Probable Causation Bonus Episode 5: Thomas Abt

David [00:00:06] Hello and welcome to Probable Causation, the show about law, economics and crime. I'm your host, David Eil and my guest today is Thomas Abt, who is a senior fellow at the Council on Criminal Justice. He has served as deputy secretary for public safety to Governor Andrew Cuomo in New York, where he led development of New York's gun involved violence elimination initiative, which employs evidence informed, data driven approaches to reduce gun violence. He's also the author of "Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence and a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets" published earlier this year and the topic of our conversation today. Mr. Abt, welcome to the show.

Thomas [00:00:46] It's a pleasure to be with you.

David [00:00:48] So my first question is why is now a good time to publish this book? You notes early on in the book that we're at a low point for violent crime in the United States compared to previous decades. Is this still a problem that we should be really worried about?

Thomas [00:01:04] Absolutely. It's a good question, and a lot of it depends on your baseline. Today, homicide rates are about half of what they were 25 years ago, but if you go back another 25 years, they're essentially the same. That means that there's been 50 years with no progress whatsoever. In addition, we continue to remain a real outlier among rich nations. Our homicide rate is roughly seven times higher than the average. So I believe that there's still a great deal of work to be done. These homicides cause havoc in our urban communities of color and it's not only the leading cause of death for, for instance, young black men. It kills more young black men than the nine other leading causes of death combined.

Thomas [00:01:49] So while white America, over time, has been able to insulate itself somewhat from urban violence, poor black and brown people continue to suffer with it. I'd also note that that in the book I argue for sort of putting violence first, not in terms of importance, but in terms of sequence based on the evidence that I review in the book look, we can reduce urban violence by more than 50% in cities without new laws or big budgets and doing so will make all of our broader social and economic justice efforts easier. So reducing violence is a complement to these broader efforts, not a substitute for them.

David [00:02:28] So you said you put it first in sequence. You know, which I take to mean first addressed violence and then once that problem is solved, move on to other, less pressing problems. How should we think of, you know, when it's solved? So I guess this ties in somewhat with my first question of, you know, is it still a problem? At what point would you kind of declare victory and say, you know, we can, you know, still worry about violence, then move on to putting a lot of emphasis on other things, too?

Thomas [00:02:59] Well, I guess I want to resist the idea that you focus on violence to the exclusion of other things. I'd sort of argue the opposite, which is that you don't push for broader efforts to address root causes to the exclusion of narrower efforts that actually, the evidence shows, can have a real impact on violence today and so while I'm saying put it first, what I mean is that all of your other efforts to improve life in urban America, addressing poverty, addressing the economic welfare of distressed communities, reducing improving physical and mental emotional health, improving education and and and housing, all of these things are easier when high rates of violence are controlled.

David [00:03:53] And in fact, as I argue in the book, high rates of urban violence are sort of the if concentrated poverty is a not, then urban violence is the thread that is pulling the various strings of that knot tight and so ultimately, to loosen that knot we need to address violence. But that doesn't mean that violence is the only thing we should be working on. I just want to sort of make sure that in terms of sequence, it's something that we're addressing first, not to the exclusion of other things, but but alongside other things.

David [00:04:29] Let's talk more about the kind of focusing narrowly on. Yeah, I think it's a theme of your book that, you know, the solutions should be addressed to where crime is most concentrated and as you say, a lot of the victims of violent crime are minorities, poor people, but those are also many of the suspects and perpetrators of crimes. And in, you know, policing those communities more heavily are focusing on violence reduction in efforts on those communities more heavily. Civil rights advocates worry that that will have negative impacts on black and brown people, and they worry also about the kind of loss of privacy that comes with, you know, preventative policing, more worried people might, you know, phrase it as surveillance or something. So where does kind of your project kind of cordon off those kinds of worries or avoid those kinds of problems?

Thomas [00:05:38] Right. So, you know, I'm not talking about a particular project or a particular intervention. I'm talking about a set of evidence and community informed strategies that collectively can significantly reduce urban violence so it's not a silver bullet solution. There's a number of elements to the strategy, but in terms of but a key element to any of those strategies is focus. And focus is warranted because overwhelmingly the evidence evidence shows this, that urban violence is sticky, meaning that it concentrates among a surprisingly small number of people and places. And not surprisingly, to address a sticky situation, you need a sticky solution, meaning one that targets demographic and geographic concentrations of violence.

Thomas [00:06:27] Now I get the concerns that some in the civil rights community have raised, but ultimately I think they're misplaced. It's really no secret who these individuals are. They typically have been arrested, incarcerated and even shot multiple times. They're well-known to the community and to law enforcement already focusing on these individuals who are already known. That means not resorting to the indiscriminate stop searches and arrests that I believe are the true threats to the rights of those who live in these impacted communities and perhaps not surprisingly, that's why people in these communities, contrary to some of these civil rights advocates who say they represent the interests of these communities, these people actually support these kinds of strategies.

David [00:07:16] So elaborate a little bit more on on the kinds of strategies here you're talking about. I know you've got a whole book about it, so there's I don't expect you to detail everything, but if it's not, you know, this kind of comprehensive stop and frisk strategy, what are the kinds of things that you're thinking about?

Thomas [00:07:33] Right. So basically, the evidence tells us that in a city, let's say in a medium, in a medium to large sized city, violence is not perpetrated in an evenly distributed way among classes of people, poor people, racial minorities or otherwise. It's it's perpetrated by a tiny subset of people in places. And so, for instance, in a medium sized city, it'll be, you know, a few hundred people and it concentrated around a few dozen hot spots.

Thomas [00:08:06] And so it's there where your efforts, both in terms of enforcement and prevention, need to be focused. Now, next, in addition to the principle of focus, which is critical, there's also the principle of balance, meaning that you have to have both enforcement and non-enforcement approaches to these people in places, meaning you have to have a set of sticks, but also carrots, disincentives and incentives to change people's behavior around violent offending and finally, you need to pay attention to fairness. Fairness means that in this sort of ongoing crisis of confidence that we're having in American criminal justice, we need to pay close attention to legitimacy and make sure that whatever we're doing in the name of reducing violence in these places and with these people, it has to be perceived to be fair and legitimate by impacted communities. So those are basically the three, three themes of the book focus, balance and fairness.

David [00:09:07] I want to talk a little bit, too, about how the notion of fairness in your book relates to that kind of procedural fairness that you talk about, how that relates to criminal procedure in the law as we know it, which I guess the idea there too, is to generate fair rules, but a lot of the kinds of programs and procedures that you're suggesting in your book are not really like that. They're not so formal. You know, they involve, you know, for instance, as you say, you know, characterizing people who are high risk because of their previous arrests and, you know, how they're known in the community, I guess. But that's not a, you know, judicial determination that can be challenged or something. So is there just kind of a different idea of fairness that's embodied in your procedural fairness compared to the one that's embodied in the Code of Criminal Procedure, or is it just kind of two different ways of addressing fairness that are adapted to their different demands?

Thomas [00:10:18] I don't really believe that they diverged in any significant way. You know, I'm currently a researcher, but I'm a former prosecutor, a former criminal defense attorney as well. You know, generally speaking, fairness is a matter of law and as a matter of policy are aligned and consistent with one another. Many of the concerns about the GVRS that's the group violence reduction strategy, which is also known as focus, deterrence or ceasefire, the concerns result from a misunderstanding of the strategy. Under no circumstances using that strategy is anyone ever arrested, charged or convicted with a crime that they didn't commit. The GVRS is a strategy where the police and community join hands to put the highest risk individuals and groups on notice that their violent behavior will not be tolerated, but if that violence stops, that they will be embraced and welcomed back into the community with supports and services. So if anything, targeted strategies like the GVRS are more legally and procedurally fair than any of their over generalized counterparts, such as zero tolerance policing.

David [00:11:31] I want to get back to something that you mentioned earlier that's, I think, important for understanding your book, that it's both evidence informed and community informed. And I think ideally in a democracy, we would like to think that the communities of, you know, priorities and views and proposed solutions are based on, you know, evidence and reasonable interpretations of it, but, you know, sometimes in a democracy, those diverge. Do you see particular tensions between being community informed and evidence informed, or is that not really a tension that has to be negotiated that often?

Thomas [00:12:11] Well, I think there can be tension initially, and you certainly have to work through it, through it. But ultimately, I think both constituencies, academics and community members are seeing the same phenomenon through different lenses and this was something that I was surprised to learn when researching my book. I found that the academy and the community were largely in agreement about what works and what doesn't when it comes to reducing violence and the three fundamental principles advanced

by the book for violence reduction, focus, balance and fairness, I believe, are broad concepts that researchers and residents can both get behind.

David [00:12:51] And kind of turning to the evidence informed part. A lot of the evidence that you say in your book is is meta studies. And you say that, you know, you rely on them because they're aggregating a bunch of different studies and maybe the errors in one will be balanced out by the errors and another and they kind of get washed out in the average, but some common criticism of meta studies is that you're kind of averaging together maybe high quality studies with possibly many more low quality studies and the higher quality the results could get kind of washed out by poorer quality results. Is that something you worry about when you're reading meta studies?

Thomas [00:13:39] Well, in the book I rely largely on evidence produced by systematic reviews, which I think is a more rigorous subset of meta studies. And these reviews exhaustively gather and rigorously interpret the results of multiple studies, as you said. And these reviews are now widely regarded as providing the strongest and most reliable evidence of what works when it comes to evaluating programs and policies like I do in the book. I think there's a pretty, pretty established consensus on that fact. That said, the quality of these reviews can vary, and that's why my colleague Chris Winship and I, when we did this research at Harvard, we used only the highest quality systematic reviews when performing the research that the book is largely based on.

Thomas [00:14:30] We used a tool called AMStar to assess the methodological quality of the reviews before they were included in our study. So high quality reviews generally only include high quality, quasi experimental and experimental studies. So they're not including studies with of poor quality and just hoping that they cancel each other out, as you said. But importantly, they also typically perform a moderator analysis to determine whether the results vary based on study to design, and then they transparently report out on that analysis. So basically, the concern that you raise is definitely a valid one, but it's one that we were aware of and addressed from the start of our work.

David [00:15:16] And then I guess a separate concern is, you know, once you've figured out what works, it can be hard to implement it even if you have policymakers bought in. Because in the American system, street officers have a significant amount of discretion and, you know, might not always go along with what they hear from their superiors. Is that something that, you know, you worry about in the implementation is that you're not sure how, you know, the just typical entry level officer is going to is going to enact the policies.

Thomas [00:15:53] Well, it's it's an obstacle to be sure. I mean, this is a question of implementation fidelity. And it's true not just for policing, but for all aspects of violence reduction, including prevention and intervention. So it's not just about police officers using discretion, but social service providers, public health providers, educators, all the other people who are involved in this. So it's I just want to point out that many of the strategies in the book, as I'm suggesting, don't actually involve law enforcement, street outreach doesn't involve them, cognitive behavioral therapy doesn't, and neither does home visitation or early parent training programs, all of which are included in the book now.

Thomas [00:16:39] And so this notion of balance that I'm arguing for in the in the book is not achieved just by moderating police efforts and therefore sort of vulnerable to, you know, discretion and implementation issues in policing, but it's also balance is also achieved by supplementing policing efforts with evidence, informed prevention and

intervention strategies. And as I said, it can't be all sticks. There have to be carrots as well. If we want people to stop shooting, we need to give them positive lifestyle alternatives.

David [00:17:14] And another kind of implementation question is if maybe the I mean, it would ideally be the case that when you find something works in one place, you'll know that it works in another place. But of course places are not so homogenous, and it may be that places differ in such a way that what works one place may not work in another place. Have you found that to be a common problem, or does it is it generally the case that programs are kind of transportable in that way?

Thomas [00:17:48] As a general matter, these programs are actually quite. Transportable, but there are some important caveats. So external validity or generalizability is always an issue when it comes to replicating evidence informed interventions, but with regard to urban violence, we see that that type of violence looks strikingly familiar context to context. So this is true absolutely to the case in the United States. The violence in Baltimore looks similar to the violence in Detroit and St Louis and etc., etc., etc., but I've worked all over the world. I've been to Brazil, to El Salvador and the barrios that I've been to in Favelas and ghettos. They look similar all over the world. And what I see is that urban violence in particular looks very much the same wherever you go.

Thomas [00:18:41] It's perpetrated by disadvantaged and disenfranchised groups of young men don't have a lot of hope or opportunities. Now, in terms of the caveats, we do need to be careful because while urban violence looks similar place to place, there are many places, particularly in Latin America, that suffer from much more organized forms of violence and that can be perpetrated by cartels or gangs or even the government itself. And we have to be transparent that the strategies contained in bleeding out don't speak to those types of violence. They require different strategies. And while the problem of look of urban violence looks similar place to place, the capacity for solutions varies dramatically. So for example, if we tried the GVRS in South Africa and it didn't work, it would likely not work because ultimately the state couldn't provide the proper blend of punishments and supports, not because the urban violence in Cape Town or another city was unique in some way.

David [00:19:47] So as you say, you've been all over the world and I'm sure talked to a lot of policymakers about these issues. What's been your experience pitching these kinds of ideas to policymakers? Who's resistant to it, who's open to it, and kind of where does the conversation go from there?

Thomas [00:20:08] Sure. I would say that the progress to date on pitching these policies after the book has been so far so good. So Elizabeth Warren, Joe Biden and the March for Our Lives group have all included my national plan as part of their broader gun violence efforts. So that's very encouraging. And I've been engaging with many cities and they've been supportive as well and my general experience is that the closer people are to violence, the more supportive they are of the strategies contained in the book.

Thomas [00:20:42] In cities like Baltimore and St Louis, people get it. Folks are dying and they need relief right away and they're not interested in arguments, they're interested in solutions. You know, there's more resistance from politicians, advocates and activists who are further removed. They tend to see these issues again as arguments to be won, not problems to be solved and that's really the most common roadblock is this lack of urgency. If urban violence isn't impacting you or your community directly, it's easy to get distracted with abstract arguments about equality or fairness or culture or any of these other cause

issues. I am fully supportive of having those discussions, but they shouldn't stop us from saving lives today.

David [00:21:32] It is interesting to me that criminal justice seems often to be an area where you have odd alliances of, you know, Democrats and Republicans, right and left, etc., etc., who for whatever reason have concerns that that align either on issues of preventing violence or on civil liberty type issues. Do you have any particular suggestion for, you know, bridging kind of partisan or otherwise political divides and, you know, coming together on formulating a solution to reduce violence?

Thomas [00:22:15] You know, I think that you're right that there are some very odd bedfellows. The Koch brothers, you know, working closely with progressive groups like the Brennan Center and others, all to promote criminal justice reform and reduce mass incarceration. And so that's I would say that's those uneasy alliances are generally cautiously a good thing and and one of the interesting things about the most effective strategies to reduce violence and one of the political obstacles to them is they are not particularly aligned with any political constituency, meaning they sort of challenge the priors of hard core conservatives and hard core progressives. You know evidence informed strategies often have an enforcement component that makes many progressives uncomfortable. They also have a strong services and support component that makes some conservatives uncomfortable. And so, you know, creating a middle space where the evidence and the community can sort of drive the discussion is important.

David [00:23:36] So if you were a mayor, say, and you were a mayor who wanted to implement the bleeding out program, but you need people to do it and you're in your group and even outside the government to cooperate with and your book describes kind of, you know, practically how of community might go about this. What are the kinds of people you'll be looking for, like either their backgrounds or their just personality traits? Would it vary by the kind of role you want them in? Like who? Who is ideal to recruit for this this project?

Thomas [00:24:17] Sure. I mean, you use the use the qualifier. If I'm frequently asked these questions by mayors and deputy mayors about how to staff up these efforts. So in generally speaking, what I say is that the most successful people in this field can work with all of the stakeholders who are involved in this work. So to be effective, you have to be able to authentically relate to and communicate with diverse constituencies like researchers, policymakers, police and prosecutors, community leaders, and even criminals sometimes. And you also have to be relentlessly and pragmatically focused on doing what works to save lives and keep folks free and out of jail. So you have to operate again with that sense of urgency. So those are the types of people who are the most effective leaders of of this inherently multidisciplinary work. And then, of course, you need to support those leaders with specialists from every sector.

David [00:25:23] And then my last question, which I try to ask of all Probable Causation, guess many of our listeners are either are or are training to be social scientists. What do you think are the major open research questions in this field that you hope scholars will address in the future?

Thomas [00:25:41] Sure. So, you know, when researching this book, I found that the the evidence base in support of these basic principles of focus and balance to be incredibly robust, supported by hundreds of experiments and quasi experiments. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case with the principle of fairness. In that area the evidence was merely

suggestive, not determinative. So I believe we need more and better studies of legitimacy, what it means and how to build it up over time. Procedural fairness, as I note in the book, has the strongest base of evidence in this area so far, but we need to continue studying it, and other aspects of legitimacy are more.

Thomas [00:26:30] And, you know, I would also sort of make, you know, stepping back, I would also make the case for being what I call an impact researcher. I would I would strongly recommend to your listeners that they study the real world, that they focus on real problems and that they partner with real people such as practitioners in the field. I recommend that they don't get too comfortable in the ivory tower, that they go out there and get their hands dirty. That, in my view, is the best way to make a positive difference in the world.

David [00:27:03] Great. My guest today has been Thomas Abt. His book is "Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence and a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets." Mr. Abt, thank you so much.

Thomas [00:27:14] It's been a pleasure. Thank you.

David [00:27:22] You can find links to the research we discussed today on our website, probablecausation.com. You can also subscribe to the show there or wherever you get your podcasts to make sure you don't miss a single episode. Big thanks to Emergent Ventures for supporting the show and thanks to our Patreon subscribers. The show is listener supported, so if you enjoy the podcast, please consider contributing via Patreon. You can find a link on our website. Our sound engineer is Caroline Hockenberry with production assistance from Elizabeth Pancotti music is by Warner, and our logo is designed by Carrie Throckmorton. Thanks for listening.