

## #73 (CYNTHIA LUM)

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### Jerry Ratcliffe:

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

A former Baltimore City police officer and detective, Professor Cynthia Lum, is a leading authority on evidence-based policing and policymaking having co-authored one of the seminal works in the area. We talk about evidence-based policing, implementing innovation, and how to overcome some of the barriers to progress.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

This is Reducing Crime. I'm your host and my name is Jerry Ratcliffe. If you know anything about evidence-based policing, you will at some point have read Cynthia Lum and Chris Koper's seminal 2017 book Evidence-Based Policing: Translating Research into Practice. You could also skim my 2023 book Evidence-Based Policing: the Basics. Huh. Yeah, getting my shameless plugin early. But Lum and Koper's book really brought evidence-based policing to many people for the first time. Dr. Lum is a distinguished university professor of Criminology, Law and Society at George Mason University. She also directs their Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy. She's an appointed member of the National Academy of Sciences Committee on Law and Justice, an appointed trustee to the Council on Criminal Justice and a board director for the National Policing Institute. And before all of that, she was for five years a Baltimore City police officer and detective. These days, she continues to contribute to the field by being the editor-in-chief of Criminology and Public Policy. That's the American Society of Criminology's Flagship Policy Journal, in case you didn't know.

And is the founding editor-in-chief of Translational Criminology Magazine, which publishes easy to read policy relevant crime prevention work. The magazine is available for free online. Cynthia finally broke down to my persistent pestering and overcame some trepidation about podcasts, which I didn't take too personally, to squeeze in an hour with me a few days before the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy Symposium, which she was organizing back in June. As you join us, we are discussing whether sitting outside a Starbucks in the DC suburbs was even a good location choice to record the episode.

### Cynthia Lum:

Jerry, I don't know. Is this a good spot?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It's the spot we've got.

**Cynthia Lum:**

That's right.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Inside is too echoey, outside was great. I came up here and it was super quiet, and now every truck in the whole of the DC suburbs-

**Cynthia Lum:**

The whole building up there is moving.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And on top of this, you're trying to organize the conference.

**Cynthia Lum:**

I know. I'm excited about it.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

The one-day symposium.

**Cynthia Lum:**

Every two years now we do the conference because it just got too big. We outgrew our pants in many ways.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You're a victim of your own success.

**Cynthia Lum:**

Well, I don't know about that, but the CEBCP symposium is big. It's one day and it goes off without a hitch. People might think, "Oh, this is simple, right?" We spend a year preparing for it.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Well, I've already been on two, I think, planning calls with you. You're almost like the FBI at this point. At this point, we're having pre-meeting meetings. It used to just drive me nuts with those guys. I mean, they're great. I love the bureau, but they're like, "Can I have a meeting about the meeting that's coming up next week?"

**Cynthia Lum:**

That's exactly right. We want to be prepared, right? And it's curated and we want folks to come and see evidence-based crime policy at its best light.

# REDUCING CRIME PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

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**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So why the hell have you got me there then?

**Cynthia Lum:**

Because Jerry, you're one of the most important people evidence-based police. Oh no, I'm serious.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

No, shut up. All praise will be redacted and removed from this.

**Cynthia Lum:**

Let me tell you why this is so important.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Nope. This episode is about you, mate.

**Cynthia Lum:**

Yes, but let me say this. You're important.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I'm going to edit this out.

**Cynthia Lum:**

I understand, but I want to say this to you. You're really important to me. I mean, people that are ex-cops, I mean-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

We're a rare breed.

**Cynthia Lum:**

That's right. But you're a senior person in this area. There's not a lot of-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That's code for old, isn't it? Thanks.

**Cynthia Lum:**

It is. It is code for old.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You've just had a big birthday too, and now you're just rubbing my nose in it.

**Cynthia Lum:**

I know. I know. It is a big birthday, but I'm serious. It's important to have people that know policing and that care about its reform and that also think about the intellectual side of it.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It's interesting, especially when we see where criminology and criminal justice is going right now. I wouldn't consider it right now to be an encouraging place for people who are in policing to think about doctoral education or even postgraduate education in many places. I mean, you start to think about where would be an encouraging place to go and be a scholar of policing from a policing background in the US and there'd be like four or five places I'd mention, and that would be it.

**Cynthia Lum:**

But if we want reform, we have to push forward with this. We have an international summer school for policing scholars, that's in July in Australia actually, and we do it because we're trying to encourage and foster policing scholars. If you're going to have reform, how are you going to do that without younger folks taking on the charge to study it, to think through it? Everything about it is hard.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Well, I think because especially as you have a policing background as well, you don't make it well known.

**Cynthia Lum:**

Probably because I was a mediocre cop.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

We're all mediocre. I am sure that wasn't the case.

**Cynthia Lum:**

Nobody was giving me medals for being the best cop in the world.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

But back then nobody did that kind of stuff anyway.

**Cynthia Lum:**

I did get a commissioner's medal once.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

There you go. That's more than I ever got. But what did they say? Only the mediocre at their best every day. No, but I think it's important to show people in the practitioner field in evidence-based medicine, for example, you wouldn't think twice about the fact that medical practitioners are also doing evidence-based medicine. But if academia keeps pushing policing scholars out and pushing them away, I worry what's going to happen is that the reform agenda is going to be left to people who are completely divorced from and outside of policing and don't understand it. And I think we are a little harder to write off because we know policing a little bit better.

**Cynthia Lum:**

And we also know the science too, which is important. I mean, I used to wonder about how my policing experience had anything to do with my academic life. I couldn't figure that out very well. And you know how it is in academia. You come from a policing background, people think you're not as great of an academic.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

In my case, they're right, but that's another story.

**Cynthia Lum:**

In the policing world, you come in with academic background, they're like, "Oh God, another one of these folks," so you're screwed either way. And it took me a while to think through how my policing experience really mattered, but where it matters is in the details. I think as cops, we kind of know... Hi, dog.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Kujo, calm down.

**Cynthia Lum:**

It sounds like some of the police dogs I know. Policing scholars know about the details and you can't pull the wool over our eyes about these details and these details have to do with just everyday little things that cops are doing on the street. I remember them clearly to this day, and this was 20 some years ago that I was a cop.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Even though we might find things that don't work that well, you actually care about improving policing and making it better.

**Cynthia Lum:**

I know so many policing scholars that are really good that get into that nitty-gritty detail that really study the details about things. Chris, of course,

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Of course, your partner, Chris Koper. Who'd have thought he would have a curve named after him?

**Cynthia Lum:**

I meant to get through this whole podcast without talking about the Koper Curve. All right? I'll go in-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

We made it like three minutes.

**Cynthia Lum:**

Let me tell you. I'll go into a police department, I'll spend a whole day with them working on evidence-based policing, talking about all these details, et cetera, et cetera. Eyes glazed over. Some of the cops are like, "Who is this girl?" Right?

I'll mention Koper Curve, they're like, "Oh, is he coming today?" I'm like, "You know what, people? I just spent five hours with you."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Okay, that's fantastic.

**Cynthia Lum:**

Oh, my gosh. When you're thinking about policing reform, you can't do it without knowing the nitty-gritty. And let me also say, none of this is sexy, okay? So you won't ever find me coming up with some huge finding that goes viral that millions of people are talking about. Why? Because I'm very much concerned with just everyday things that the police are focused on.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

But that's so important because I like doing a lot of field work where I can, because that's where I get ideas from, because it's what frontline cops are doing.

**Cynthia Lum:**

It's where you learn.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It's where you learn, "Oh, that shit ain't going to work." It's where you also go, "Oh, that's a good idea. Do you see what they were doing there? Or do you see where that problem was? We could fix that." Incremental change isn't sexy, but I'm a big fan of incremental change because these big sweeping changes that people want to make, it's like, "Do you want to tell me what the consequences are likely to be before we go rushing off and do that?" Big fan of the incremental change.

**Cynthia Lum:**

I am too. I get a lot of joy when cops that I'm working with all of a sudden you can see the light bulb going off in their mind, or they take a risk and they try something that's out of their routine, and I see their intellectual side. I always tell people like, "Policing to me is an intellectual profession." I don't mean that in an academic sense. I mean that it involves thinking. You have to think through things. You have to engineer things.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So you just had a big birthday, so congratulations.

**Cynthia Lum:**

Thank you very much.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You look great for 21.

**Cynthia Lum:**

Thank you so much. I'm going to early retire at 25.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Fantastic. That's what we all want to do, isn't it? You don't make a big thing about your policing career. I don't know. I think you should a little bit because it's not like you did two weeks in the job. You spent five years in the job and you weren't in the Mickey Mouse department either. I mean, Baltimore back in the day-

**Cynthia Lum:**

Baltimore City.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Baltimore City Police Department back in the day was a hell of a place. How did you end up there?

**Cynthia Lum:**

People ask me this question all the time. My answer is so sad. I tend to make decisions in my life based on just whims.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

We won't tell Chris this.

**Cynthia Lum:**

Oh, that's a good one. I make decisions based on whims and passions and things that I'm interested in at the moment, and I think I get this from my parents. As immigrants, they were very adventurous people. My dad has a fantastic story of how he survived World War II and then made it here and ultimately helped build the Apollo series and the Space Shuttle. I was of course his favorite child, don't put that on the podcast, but I never knew anything about criminology when I was in college.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

What did you study in college?

**Cynthia Lum:**

Political science and economics. I went to UCLA and it was just happen chance that I ended up at the London School of Economics. So I go knock on Paul Rock's door and he says, "Hi." I said, "Hi, I am Cynthia." And so I asked him if I could join his master's program in criminology and the sociology of deviant, and he said, "Well, do you know anything about criminology?" And I'm like, "No."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Way to sell yourself, Cynthia.

**Cynthia Lum:**

I know, I know. Jerry, nobody ever accused me of being the sharpest tool in the shed, okay? I know this is horrible.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Cynthia Lum's interview tips for how to join a master's program 101.

**Cynthia Lum:**

It's horrible. Yes.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Don't do this kids. Don't do this at home.

**Cynthia Lum:**

Don't do this. So Paul Rock said, "Sure, come on in." He was so kind, and so generous.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Paul's a lovely man.

**Cynthia Lum:**

Oh, he is.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I had lunch with him many years ago. It was one of the most delightful lunches I've had. It was wonderful.

**Cynthia Lum:**

He was the first person I ever met who was a sociologist, and I just learned so much about it. I said, "Oh, I'm going to take on this." And so that's how I decided to apply for criminology department, and one of them happened to be Marilyn. And one day I was in my flat in London and got a call from Larry Sherman.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Oh, that old troublemaker.

**Cynthia Lum:**

And I'm sorry, Larry, if you're listening to this, I didn't know who Larry was because I wasn't involved in policing research. It became fateful because Larry became one of the most important people in my career.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

In many people's career.

**Cynthia Lum:**

Oh, yeah. And he called me up. He talked to me a little bit, and Larry's very convincing, and so that's how I chose to come to Maryland.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You didn't have a connection to the...

**Cynthia Lum:**

I lived in Los Angeles my whole life. I had no idea about Maryland.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You didn't have a connection to anywhere on the East Coast, then?

**Cynthia Lum:**

I didn't know anything about the university, frankly. A year into University of Maryland, I realized that that was not for me.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Oh, wow. Really?

**Cynthia Lum:**

Yeah. Everybody was so bright and smart and I was like, "I don't think this is for me."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Do you think you had a wee touch of imposter syndrome kicking around there?

**Cynthia Lum:**

Oh, yeah.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It's very common.

**Cynthia Lum:**

It is very common, and I thought, "Well, I think instead I'm going to join a police department." The reason why I joined Baltimore City was it simply was the largest city nearby where I lived.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Fantastic decision making. Didn't do any research on Baltimore City PD and just-

**Cynthia Lum:**

I didn't know anything about it. I didn't know anything about the city. It just seemed like a big city. I was like, "Let's go there." Because I come from a big city.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

When was this? Because this must've been pre The Wire then?

**Cynthia Lum:**

I started reading Homicide: Life on the Street, and I met some of those folks while I was in the academy. The guy that got shot was an academy instructor, and he was blind by that time from the injury, and he taught in that academy and I got to meet him, and that's how I ended up in Baltimore City.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You ended up as a detective in the Western District, didn't you?

**Cynthia Lum:**

No, started off in the Eastern District in patrol. They film a lot of The Wire in the Eastern and the Western, so those two districts are kind of your highest crime district. I stayed in patrol for a few years and then became a detective in special victims. Back then it was called Child Abuse Unit, and we handled all physical and sexual child abuse, but I ended up going back to the University of Maryland to try to finish my degree. It took me seven years to finish the PhD because I was working.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Sure. I've had a few students who are serving police officers, and they're juggling kids and work and shift work and call-outs and doing a PhD. I mean, it's an incredible lift. They're very, very impressive.

**Cynthia Lum:**

It's a big lift. And at the end of my time at the University of Maryland, I applied for assistant professor position. Northeastern was the first to offer me a job. They offered me a job right then and there, and I took it, and that was how I got into academia. I could have gone back to policing, but by that time I had hit the five-year hump for policing, and it had made me angry. It's hard to explain this to people who aren't cops, but sometimes policing, it makes you cynical, it makes you angry, it turns you into a different type of a person, and I realized I need to move on.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Oh, that was good of you. I mean, I did 11 years and I decided to just adopt that as my whole personality, and that's why I haven't changed since then.

**Cynthia Lum:**

I mean, it makes you rough in many ways, and also I knew that I couldn't advance.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I think it can be a mindset depends on where you are and what you do. I mean, you were working in a particularly challenging area.

**Cynthia Lum:**

It also depends on who your mentors are and your support system and things like that.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

If you've got good people around you, the job's fantastic. If you've got bad people or a really rough job, it can be hugely stressful. Got an episode coming up soon on the podcast, probably the next episode with Grant Edwards from Australia who also worked in child abuse investigations and it had a hugely deleterious effect on his mental health. So you were working in this area pursuing your PhD. If I remember correctly, you told me that your dissertation was on drug markets and crime, and that's hugely valuable for policing. Was it informed by your patrol work in Baltimore?

**Cynthia Lum:**

No. In some ways, yes, in that there are some places in East Baltimore that have a lot of very active drug markets that are not violent at all and other places that are very violent drug markets.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Were the first ones Hamsterdam?

**Cynthia Lum:**

Well, no. But I think what really informed me about that dissertation was probably my interactions with David Weisberg, and I was very influenced by his thinking about place-based research. And got me thinking about why are there places in Baltimore that are not violent, but are very heavy drug markets, and why are there places that are very violent?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Drugs obviously have a negative effect on people in neighborhoods, but they're not all as bad as each other.

**Cynthia Lum:**

No.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It's the weirdest thing to say. There are drug markets that are bad and drug markets that are bad, but not as bad, and that doesn't make sense to the public, but when you're actually staring at the data and data doesn't care what you think, it just tells you what it is. It's really clear to see.

**Cynthia Lum:**

Well, and a lot of violence that takes place in areas that have drug markets are not related to those drug markets, and so it's a much more complicated situation than just saying, "Hey, these open air drug markets are causing violence."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Are we verging on the edge of talking about broken windows at that point now then?

**Cynthia Lum:**

Yeah. Okay. Let's stop.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You feel this looming trap door open in front of you?

**Cynthia Lum:**

Oh, yeah. Let's get back to evidence-based policing, because I think that's a challenging subject, Jerry. Sometimes with broken windows is that in many ways we have the most simplified view of it and then the most simplified knee-jerk reaction to it, right?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yes.

**Cynthia Lum:**

But anybody who studies place or environmental criminology knows how complex the intersection is between routines, crime, disorder, people's perceptions, the police, social, informal and formal social controls.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Horribly complicated.

**Cynthia Lum:**

It is, and so when you think through that, in order to deal with that particular problem, it needs a complex approach. It needs an approach that's thoughtful and that's critical.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It's not deterministic. It's not, "If you have all these things, you'll end up with this."

**Cynthia Lum:**

Exactly correct, but here's the trap. When police are confronted with a very complex problem without enough information, evidence, tools, mentorship, supervision, systems to deal with that, then they're going to apply what they know. And what they know from traditional approaches to policing is not enough to deal with those problems. That's why evidence-based approaches are so important.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

The problem with simple approaches is that they're easy. They don't require much of an education, and they sound very determined and decisive, so they appeal to police leaders exactly for all of those reasons. What you're really pitching from an evidence-based approach is more doubt, more thought. You've got a lot of experience with police departments. How do you pitch that much more harder approach, which is more evidence driven and more data-driven and more logical and reasonable when the competition is just some captain going, "We've done this in the past and I know this and I'm absolutely sure this will work. Let's do this."?

**Cynthia Lum:**

Or they take things from evidence-based approaches, and they simplify it down to something and say, let's do this evidence-based. It's hard, Jerry. I mean, I feel like I'm preaching to the choir because the selling of this is one of the most difficult things that we can accomplish because you're asking the police to basically undo all their systems that they're used to. You're asking them to move into a very risky area, and also there's no solution about the thinking part either, Jerry. You can say, "Let's hire more educated cops." I don't believe that's going to help you. Thinking does not only require education, it requires all sorts of incentives, infrastructure, training, mentorship, supervision to get you to that level of thinking.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And the mindset...

**Cynthia Lum:**

It doesn't matter that we already know that the police organization is stronger than any innovation that tries to be brought into that organization. We know this about technology. We know this about innovations. We know this about human resources just as we know this about physical resources.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So when you say it, we're talking about evidence-based policing, and of course you and that chap who did the curve business, you guys wrote a Bible on this subject. That's sort of in a nutshell, what to you is evidence-based policing?

**Cynthia Lum:**

It's two things really and the intersection between these two things. First, on the one hand, you have the evidence itself, and science to me is incredibly important in democracies. It's an important source of objective information that's systematically developed and it can be developed in many different ways. There's a lot of different methods that we use as scientists to answer questions. On the other hand, evidence-based policing is about how do we get that science to then be institutionalized into practice, and this is to me, the other leg of evidence-based policing the most... maybe more important than the science perhaps, right? It's like, "How do we think through undoing the systems of police that have relied so much on discretion or vague notions of the law or tradition? How do we undo all that to then take something we know from systematic study and then turn it into an actual deployment?" To me, evidence-based policing is about trying to figure out not only that supply of research, but also trying to figure out how to institutionalize it into practice.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Now, seeing how I bought you a coffee, I feel that gives me some latitude, obviously. This coffee wasn't worth the price, right?

**Cynthia Lum:**

It's delicious.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So let me throw something at you because people who are not fans of evidence-based policing so much, attack evidence-based policing, a whole range of ways, everything from it's just about randomized control trials or I think frontline cops think, "Are you taking away my discretion by telling me what to do?" Because their argument is, "I've got this experience. My experience tells me something else." How do we overcome that?

**Cynthia Lum:**

This is a challenging question.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That's why I bought you a coffee.

**Cynthia Lum:**

Well, in terms of how to change police and their beliefs about lived experience, I'm a big fan of attacking from all sides, okay? This is a huge challenge. This is something that's not easy, so you have to come at it from every single possible angle. Let me explain what I mean by this. At things like the national level or at the funding levels, or even at the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy levels, you come at it by building synergies between people by raising awareness about what it is, the societies of evidence-based policing, they build communities of interest and thinking around this because they're trying to change the way people define the profession, and this is where Larry's work has been so important in that some of his earliest writings on this is about how do we figure out what levers can incentivize agencies to think through adjusting police officer behavior?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And not even rubber leavers. You don't want them pulled briefly, and then as soon as you let go, they spring back to their original position.

**Cynthia Lum:**

That's exactly correct. So on the one hand, you need these very big organizations and funding mechanisms and incentives, and sometimes they're negative incentives too to try to adjust the way that police view their profession. On the other hand, and this is something that brings me a lot of joy, as I mentioned before. On the other hand, you need folks that are in the field that are working with police, but you need to start working with cops to start understanding what the evidence is and start thinking through how to address problems differently.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

We can come to them with all the ideas, but they have to make it work in their environment.

**Cynthia Lum:**

That's exactly correct, so it's also partly about taking their experiences and saying, "Hey, can we try something different?" Or, "Hey, can you think through how your experience could be helpful in facilitating this evidence base?" We need cops to also be cops.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I have a model that I use for crime reduction called panda. Each stage comes with checklists. And people have occasionally said to me... they seem really worried, and they kind of say, "I want to add something here or slightly change that," and they think I'm going to be horribly offended. I was like, "No, you have to adjust this to your environment. I'm happy that you're even looking at it. Adjust it a little and make this work. If I've got you 90% of the way there or 80% of the way there, if you can make it work by adding your 10 or 20%, do it. Go for it. Absolutely."

**Cynthia Lum:**

This is a work in progress, Jerry. We will never have evidence-based policing achieve its full potential by the time you and I... we'll be long dead by then.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Oh, bloody hell. You depress me. What do you know about my health?

**Cynthia Lum:**

Hence, the reason why we need younger folks to take on this charge, right? It's like any one of us just trying to change our regular daily habits. If somebody came up to you and said, "Hey, change the way you teach your classes." We'd be like, "Ooh," and huff and puff about it, or, "Use this new technology to change the way you're teaching classes." It's hard.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And I think for all of those levels and everything in between, smaller incremental steps seem far less threatening.

**Cynthia Lum:**

They do, but I think the trick is how to then change some of those things to have bigger impacts. For example, with your panda and with your checklist Jerry, and also with who you are, it's like, "How do we get more people to think through thinking about what's on those checklists, right?" It's not like they're taking the checklist out on the street and then checklist it, check, check, check, check, check while they're in a conflict and trying to keep somebody from shooting someone.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Three rounds of smacking into the wall it's like, "Hold on a minute. I'm in the middle of my check."

**Cynthia Lum:**

That's right, and that's often a critique that I think some academics like to fall back on. It's a straw man argument. It's like, "Sometimes I don't even want to bother with that," but what matters is they think, "Okay, wait a second. There's a lot more to think about here." And if that checklist can help them think a little bit more about that topic, then you've made strides.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

Thinking through the other way, the much more esoteric academic arguments. I remember reading some work by David Fen when he was talking about systematic reviews, and I'm paraphrasing. He writes that some people are offended because the methodological quality of their work, they feel they're being criticized because it's not included in systematic reviews, and he says basically and their right to be. We are only including work of a suitably high methodological quality, and that's a criticism of evidence-based policing, especially among people who still seem fixated on this idea it's just randomized control trials or nothing.

### Cynthia Lum:

I don't think anybody who I know that does randomized control trials has ever made the argument that randomized control trials or nothing, that's the only way to generate evidence. For example, Chris and I have developed something called the evidence-based policing matrix. In that matrix, you don't have just randomized controlled experiments. You have quasi experiments, you have some econometric analysis. You have some studies that some methodologists might think are challenged in terms of their internal validity. However, I take the view that if we only looked at certain types of studies, then you're going to have a very limited pool in which to inspire police to think through changes on how they're doing their deployment. Sometimes we don't have all the answers, a good example is in investigations. We don't have a lot of randomized controlled studies on investigations.

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's one of the most unresearched areas of policing, and yet it's hugely important.

### Cynthia Lum:

That's exactly correct. And so some of the work that I do in investigations is really just trying to bring together a large amount of research. Some of it is not quasi even quasi experimental, but it's trying to give people a sense of what I think given the literature and given the research in this area matters in investigation, and that is effort and organization that's built around that effort, these academic arguments about methodology, they're important in some regard. I don't dismiss them because method is very important. We want to find the answers to questions and use the best available methodologies that we can, whether they're qualitative or quantitative. But oh my gosh, Jerry research and policing is messy. Have you ever been involved in a study that didn't go south in some way?

### Jerry Ratcliffe:

Have I ever been... There's a wonderful quote by a general called Von Mulkey from the late 1800s. It said, "No plan survives contact with the enemy." There's no enemy in these studies, but it's just life. I think the better quotes is Mike Tyson, "Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth." Well, just starting a study is like being punched in the mouth repeatedly, and then you find all the things that can go wrong with it. But I think what's important is that we persevere because even if you start with the idea of having... and I don't mean RCT is like a gold standard, but a gold level study, if in the end it ends up being silver or bronze, that's still okay. It can make a contribution just as long as it's not rusty pewter.

**Cynthia Lum:**

That's exactly right, and sometimes you learn just by knowing what failed. Failures are important sometimes, and it helps us understand policing better. If you don't pursue field work because you're afraid of that failure, then don't pursue it, because every study that I've ever done has always had challenges.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Absolutely. I mean, you've done some fantastic studies over the years and a whole range of areas. You're very eclectic in what you've taken on, which I think has been fascinating and great to see, but they only see the final product.

**Cynthia Lum:**

That's right.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

The peer reviewed journal article or the Campbell Collaboration kind of review, systematic reviews and they see these studies and they think, "Oh, I could never do that," but they don't see that in amongst all of that, there are whole sections that are a monumental cluster of biblical proportions and all you're just doing trying to carve out some sense of meaning and purpose from this in the end.

**Cynthia Lum:**

That is exactly correct. As academics, I think... let me put on my academic hat, I think we're sensitive and our egos are fragile, and everybody's looking for that big score, that big finding that's somehow going to make them famous or something. I don't know. Frankly, I don't know. This is not me, so when a study is left out of a systematic review or when we feel like somebody's ignoring our work when they may not be, they just may not know it. I think sometimes academics can be challenged by those things, so I feel like for me, I just have to do things that bring me some purpose to what I'm working on. I don't focus so much on critiques about evidence-based policing because there are a lot. I don't focus so much on cops that are like, "I don't want to do this because this is ridiculous," and, "You got all your checklists, and what's this?."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Are there any critiques of evidence-based policing you've heard that you thought were reasonable in some way?

**Cynthia Lum:**

I think a lot of critiques about both policing and evidence-based policing are reasonable, and that's why we keep working in it. Sometimes we don't have enough research, but we're trying to say something about something, and I think that's a fair critique.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

We overstretch sometimes.

**Cynthia Lum:**

Because I think we're interested and we want to help. Look, I'm just one person. I can only focus on some things. One of the critiques we always get is why do you only focus on crime reduction? Which is not true, but why do you only focus on prevention? It's because I'm just one person. I can't do it all.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I'm so sorry that my research agenda doesn't aspire with what you would like me to do. I mean, who says that in the rest of the world?

**Cynthia Lum:**

I can't do it all? I can only really focus on what I can contribute.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Sometimes I want to just be an accountant or something else just to save the hassle so that other people-

**Cynthia Lum:**

You and I could go back to being cops. We just can't fit into our uniforms any more probably.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You could, you're in great shape. But this notion that people get upset because we are not researching what they would like us to research, in what other field do people behave like that?

**Cynthia Lum:**

It's unfortunate, but I feel like you do need those people who are running those big experiments. You also need people who are just working with cops on a day-to-day basis. And you need the societies of evidence-based policing. Some of those individuals, they might not be able to do some kind of fancy analysis or something like that, but they're incredibly important to evidence-based policing because they're the ones that are translating, that are building receptivity, that are thinking about re-engineering systems.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Well, there are people who are pioneers in small or medium-sized departments. They're doing huge work in turning-

**Cynthia Lum:**

Look at the Hall of Famers. Look at the evidence-based policing Hall of Famers, every single one of them has a different take on their contribution.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And often they're pushing against a lot of resistance internally within their department.

**Cynthia Lum:**

They should get a medal just for that.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Putting their career progression at risk simply by pushing for something that they know is going to make a contribution to the field.

**Cynthia Lum:**

That's right, and I look up to that because eventually Jerry, they're going to have a supervisor that doesn't understand what they're trying to accomplish.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

What is the role then of the Center for Evidence-based crime Policy that you've set up at George Mason University?

**Cynthia Lum:**

The Center for Evidence-based Crime Policy in my view, has a couple of purposes, and it really gets back to what I view evidence-based policing to be about. One, it's about generating good science. Ever since 2008, we now have, I think our grant portfolio is over 50 million now.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That's incredible.

**Cynthia Lum:**

And the other part of our center is really focused on how do we then encourage translation, receptivity, institutionalization, implementation at a level that's at the national level?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

What works, in that translation piece?

**Cynthia Lum:**

Synergies are important. Bringing together people and developing a community of interest and intellect around a particular topic to move the needle and the Center is incredibly unusual in this regard. We invest our own money into other people that are not part of George Mason University, like bringing together folks for symposium or congressional briefing or summer school or workshops, and we've been doing since 2008. The second thing is developing tools. So for example, Chris and I have developed a lot of tools like the Matrix, the playbook, case of place, tools related to training and communities, webinars, videos, different things like that, resources that are trying to help push that needle.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

This isn't just an academic venture, is it?

**Cynthia Lum:**

No.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Because universities are terrible at rewarding all the things that you've just been talking about.

**Cynthia Lum:**

That's exactly correct.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Unless it's grants and peer reviewed journal articles, they're pretty much not interested.

**Cynthia Lum:**

That's right. There is not a reward for this in the academic world, but the reward is greater than that. The reward gets at the core of what we're trying to accomplish.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I feel like I'm standing an inch taller.

**Cynthia Lum:**

Well, you should, Jerry, because as scientists, our job is not just to generate peer reviewed publications for ourselves. We don't even read each other's work sometimes, right?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I read yours.

**Cynthia Lum:**

Well, thank you. But Jerry, it's like, "What's the purpose of our work?" The purpose of our work is to think through improving whatever we're working on. That's what drives me. It is a little unorthodox in the academic world, and this is why I work eight days a week. I think the center is unique in that it really tries and that I really try as the director of the center to think through the balance between generating that science and then building communities around that science.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And in all this translational work and thinking about that, if there was one thing that you would want police leaders or police organizations to do differently that would really help advance evidence-based policing, what would that be?

**Cynthia Lum:**

I always get this one thing question or, "Give me five things, Cynthia."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I haven't got time for five.

**Cynthia Lum:**

Well, you won't have time for my one either, because there is no one thing. If I had to say one thing, it's more like a suite of things, and that is, I think police leaders have to strategize about how to achieve the different mandates that they're trying to achieve, crime control or prevention or police legitimacy or what have you, improve relationships with the community. The reason why I say strategize is because they have to look at all of the systems that relate to that outcome that they're trying to imagine. They have to figure out, "Well, okay, how do we manipulate these systems?" And that is no easy task. The Hall of Famers understand this, and this is where they dig their grave a little bit, right? Because they know that-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You can't do one thing.

**Cynthia Lum:**

... the solution is in re-engineering the systems. If they re-engineer the systems that is poking the sleeping giant.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That's a great way of looking at it. It's to be much more strategic in their thought. I think a piece of it is just be open to the possibility that they don't have all the answers and evidence-based policing might help them get there. And it doesn't even mean that we've got the answers to give them, but the processes of evidence-based policing will help them get there because end up using their data and their personnel in more interesting ways. Well, we've already taken up far too much of your time, but as a kind of last piece, where does all this need to go next?

**Cynthia Lum:**

The most important thing I think to me is that people involved in this, you, me, cops, practitioners, people at CEBCP, people have been kicked down or whatever. Everybody that's involved in this continues, they persevere. Right now is a hard time for both policing scholars and for policing practitioners, but ultimately crime persists.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It does.

**Cynthia Lum:**

And we have to figure out the best ways to deal with that crime in ways that are democratic, that are lawful, that are legitimate, but that are also evidence-based, and that doesn't mean throwing in the towel of either police practice or police research.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Well, this has been super fun. Thank you for coming out to it.

**Cynthia Lum:**

I'm glad it's over.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Thank you for coming out to a coffee shop in the middle of the DC suburbs and coming and chatting to me. It's been great fun.

**Cynthia Lum:**

Oh, sure, Jerry. I'm happy to do it.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That was episode 73 of Reducing Crime recorded somewhere in the Northern Virginia area in June 2024. Did you know that you can subscribe to Reducing Crime at Spotify, SoundCloud, Apple, or just about anywhere? If you subscribe, episodes arrive on your device automatically and an angel gets its wings or something. Transcripts and multiple-choice questions for every episode are available for instructors. Just DM me @\_reducingcrime on Twitter for details.

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