
- Jose Sanchez 06:06

Yeah. \*laughter\* But there's been some talk that, oh, this only happened in large cities, or that violence only increased in Democratic leaning areas. So our question to you is did this increase in deed only happen in specific locations, like bigger cities like Los Angeles, Chicago? Or was it more evenly dispersed across the United States and affecting a multitude of communities?

Thomas Abt 06:31

That's a great question. And the answer is that, no, it was very much a national trend. And so violence increased in blue states and red states, in cities run by Democratic mayors to those

run by Republican mayors. It increased in urban areas and suburban areas and in rural areas. There was a slightly more pronounced increase in urban areas, but it hit everywhere. Unfortunately, very few regions or locations or jurisdictions were spared.

# Jose Sanchez 07:03

So this question, like we're coming at you a little early with the big stuff, because I'm pretty sure that we're going to grapple with this question for quite a while. But what are some of the factors that you believe led to this increase in violence?

#### Thomas Abt 07:18

Sure. Well, I think that's the right framing, which is that I believe, because I think as many folks who are maybe listening to this podcast know, understanding crime trends is a notoriously difficult business. You know, the National Academy of Sciences a few years ago, convened a working group to try to understand the massive crime and violence decline that began in the 90s. And they convened the best and the brightest, and they struggled with it for months. And they couldn't come up with a better answer other than it was a bunch of things. We don't know which one was most important, and sort of identifying those things. So just understanding that unfortunately, at this point, there's not a sort of scientifically confident answer on questions like these.

# Thomas Abt 08:09

But that said, I think that and we documented this at the Council on criminal justice where I'm a senior fellow. I think that most sort of experts in this area generally settled on three interconnecting factors. The first, of course, is the pandemic, which both placed the individuals at the highest risk for violence under a disproportionate amount of strain. COVID, especially initially hit the most disadvantaged, the hardest, that's also the people who are at the highest risk for violence. And at the same time, it placed enormous strain on the institutions that we rely on for responding to violence. Obviously, that includes law enforcement, courts, corrections, but it also includes community based street outreach. It also includes hospitals, EMS, and it also includes all those sorts of social services that we depend on. Reason number one is the pandemic.

### Thomas Abt 09:09

Reason number two is the social unrest that followed the brutal murder of George Floyd. When you look at the data, you see a massive jump in violence immediately within days after the death of George Floyd. And that violence was not associated with protests, there was lots of property damage associated with protests, but people getting shot and people getting killed, that was happening in the communities where it was always happening. And we saw a massive surge in that. We don't really know why, but we know for sure it happened. And there's two leading explanations for why one is depolicing that in the aftermath of George Floyd and also in the aftermath of the death of Michael Brown, and other highly publicized incidents like Freddie Gray policing became much, much more difficult. And police in response reduced their

proactivity, their discretionary investigation and enforcement activities. The other theory is delegitimization. Basically, that for communities that already had lots of issues with law enforcement and maybe didn't trust them, this just reinforced that lack of trust, and that they sort of continued to offer even less cooperation, even less information, all of these things. And that likely lead to an uptick in retaliatory violence. Because if you're really, really not going to talk to the police, now, when you have an issue in your community, you're going to try to handle it yourself. So that's number two. That's the sort of the Floyd effect.

# Thomas Abt 10:46

And then number three is a massive surge in legal gun purchases. Lots of folks bought lots of guns during the pandemic. Record sales. And I initially was skeptical that that would have an impact. In the short run, I was really concerned in the long run. But if you look at sort of the data, the time to crime for a legally purchased gun is typically something like three to five years. Time to crime, meaning the time between which a gun is legally purchased, and it's recovered at a crime scene. I thought, no way these guns have made their way into sort of the wrong hands so fast. I was wrong about that. There's ATF data that shows that the time to crime for guns that were purchased during the pandemic is much shorter, and a much larger percentage of them went right into the wrong hands. And some people speculate and now this is really just speculation. Some people speculate maybe there was more trafficking or things like that. But it was probably because there were a lot of first time gun buyers and much less knowledgeable about how to keep and store and safeguard their weapons. We also saw a massive increase in motor vehicle theft. So a lot of these guns were stolen out of cars, when people couldn't bring their gun in to a certain location. They leave it in the glove compartment, car gets stolen, et cetera, et cetera. So those are the big three pandemic, social unrest, and guns.

Jose Sanchez 12:20

### Jenn Tostlebe 12:21

I'd heard the first two explanations before. Actually, this is the first time I've heard about the guns explanation, and that's wild that the time to crime decreased by that much. Yeah, it'll be interesting to see what explanation is kind of unfolding, from what you talked about. As for why that happened.

Thomas Abt 12:40 Yeah, I agree.

# Jenn Tostlebe 12:41

All right, so much of your research and recent talks that we know about, have really focused in

on urban violence. Here at the Crim Academy, we are big rans or definitions. And so this might be kind of a silly question. But can you provide a definition for what you mean by urban violence?

# Thomas Abt 13:00

Sure, I'll provide a definition. And then I'll tell you a little bit about how that definition has evolved. So when I wrote my book, Bleeding out: The devastating consequences of urban violence and a bold new plan for peace in the streets, very wordy title, I know, urban violence was the sort of best used term at the time. And I use that term because this was violence that happens predominantly in cities, not necessarily only large cities, but large, middle and medium and small cities. And it captured that there's a urban violence is sort of a confluence of street violence, gang violence, gun violence, youth violence, and that all of those terms highlight a particular aspect of urban violence, but it's all of those things. And ultimately, it's the violence that causes the most homicides in the United States every year. And it's the violence that happens between young men without a lot of opportunities for much hope, and not so young men. Actually, it's important to note. That said, that was where we were in 2017, 18, and 19 when the book was being written and published. Since then, some people don't like the term urban violence, they think it has a sort of buzzword connotation. And they worry that urban sort of is code for Black. And that wasn't a major concern as I was writing the book and trying to think about what was the right term, but the field has shifted. And so I now use the term community violence or community gun violence, because I'm sort of agnostic as to terms and if the term is troubling or concerning for a certain population, I don't need to use that term. I think sometimes we argue too much over terms and ultimately what the purpose of the book was. And the purpose of my work is, is to save lives by changing policy and practice, and if the words I'm using are tripping people up, I'll use different words.

### Thomas Abt 13:30

Okay, given that community violence happens primarily, like you mentioned in cities, not necessarily just large cities, and among typically disadvantaged and disenfranchised neighborhoods, some people may be thinking that it does not directly impact them, especially like people that may live out in like the suburbs, or outside of, say, like a downtown area. And so therefore, they don't really need to concern themselves with it all that much. What would you say in response to someone with that perspective, why and how community violence impacts maybe all of us, not just those specific neighborhoods where it might be concentrated?

### Thomas Abt 15:47

Yeah, I think this is a great question, because I think that community violence is often used as a sort of political football between the left and the right. And on the right, you see a tendency to sensationalize the violence to sort of create fear. And sometimes on the left, you see a tendency to sort of play it down, and to sort of dismiss the concerns. And obviously, the struggle is to get the right balance. So I think that it's true that community gun violence is concentrated among a surprisingly small number of people in places in jurisdictions all around the country. And so thankfully, most of us are not at direct risk for being involved in community gun violence. However, I think it's very important to understand that the issue more broadly impacts all of us. And I try to make that argument in terms of economics, and also try to make

it in terms of civics or morality. In terms of the economics, you know, there's good evidence suggesting that the total social cost of one homicide ranges anywhere from \$10 to \$19 million. And that's everything from the direct costs to the legal system, the medical system, lost wages, et cetera, et cetera. But it also captures all of the indirect costs, the costs of raised taxes, raised insurance premiums, all of the protective measures that people take to avoid being victims of crime. And probably the biggest dollar figure in terms of the indirect costs is decreased property values. There's some good research that shows you know, if you ever, if you have a homicide on a block, you can expect that the property values surrounding that block are going to drop in the next year and years. I argue that it's in every American's self interest to care about this, we're all impacted financially. But I also argue that it's in our interest as Americans to care about our fellow citizens and to care about our fellow human beings. I find it deeply disturbing that I live in Washington, DC, I'm in Northeast, and I live in a very safe area, but a mile, two miles away, maybe even less, gun violence is a real concern. Very few Americans are very far away. Maybe if you live in a rural area you are, but if you live in a city, gun violence is near you, I sort of try to convince people that this is an issue that we should all care about in a variety of ways.



#### Jenn Tostlebe 18:35

So related to you started mentioning this when you're talking about why urban violence matters. But one of the core topics you really discuss is how community violence is sticky. And you use that term specifically. So can you explain what you mean by the term sticky related to community violence? And then how it kind of relates to this idea of the law of crime concentration?



#### Thomas Abt 18:58

Sure. So I describe and I'm not sure that I'm the one who came up with it. I don't have that many truly original ideas. I'm more of a synthesist. Basically, I have been describing community violence as sticky for some time. And what I'm trying to get across is that community violence clusters among a surprisingly small number of people, places and behaviors. That clustering is why it's sticky. And that enables me to say, look, if you have a sticky problem, you need a sticky solution, you need a similarly clustered, a similarly focused, a similarly concentrated approach. I know I'm jumping ahead, but that's the way I use that. It's my way of describing to a broader audience the work of David Weisberg, as you mentioned, the law of crime concentration, the work of Larry Sherman, a lot of the people in this sort of place based policing hotspots policing area but then also a lot of folks on the people base side who have documented a concentration of offending among a surprisingly small number of people. And so that's a lot of what I do is gathering a bunch of research together, and trying to synthesize it and then explain what's important in ways that are somewhat accessible.



#### Jose Sanchez 20:21

Alright, so since we're starting to move in that direction, start talking about how we start addressing these issues. Clearly, it's critical that we actually address the issue. But as someone that tends to specialize a little more on programmatic responses to violence and things like gang violence, it seems that local leaders oftentimes are trying to find a solution, but they're

not entirely sure what that solution is. So they might just implement something for not necessarily the sake of implementing it, but because there's pressure on them to do something. Right. So you might have things. So that's how you get like these tough on crime policies, you might get the implementation of mentorship programs, job programs, gun buyback programs, can you give us an idea of what the state of evidence is for these programs? Do we actually know if they work?

# Thomas Abt 21:16

Yeah, that's a great overall question like what is our overall level of confidence with anti violence interventions, and I would say it's reasonably strong. We know that there are, you know, anywhere from maybe eight to 12, particular interventions, some are people based, some are placed based, some are highly focused on suppression, some are focused on deep prevention. But there are about 8 to 12 interventions in this space that you can identify, you can label either as promising or proven. What I argue in my book, and with my center and other places, is that cities need to find the right combination of these eight to 12 strategies, there's no one strategy. But I think that's somewhat of the challenge is we have reasonable confidence that there's a body of evidence that you can rely on in this space. But there's not a precise roadmap, step one, step two, step three that works for every jurisdiction. And that is hard for jurisdictions that might lack expertise in those things. And also, there is a temptation in many jurisdictions to shortcut and to sort of take actions that are sort of performative and that sort of look good or sound good, but aren't actually going to do much about the problem. And I think the reason for that is because a lot of politicians and policymakers actually don't really know the evidence, and really don't actually believe that they can do something about this issue. And so they are looking for ways to appear successful, but they don't actually think that they can be successful, they think it's beyond their control. And so that's something that sort of you have to break down. It's also not something that a lot of politicians would admit openly,

- Jose Sanchez 23:09
  - Right, sort of reminds me of this paper by Andy Papachristos. What's it called, Too big to fail? Too large to fail?
- Thomas Abt 23:18
  I know that one.
- Jose Sanchez 23:19

Yeah. Where he mentioned that academics and politicians are on two separate timelines, because as researchers, we can take our time to set up a study, develop our instrument, but politicians are sort of working in these very tight cycles, even if they know what the evidence is, if a program looks good, they might implement it, especially if they're starting to near like reelection, for example, like that might motivate some decision making with the types of programs. So I think it's pretty clear that we need to do something, we need solutions. We need good solutions. But something that seems to divide people is addressing some of the

arguments are well, some of these programs or some of these approaches. They're just bandaid, right? They're just sort of stopping the bleeding, but we're not exactly addressing the underlying issue the root cause. And so we should actually be addressing things like poverty. I think there's some people that say, Yeah, of course, we want to address poverty, but that's kind of a pipe dream. Like, we'll never really get rid of poverty. And so we want to get your thoughts on, would this be a good strategy? Is that even a viable strategy? And why or why not?

### Thomas Abt 24:31

Yeah, I mean, this is one of the things that comes up the most often in our work, which is the sort of critique that comes up the most from sort of those on the left, which is crime is just a symptom, you've got to address the underlying illness. And so you have to address structural racism, inequality, lack of opportunity, poverty, so on and so forth. You know, I'm a political progressive in my political career, I only have worked with Democrats. Although I do believe that the best policy in this area is nonpartisan. I'm firmly in favor of addressing all of these structural causes. But as an empiricist, I have to be willing to look at the evidence. And the evidence is guite clear that while there is a strong association, at particular points in time between all of these root causes, there is not a strong causal relationship. Meaning that yes, if you look in a cross sectional way, rich countries tend to have less violence than poor countries, rich individuals tend to commit less violence and experience less violence than poor individuals, all of those, and you know, you can do that type of comparison all throughout. But if you look at changes in wealth, changes in poverty, changes in inequality, what happens next that if/then causal relationship, much murkier, just look at poverty, crime declined during the Great Depression rose during the booming 60s held flat during the Great Recession, and has risen recently completely unrelated to poverty. We just have to acknowledge that we need to be able to do two things at the same time. And that these longer struggles to make our country more fair, more equal, are incredibly worthwhile, but they are not anti violence solutions in the short or even middle term.

### Jenn Tostlebe 26:33

Getting more into the empirics. Then, along with your colleague, Christopher Winship, you completed a systematic meta review of anti violence strategies you summarized over 1400 individual impact evaluations. For those who are interested, the review is titled: "What works in reducing community violence: A meta review and field study for the Northern Triangle." And so based off of this study, What strategies did you actually find worked the best for reducing community violence?

# Thomas Abt 27:05

So there's an interesting thing in the study, which is, what is the strength of the evidence? And what is the strength of the effect? How confident are we that something works or doesn't work? And how much does it work or doesn't work? So I would say the leading intervention that came out of that paper that was produced in 2016, and the evidence has only gotten stronger since then, in this area, is a strategy called focused deterrence, otherwise known as the group violence intervention or group violence reduction strategy. It's often called Ceasefire in individual programs. Got its started in Boston, has been done more than 30 or 40 times all

around the country over the past 30 years. And it's a strategy that brings together police service providers and community members to focus on the highest risk individuals. And then they basically collectively confront these individuals in groups and say, look, what you're doing is wrong, it has to stop. If you let us, we'll help you. If you make us, we'll stop you. And they offer a set of sort of carrots and sticks to get folks to change their behavior. That has a fairly strong body of evidence, there's about 24/25 tests of the strategy. And in more than 20 of them, it was successful, and particularly in reducing group and gang violence, it was successful 12 out of 12 times, and it has the largest effect size. I talked about this all the time. So I know the number is .657 in the Campbell systematic review. Folks don't need to know what that number means. But .657 in the world of criminology is a really large effect size. And it means like gun violence is dropping by like 40% 50% 60% over three years, four years, five years. That's sort of the leading strategy in terms of both evidence and effect size.

Thomas Abt 29:01

Another really powerful intervention is cognitive behavioral therapy. Cognitive behavioral therapy has a very large body of evidence behind it.

Thomas Abt 29:10

One of the criticisms I should just go back to of the evidence in favor of focus deterrence, is that it's all quasi experiments. There were very few true experiments or randomized controlled trials in that area, some of the biggest evidence snobs, often economists, sort of say I don't trust this body of evidence. I don't share those concerns. But just so you know, there are some people who sort of turn their nose up at that body of evidence.

Thomas Abt 29:39

Not so with cognitive behavioral therapy, maybe 10/20 randomised controlled trials in this area, very well studied and has a fairly large effect size, can reduce recidivism. Strong programs can reduce it by as much as 50%. And cognitive behavioral therapy is not sort of your mommy and daddy's Freudian therapy. It's very forward looking. It's all about sort of identifying particular mental habits you have that make you act out in certain ways. So it's a very practical way for people who usually it's about conflict management and anger management for people to identify when they're about to explode and how to avoid.

Thomas Abt 30:23

And then I think another sort of area of body of evidence that there's a very strong body of evidence for is hotspots policing and problem oriented policing. Basically, the sort of evidence based approaches to policing where you focus on a specific area, and you focus on a specific challenge in that area. And we have lots and lots and lots of research, some of which is done with randomized controlled trials, that that's effective. But here's the rub - small effect size. So we're very confident that hotspots policing and problem oriented policing work, but they don't work that great. So it's like a small effect size. So it's like 5% reductions, 10% reductions. One of the things I say is like, look, policing is always going to be a component of this, you're always

going to need an enforcement component to what you do. But it's not likely to generate strong enough results, that that's the only thing you do. So those are some takeaways. We've reviewed, as you said, over 1400, individual evaluations, so I could go on and on and on. But those are sort of three of the bigger ones.

Jenn Tostlebe 31:31

The sticky solutions.

Jose Sanchez 31:33

Very briefly not to get super technical, but you mentioned effect sizes, the biggest one being .657. So just very briefly, for our listeners, in the sciences, like the effect size of .1 to .2 is generally considered small .3 to .4, we would consider that like on the medium side, .5 and higher, we would consider that larger effect size. And those tend to be on the rare side for the social sciences. So when Thomas says something like .657, you know, that'll turn our head real quick, because you just don't see effect sizes that big, very often in the social sciences.

Jose Sanchez 32:11

Okay, so talking strategies, you just ran through a few of those. And so some of the strategies, like you mentioned, involve targeting hotspots, or what some would call quote, unquote, Hot People. So places or people that are responsible for the majority of community violence, or where community violence might be concentrated. Some of the questions that come up with these strategies are concerns over replacement, or this idea that if you take out one actor, a new one is just going to come and take their place to fill that void, or concerns regarding displacement. Meaning, once you start focusing your attention into one area, then the violence is just gonna move or trickle out to the surrounding areas.

Thomas Abt 32:55
And displacement concerns places.

Jose Sanchez 32:58

Right. And so are these valid concerns? Like is this something that we actually do need to worry about, like replacement or displacement?

Thomas Abt 33:05

There's certainly valid questions to raise. And it makes a lot of sense to sort of say, well, if the underlying conditions remain the same, and you persuade one shooter to put down the gun, won't another just take their place, or you calm down violence in one area, doesn't it just move around the corner, the quote, unquote, balloon effect. But we've studied this fairly carefully.

And we know that there is replacement and displacement, but it's quite modest. And in fact, the benefits of these initiatives often outweigh any displacement or replacement concerns. So meaning, if you do a effective anti violence strategy in one geographic area, it actually improves the violence in the surrounding areas, it doesn't push it to other places, most often. That's not always true. But generally speaking, replacement and displacement are not huge concerns. And when you think about it, and you understand this concentrated nature of violence, it makes sense. It takes a lifetime of trauma to create someone who's willing to pull the trigger, you know, so people don't just step up when someone stops that, and it takes decades of disinvestment to create a crime hotspot. And so again, that doesn't just happen overnight. And that's what you see in the literature, you see that these micro locations that we call hotspots where crime concentrates, these are not neighborhoods, this is an important point. It's much more concentrated than that. It's a particular housing project, its particular liquor store, its particular nightclub on a particular night. And these individuals, they're pretty stable over time. Sure, some crime hotspots sort of flare up and flare down, but it they're often durable for decades. Anthony Braga did a great study of this in Boston demonstrating this, but it's true for most other cities as well.

Jose Sanchez 35:09

Yeah, I know Braga also has a meta analysis showing that the areas that we're getting focused deterrence, the surrounding areas also saw some benefit of that approach.

Thomas Abt 35:20 Yes.

### Jenn Tostlebe 35:21

All right. So clearly there are some of these strategies being implemented in communities across the United States to reduce community violence. But at least from what I can tell, it's not being done nationally. And sometimes they don't always maintain public support. I'm just wondering if there are these good evidence based strategies that we know exist. Why is this the case? Why aren't they being implemented nationally? Why don't they maintain public support? You know, I think everyone wants to live in a place where they don't feel like themselves or their family members will be victimized. So just why is this so difficult to achieve?

# Thomas Abt 35:59

Sure, I think that I struggle with the same question. And I think one of the things that I sort of say is that it's not that we don't know how to reduce violence or haven't reduced violence. We reduce violence again, and again, and again, again. What we don't do is we don't sustain those approaches over time. One of the chief criticisms of focus deterrence is that it seems to work for three to five years, and then the program has some type of sustainability challenge. And some people say that's a criticism associated with that program. I think that's a criticism of every program. Show me a programmatic intervention that has a strong record of sustaining for

more than three to five to seven years. And I'll show you an outlier. And the reason is, is because programmatic interventions are sort of, by definition outside the normal course of business of government. And one of the things that I think is the criticism concerning this lack of sustainability shouldn't go to the programs, the programs have established that they can do what they say they're going to do. The criticism should be of government to say, government, why don't you make this sustainable? Why don't you take this on? Why don't you routinize these things? And I think the answer there is really sort of twofold. One is technical. These solutions, while they don't typically cost a ton of money, or require a bunch of legislation, they're hard to implement and they're quite sophisticated and quite technical, and so not so easy to sort of do. And if you're talented executive director leaves, there's not always a clear person with similar expertise to sort of step right in. So that's the first thing. The second thing is the politics. Most of the most effective anti violence solutions don't sort of conform to the political talking points of either the left or the right. So they have elements of toughness, they have elements of softness, they provide services and support, but they also insist on accountability. So no one's political base is completely satisfied by these strategies. And then the last thing I think we just need to be candid about, which is that community violence impacts the most disadvantaged, and the most disenfranchised people in our country, poor people of color. And when this problem is sort of hidden to the majority of us who are not directly impacted, we tend not to care. And I think there is a massive empathy gap in terms of this. And I think that, frankly, if community violence was happening in predominantly wealthy, predominantly white communities, you wouldn't see these sustainability issues. You know, you know that, you know, folks who are experiencing this feel this in their bones, they say, this country is capable of enormous things. We send people to the moon, we fight wars overseas, we do all of these incredible things. And yet, we can't seem to fix this. I really do think that we have to acknowledge that our sort of ugly history with regards to race and also class is holding us back with this.

Jose Sanchez 39:24 Yeah.

### Jenn Tostlebe 39:24

This might be kind of a difficult question to answer. But say we wanted to get these in play around the country and sustained over time. What do you think it would take to get that to happen?

# Thomas Abt 39:39

So I want to point out that there has been some significant progress in this area and some cause for optimism, which is the Biden administration has embraced anti violence approaches, both in terms of law enforcement and importantly community based approaches and is offering In funding at a level that has never been seen before. That's also happening in many states and also among philanthropy. I have never seen this much money in the anti violence field. And that's a good encouraging thing, it's going to take time for those investments to play out. And there is a significant risk that those funds could be mismanaged, and therefore not as effective. But I feel more hopeful in some respects, given all of the funding that's going into this area, I

think we're frankly, moving backwards on gun policy, which could also undo some of these investments. I mean, when I'm in states where the gun laws are being loosened, to the point where everybody has a right to carry a gun, concealed or otherwise, you really feel like you're swimming upstream. Law enforcement feels that way, the community based people feel that way. Sort of doing, it makes that work incredibly difficult, because now you're dealing with a situation where so many people are armed, and you have limited opportunities to do anything about that, you're not really allowed to disarm them in a lot of situations. And so that's a really challenging issue right now.

# Jose Sanchez 41:20

If only money could fix it, that'd be nice. But we have plenty of evidence showing why programs tend to be short lived, right? You know, like you mentioned, policies can impact it, then there's programs that are more comprehensive in nature, but trying to bring the different agencies and figureheads to the table, and to play nice that in and of itself is a giant hurdle that programs have to get over, right, because you have like the chief of police, that sees things one way, the head of probation that thinks he's a completely different way, you have the mayor that maybe has their own worldview that conflicts with everyone else's. So..

#### Thomas Abt 41:56

I also think that there's this in addition to this apathy, or empathy gap, there's also just the nature of violence itself. This is dark, dirty, ugly business. And most people don't want to focus on it. That's quite normal. When you step outside of law enforcement, most people who are involved in law enforcement accept this as part of their mandate. But outside of that, working with social workers who are now transitioning to an anti violence program, dealing with people who are dangerous, you know, a lot of people didn't sign up for that. A lot of mayors, they want to focus on the hope and change and optimism and all of these things. They want to get people jobs, and they want to get people graduated from school. And so it's not easy to keep people focused on this. And basically, as soon as the problem stops being a crisis, a lot of people are tempted to sort of turn away. And the challenge there is sort of described by Pat Sharkey in his book, uneasy peace, which is through great effort, you can suppress violence, and you can keep it low. But you have to keep it low for a significant period of time to change the underlying dynamics. The first thing you have is a sort of uneasy peace for troops. And if you release the pressure, either from law enforcement or from supports and services and other things, violence will come right back. And that's really the challenge is we don't do well enough on violence for long enough to change the underlying dynamics, meaning that folks in impacted community say, actually, we don't solve problems that way anymore. Because what happens is folks are like, No, we still do solve problems that way, just not right now. And if things change, we'll go right back to it.

# Jose Sanchez 43:55

Well, we want to spend the last few minutes that we have talking to you about public dissemination, you launched the new center for the study and practice of violence reduction at the University of Maryland. Can you tell us what made you decide to start the center and what your goals are for the center?

# Thomas Abt 44:13

So I sort of see the center as sort of the next step in a lot of my efforts to make a difference in this space. I worked in government on it. I've written a book about it. I've advocated for policies. And ultimately what I wanted is a platform to sort of work in all of those spaces at the same time. And so the center for the study and practice of violence reduction, it's a wordy title, but the reason I like it is because it describes exactly what we do. We study and we practice. We're about 50% focused on research and dissemination of research. And we're about 50% focused on the application of research and directly impacting practice. And So it's a great platform to keep doing this to keep doing this work.

#### Jenn Tostlebe 45:06

That's really cool that you have both sides, you can take the research that you've done and what you've learned and actually apply it or get that information out to people, I'm sure it's really rewarding, and probably is a nice change of pace from doing one side or the other, you get to do both.

# Thomas Abt 45:22

You know, we'll see. So I don't do this because it's rewarding, I do it and the other folks who work with me do it to make a difference. And just getting started. And we've had some early success. Our work has been well received so far. But the mission of the VRC, that's what we call it for short, is to save lives by stopping violence using science. And that's what we're focused on. And if we're not saving lives, we're going to have to take a hard look at what we do. And so that's really how we measure our success. And we try to do that through a combination of scientific rigor--that's one of our key principles--real world relevance, bringing folks in who have actually done the work and understand how to do it. And then political and financial independence, our job at the VRC is to sort of call it like you see it, and we don't sort of choose sides, we just go where the evidence takes us. So we don't have sort of pet programs or pet approaches.

# Jenn Tostlebe 46:21

So, the last question that we have for you, then is about public dissemination. And I think that's one of the goals you have in your own work like it is with ours on this podcast. We are really curious what you think about this question, how do we actually expand access to research about what works?

### Thomas Abt 46:40

I think it's not a inspiration question. I think it's a perspiration question. It's not rocket science on how to do it, we just need to do it. And it's more work to do it. But I think it's very much worthwhile. So basically, what we need to do is we need to make sure that any research that is worth noting in academia as a one to two pager that can describe it for broader audiences. And

then we have to make sure that those one to two pagers get out to lots of different groups and organizations and those things. And we need to be responsive when people want to engage with us about that research. I think there's a really challenging sort of timeframe issue. I think you raised it earlier, which is academics work slowly, policy and practice folks work quickly. I think that the way to bridge that is by once research is finished, synthesizing it and summarizing it so it can be quickly given to someone else. I don't think that means you speed up the research process, and you know, compromise quality. But the point is that once the research is done, you should have something that you can send to someone in 15 seconds that they can read in five minutes so they know what your study meant. And everybody should have that for their work at their fingertips. So that's a little bit about how to do it. But you know, that requires doing the work. And it requires thinking about an audience who doesn't think about the work the same way you do. Not all academics are comfortable giving an elevator pitch and saying you have two minutes to tell me what your work is and why it's important. But people need to practice that.

- Jose Sanchez 48:24

  Definitely something I could do better.
- Jenn Tostlebe 48:26

  I like the idea of the one to two pager.
- Jose Sanchez 48:30

  Those are all the questions we have for you today. Thank you so much for taking time out of your day to sit and speak with us. We really appreciate it. Is there anything you'd like to plug anything that we should be on the lookout for in the future, either from you or the VRC?
  - I would just say that the VRC, probably towards the end of this year is going to come out with some very important research. We're going to update the systematic meta review that we discussed here. And so we will have 2023 results of the latest on what works to reduce community violence, you know, and that'll be another massive review. And we are going to publish the first ever systematic review of street outreach strategies, which Jose I know that you're very interested in and involved in. And it hasn't been done before. It's an incredibly important strategy. And it's really important that we sort of know what the evidence says about it. And so we're looking forward to that as well. And we'll continue to produce research that is available for free in accessible formats for policymakers and practitioners. Our website is just kind of a placeholder right now, but we're going to be building and building and building as we go.
- Jose Sanchez 49:46

Thomas Abt 49:51

Folks can reach out to me at Maryland, my email is on our website. As some folks know, I can't seem to stay off Twitter. So, you can regularly see me getting dumped on by the hard left and the hard right on Twitter.

Jose Sanchez 50:06

We'll put that information in the description as well. Thank you again. We really enjoyed our conversation with you. We appreciate it.

- Thomas Abt 50:13
  Oh, it was a pleasure. All right. Take care, guys.
- Jenn Tostlebe 50:16

  Bye.
- Jose Sanchez 50:17 Bye.
- Thomas Abt 50:17 Bye.
- Jenn Tostlebe 50:18

  Hey, thanks for listening.
- Jose Sanchez 50:20

  Don't forget to leave us a review on Apple podcasts or iTunes. Or let us know what you think of the episode by leaving us a comment on our website, thecriminologyacademy.com.
- Jenn Tostlebe 50:29

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Or email us at thecrimacademy@gmail.com. See you next time!