

## #35 (CARMEN BEST)

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### Jerry Ratcliffe:

Reducing Crime is a podcast featuring influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers.

As police chief, Carmen Best led the Seattle Police Department through the turbulence of the George Floyd protests and the creation of the CHOP and the CHAZ Capitol Hill protest areas before resigning in August 2020, when the city council planned major cuts to policing. We talk about all of that and more in this episode.

Hi. I'm Jerry Ratcliffe. Okay, before we get to Carmen, guest themes. In the last episode, the guest theme was from S.W.A.T., a short-lived cop series from the 1970s that had two mediocre seasons before being thankfully canceled. Look, just go and watch the opening credits to S.W.A.T. on YouTube, and you can see what I mean. All right, maybe with the right recreational chemicals it could almost be good, but no.

The guest theme for this episode that you just heard is from the US version of an acclaimed Danish police series. From 2011 to 2014, it featured four seasons of moody acting, damp weather and sweaters, lots of sweaters. If you haven't figured it out yet, I'll reveal the name of the series next episode. The damp weather and sweaters are a result of the series being set in Seattle. That is for me, a surprisingly nuanced segue into my guest for this episode, Carmen Best.

Carmen Best served with the Seattle Police Department for 28 years, rising through the ranks to take over as chief in August 2018. She led the department through the turbulence of the George Floyd protests, culminating in the more than three-week occupation of the Capitol Hill neighborhood in what became the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone. Best resigned in protest when Seattle City Council voted to downsize the department by about 100 police officers.

A US Army veteran and graduate of Western Illinois University and Northeastern University, Best was the first African-American woman to lead the Seattle Police Department. Having filled many policing roles, as chief, she focused on diversity hiring and community engagement. Her professional education includes courses with the FBI National Executive Institute, the FBI National Academy, and the Major City Chiefs Association, Police Executive Leadership Institute. Carmen's currently an NBC News and MSNBC contributor and a law enforcement analyst for NBC's Seattle affiliate. We chatted over lunch, accompanied by Chris Fisher, executive director of strategic initiatives for the Seattle department.

# REDUCING CRIME PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

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Carmen and I discussed the public perception of police-involved shootings, never-ending consent decrees, her departure from the chief's job, the challenges faced by Black women police chiefs, the closure of the East Precinct station and the future of reform in community policing. We met at Seattle's Blue Water Bistro, a waterfront spot with a great view of Lake Washington. We were a little close to the kitchen, so I apologize for some of the background noise but look, the place is popular.

I recommend the Thai wings and blue cheese salad. Tell them I sent you.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

But you've pretty much done every job in the Seattle PD, haven't you?

**Carmen Best:**

Not every, but quite a few. They haven't gotten me in scuba gear yet.

**Server:**

We have the spring tacos.

**Chris Fisher:**

Here.

**Server:**

If you'd be so kind?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

He's having tacos, yeah. Oh, my goodness. Look at that.

**Server:**

Blue cheese salad.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Thank you.

What was the best job?

**Carmen Best:**

People always ask that, like, "What was your best job?" No, thank you. Well, the fun assignments would be believe it or not, being a decoy prostitute was a lot of fun. It was hilarious.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah, that's not a job I could ever get.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah. You'd be surprised. Yeah. I loved any job where I could work with community. So when I was in the Community Police Team, or when I was a lieutenant for the Community Police Team, I liked going to meetings, hearing what people are concerned about, trying to problem solve.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It's an interesting place world in policing now, isn't it?

**Carmen Best:**

Well, every day, it seems like we get a new low in the publicity. We have dead children, trial. And then there was Daunte Wright. And then there was a kid who was, I can't remember his last name that Alex something in Chicago, Andrew Johnston and another. I mean, it was like it's every day or two days, there's one other controversial thing. And people don't recognize and consider it's a big country with a lot of people. I'm not trying to minimize these things, but they're going to happen, right? And then they get publicized and everybody in the whole nation sees it and around the world. And it just seems like it's-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Endless.

**Carmen Best:**

Yes, it does.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And it's going to keep happening, because as you say, I mean, the Bureau of Justice statistics estimate 75 million police community contacts a year. And I think they sorely underestimate that.

**Carmen Best:**

Yep.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So if you're looking at north of 100 million in the most heavily-armed civilian population in the world, a certain percentage of those are going to go wrong. It's just the nature of human interaction.

**Carmen Best:**

[crosstalk 00:05:01], right? Yeah.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

But now we video everything, we're going to see all of them.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And I think you're right. I think people have got to understand it's a big country with a lot going on.

**Carmen Best:**

While it's true that will not resonate well with folks. You know what I mean? If your family member was one of those family members, it's like they don't want to hear, "Well, scalability and those types of things." But that is the truth of the matter, right?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And I'm not trying to minimize it either.

**Carmen Best:**

I know you're not. Me either. But just knowing the perception will be it's just hard right now to say something like that.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Do you think that this is changing the nature of policing in America?

**Carmen Best:**

I think it might. I think it has the potential to change it, because we've been down this road before with Rodney King for example. You would have thought, "This is it. We're going to have change." And then, we had Ferguson, all the riots, all of the demonstrations. This is it. We're going to have subjective change. Breonna Taylor, Philando Castile, I mean, we can name all the different things that were pretty dramatic, highly publicized, a lot of attention and a lot of noise. And then, eventually, things settle down a bit and we actually looking about what significantly changed? Sometimes, not so much.

**Carmen Best:**

I will say the Department of Justice doing the consent decrees gave hope that there was some additional oversight. They could ensure agencies were operating fairly.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Do you think that helped here?

**Carmen Best:**

I absolutely do. I think it helped. But I think it's run its course. I mean, that was 2011, if I remember correctly. I was still a lieutenant. I have had a whole career. Since then, I've worked in gangs, narcotics, robbery, chief of investigations, deputy chief, chief of police-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah, you've done it all.

**Carmen Best:**

... and retired. And they're still here. I think it's run its course.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So these things should have a time limit?

**Carmen Best:**

Absolutely, they should.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And yet, all of that, it doesn't feel like you had the opportunity when you were chief to reap the rewards of all of that. From outside perspective, they kind of felt that you had a brief honeymoon, and then it was, "Okay, we're going to just sink you like everybody else."

**Carmen Best:**

It felt like that to me too. And it wasn't even a brief honeymoon. I mean, I had that. It was a lot of stress getting into the applicant pool to be the chief. I had been here working and doing the job for months and then, I didn't make the top three. But that just seemed absolutely ridiculous to me. So I do think there was probably some political maneuvering somewhere to not have me in that candidate pool for the very reasons that I got put back in it, because it was just a lot of community support for me.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah, it kind of strikes me as an early indication of some naivety on the part of the city council, right?

**Carmen Best:**

Or somebody, right?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Or somebody.

**Carmen Best:**

In this case, I mean, there were so many different folks who were involved. I think there were 40 members on part.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I'm sure Machiavelli could have written something about selections for police chief and how that works, right? There's a whole book in there.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

The follow up to "The Prince" is "The Police Chief", right?

**Carmen Best:**

Right. It was really something.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And it all turned out wonderfully.

**Carmen Best:**

[Laughing] Yeah. Pieces of it did. Pieces of it did. It really did. I got a lot of pleasure from the job. And the challenges were also opportunities in many ways, to do different things, to try things out, to create and build a wonderful team of people to work around me.

**Carmen Best:**

But after the George Floyd demonstrations and then, right into the CHAZ and the CHOP, it became really quite a challenge. Even then, though, something I was up for. But when it talked about literally the headlines were they're going to reduce the budget by 50%, lay off 50% of the officers, the politics just became untenable. The conversations, the meetings were occurring. I certainly wasn't invited to them. I wasn't a part of that conversion.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I can imagine for the people that supported you kind of devastating to see the lack of support that came from city council in your, yeah.

**Carmen Best:**

I think a lot of them were quite upset about it, to be honest with you.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

One of the interesting perspectives for me is obviously, pardon my accent, I'm not from South Philly, right? And coming as an immigrant to country, one of the things that you understand quickly is that you'll never understand how America deals with race, right?

**Carmen Best:**

Right, yeah.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Basically, I'm so white, even speed cameras don't give me a ticket. So I come into this trying to understand how this works. And I think, "Well, if anywhere has got this squared away, it's probably Seattle post George Floyd because you're kind of a unicorn in a Black female police chief." If there's anybody can help navigate a city through something like post George Floyd, it would be you and Danielle Outlaw and-

**Carmen Best:**

So I think the Black women in particular have a harder time than other chiefs.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Exactly. How the hell did that happen?

**Carmen Best:**

It's structure. It's perceptions, all of those things. But I absolutely feel that way. But I'm looking at this saying, "These are highly competent people, intelligent, well-versed, understand policy, practices, procedures, accountability, reform and certainly, the difficult political situations that you have to address as a police chief." And I feel like the Black women in particular, all chiefs have dealt with it across the board, but I certainly feel like all the ones that I knew, which is only a handful... I think Danielle, you'll talk to you I know. And she'll talk about her challenges. They're pretty significant. Cassandra Deck-Brown has retired now with a lot of challenges that she was dealing with at the end there. Renee Hall. So there's a little bit of that.

**Carmen Best:**

And the real thing is you don't know. I mean, I feel like that every day. You don't know if a person just didn't like Carmen Best because our personalities is clashing. You wouldn't like me no matter what. Or if there's some other reason. And that's the difference for most folks.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

If people don't like me, it's fairly obvious they just don't like me. There's nothing more complicated than that. And there's a very, very large group of people in that category, right?

**Carmen Best:**

Quit making it so easy.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You've met me, damn it.

**Carmen Best:**

I'm kidding. But you don't have those thoughts of like, "Is this a sexism thing or racism thing? What's going on here?"

**Carmen Best:**

And sometimes, it can be any of the above or none of the above or all of the above, right? And that's what makes it a little more tricky when you're trying to maneuver through things. But you put on the uniform-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

All bets are off.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah, a game changer. In fact, I was speaking at an event about a week or so ago. And there were a number of people who wrote in. I was told younger people that writing in that didn't want me there, because they said, "Well, once a cop, always a cop. She could be detrimental to your African-American men." It was so insulting. I have 14 aunts and uncles and dozens of cousins and nephews. My nephew lives with me.

**Carmen Best:**

So African-American men are a part of my daily life. So the idea that my presence or my speaking could be detrimental to them is ridiculous. But they're not seeing me. They don't see Carmen Best. They don't know the trials, tribulations, my history, anything. They just see a cop, right? And that's it. And because of their own bias, well, cops are all bad and she was a cop so she's part of the problem.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So you get excluded from the conversation.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah, [crosstalk 00:12:17]-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It just makes me wonder in the more progressive cities, which Seattle definitely is, is there anybody who could be progressive enough? You just had an impossible task, because you should fit perfectly for helping negotiating the city through this. You've strong ties with the community, being minority, being Black, being a woman, perfect for having that kind of level of empathy and connectivity. But it's just like they steamrolled across the whole process.

**Carmen Best:**

All of that. Yeah, well, they had their own agenda there. Given the option of supporting this one woman out there or getting the policing all together, they're trying to impact policing altogether. And I think there's just so many complexities about why that happens. And it wasn't everybody. There were tons of people who were completely supportive and really did not want me to leave. I think the ministers threw a press conference, to my surprise. But there were those groups that really just wanted to see also change. And I was just part of the results of that happening.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I just had to look up a quote. Martin Kaste, the NPR correspondent that covers policing was writing about you and said, "Being a police chief in 2020 is precarious." That's kind of an understatement really, isn't it?

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah, precarious is one way you could describe it. But I mean, it's really challenging. I would have stuck with it, but the idea of having that many officers laid off, particularly officers that's going be young women, people of color.



**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You recruited a lot of minority and women candidates.

**Carmen Best:**

Yes.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

They were your youngest officers, which is similar in many police departments, right?

**Carmen Best:**

Of course, me personally, I did try. But it was the organization that did the whole thing. And they did a stellar job. It was one of our goals to really try to have our department more reflect the community that we were serving. And so, they went back to 50%. That meant our people who had been here for up to 10 years would be gone. And all that was going to be left was the least diverse department, right? And honestly, how could I-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And probably the least adaptable to change as well.

**Carmen Best:**

Yes. And how could I as you said, unicorn, African woman police chief, my legacy be that the women and the Blacks and minorities were gone? And whether it's my doing or not, that is part of your legacy of your tenure. And I was not going to have that. And just the way that the council was sort of dismissive of me, because now it's contentious. They were more concerned about politics than public safety for sure. And now the tension is there. And no way was I backing off the fact that their decisions were reckless. They were not being thoughtful. They were going to really increase crime, increase detriment to the people in the city.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

How do you go tell a mother, "I'm sorry. Your son got killed. We can't do much about it, because over in this corner, we're playing politics with the budget"?

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah. Well, I wasn't going to do it, right? It wasn't the place for me.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You know, in American politics there's no place for you with all these principles that you've got.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah. Yeah, I just mean two years out. I didn't want the department to suffer because the leader is now embroiled in this tit-for-tat, back-and-forth with the council. They really just did not do their job and they were quite awful. I mean, and that's just the truth of the matter because the politics of the day were dictating their actions much more so than taking care of the community, the people they were supposed to be serving. With the narrative, we were trying to

create about engaging, working with community members, bringing in people of color, actually being very open to if we could shift resources, if we can bring others in to answer some of these calls for service. I think everyone's open to that. Things evolve.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I think progressive evidence-based people are, "If this works out better for the community and everybody involved, I'm all for it." That's what you joined the job for, is for public safety however we achieve it, right?

**Carmen Best:**

That's exactly right. We're all in. But we have to be pragmatic and practical. Even a large change means you scale up to that change. You review things, see what works, what doesn't work, maybe pilot something in a reasonable fashion so you can make sure that you get it right.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And you don't inadvertently make things worse.

**Carmen Best:**

That's right because the risk is too high, too great, right? And so, I spent a lot of nights thinking that through and talking to others about that very issue. And just something in me was not going to allow me to stick around if that was going to be the way they go. And by the way, here we are. Adrian Diaz is doing a great job as chief. But look what he's got to work through. They lost I think, 66 people since the beginning of the year. The lowest numbers ever, and that is squarely at the feet of that city council for creating such a adversarial and unpleasant environment that they're not able to move it forward.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

There's a chunk of research and I've said in the past that it doesn't matter how many cops you have, it's how you use them. But after a while, when you start to really decimate numbers, no, it actually does matter how many you have.

**Carmen Best:**

You have to have some.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah.

**Carmen Best:**

Or at least have somebody there to do the work. I mean, it's like there were any cops and I haven't seen where they brought anybody else in to do all these grand ideas. And we're going to bring in all the social workers. Okay. Well, here we are. What is today? It's May 3rd. I'm looking around. Where are they? Have they hired them? Have they trained them? Have they brought them on? Are they answering calls? Are they showing up?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I mean, you guys have lived through... You've really lived through some formative moments in 21st century American policing.

**Carmen Best:**

Oh, yeah.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Other than the battle for Seattle, what was that? 20-something years ago.

**Chris Fisher:**

Seattle keeps setting the mark.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah, other than that-

**Carmen Best:**

WTO and all that. Yeah.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah, the WTO back 20-

**Chris Fisher:**

1999.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

... 20 years ago-

**Carmen Best:**

1999, yeah.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And now, suddenly, this. You've been front and center the whole damn thing.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah. When WTO was there, I was a public information officer during that timeframe, just a crazy time. And so, I think there were a lot of lessons learned. And so, we felt really good. We learned how to handle demonstrations. We learned how to deal with them. We had May Day. We've had M30. We've got this down. And then, when the George Floyd protests

came, those tactics that had been tried and true that we've worked on so diligently for almost two decades really weren't working. Obviously, it does disperse the crowd like it was supposed to. But the community feedback on it was so very strong about it and around it.

**Carmen Best:**

And I was trying to think of why is it so different? But things change. People evolve. We had more people out there, more people who were average citizens out there, community members out there protesting and whatnot. I mean, thousands, way more than we'd ever had before. And in the midst of that, people who were bent on doing criminal activity and throwing rocks and bottles. And so, we did have to make those adjustments to disperse the crowd.

**Carmen Best:**

And the other thing that I found very curious during that time frame was that the destructive behavior, for whatever reason, I'm not sure if there's a political reason or otherwise, did not get the level of publicity or media attention as... I would read stories about the peaceful protests. I go, "Well, part of it was peaceful." But I was standing 20 feet away from a hail of rocks. I was looking right at them hail down, feet from me. I was behind a telephone pole [crosstalk 00:19:35]-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And then you read the media and find that they're pretty much gaslighting you. It never happened.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah, it's like, "What?" No. It was just a peaceful protest and the police just unleashed this tear gas and pepper spray. And it just wasn't true. I mean, we did do it. And we obviously did it for reasons. And maybe in hindsight, maybe some of those times we could have waited longer or did something differently. Obviously when you look back at things, you have more clarity. But the fact of the matter is it did happen and there were reasons. It wasn't arbitrary.

**Carmen Best:**

But certainly, we were trying to look as non-threatening as possible, maybe not have the riot shields up. But once we know we're going to be getting rocks and bottles thrown at us, I have a responsibility as a chief to make sure people have protecting gear. We can't just leave them out there with soft hat and rocks are being thrown and whatever.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

There's actually a previous episode of this podcast I interviewed Ed McGuire, who is an academic, but an expert in the area of protest policing.

**Carmen Best:**

Oh, really?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah. He was saying the good thing to do is to go out with soft gear when things are peaceful, but once you start receiving airmail, you got a showering of rocks and stuff being thrown at you, cycle those guys out and come in with protective gear because it's like yeah, we understand public perception, but you also have an obligation to protect people who've just come to work.

**Carmen Best:**

To work, that's exactly it.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It's their job. They come to work and they should have the right equipment to protect them during that job.

**Carmen Best:**

And you have such liability. I mean, the department even got sued by one officer who had a helmet on, but it was the older version of the helmet that didn't protect him and yeah. So knowing all of this, even if I didn't know all that, I just wouldn't not send people out there unprotected. That's just reckless and not the right thing to do, right?

**Server:**

It comes with a soup as well.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Oh, right. Thank you.

**Server:**

On top of that.

**Chris Fisher:**

Thank you.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I picked the wrong thing. I'm just looking like a complete heathen the way I'm eating.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah, yeah, you're good.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Which I like though. They're very good. Chris, you should have one.

**Chris Fisher:**

I might have one. [crosstalk 00:21:29]

**Carmen Best:**

Thank you.

**Carmen Best:**

And then, we called in the National Guard to help augment our resources. Those kids to me, were just kids. Well, my children were probably older than some of those kids that were out there. Some of them in early 20s, 23-year-olds and 20... And then, out there, they're doing their civic duty. They're going to be guards persons. And here they are, standing on the line and these folks are just saying... Some of the people in the crowd were saying really awful things about their families, their parents, their mother, their children to the point that we started rotating officers off the front line at a faster cadence because nobody should have to stand there and listen to that.

**Carmen Best:**

But I just was thinking we have a responsibility to take care of the people who suit up to come to work. Some of the negative things that were happening in terms of some of the crowd behavior of people embedded in the crowd, that were acting bad, just were not... Nobody was talking about it.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

No.

**Carmen Best:**

And my perspective-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And so, the police response looks disproportionate.

**Carmen Best:**

It does. And on occasion, it was. On occasion, people did things and they'll get disciplined for it as we find out people who may have gone rogue or may have done something out of policy. We certainly don't say that the police response was perfect all the time.

**Carmen Best:**

That said, there were definitely some challenges with some of the protesters doing things, setting buildings on fire. Really? And I know that there are folks that think that that's just all part of the process, but I will never agree with that. I know small business owners. They struggle very hard. They work hard to keep their businesses open. So all of those things really have an effect on them. They really do.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I remember businesses in East London, when I was a cop, and the business owners were telling me, "When we get broken into, when we get stuff stolen, I think the kids that are doing this just assume that we're insured. But this is a high crime area. We can't afford the insurance for this area. When they break in steal our stuff, it's gone forever. We don't get that back."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And I'm sure that's the same for businesses here too. I'm sure they can't all afford insurance. I'm sure it's damn expensive in some areas.

**Carmen Best:**

Right. Or the deductible isn't high enough for them to... So all of those things combined that you think about when these things are occurring.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Again, from outside, I don't know how much you... I think you do, but you appreciate how the rest of policing was going, "Holy shit." Was it the East Precinct and leaving the East Precinct police station? Now, that wasn't down to you. I've read the media stuff.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah, listen, I was quick to say that was not my decision because it wasn't and I didn't want anybody to think that that was.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You worked there originally, didn't you, back in the day?

**Carmen Best:**

I worked at a precinct quite a bit of my career. Yeah. So there was a confluence of events that really led to that happening. The leaving the precinct was a real problem, because that was the precipitating factor to the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone, the CHAZ, which at some point, turned into the CHOP. But leaving that precinct really, no pun intended, sort of triggered that whole thing, that whole set of events.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

When was it? Did the officers there kind of decide to leave? Because I would get that completely. I mean, I was looking at it thinking, "Would I stay there?"

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah. Well, it was a command decision. And these things happen. I want to preface this by saying often there's dynamic situations. Things are happening in the middle. You're in charge and you're making decisions. And I think people question, "Why weren't they talking to you about it? You're the chief." I said, "I would have preferred that happen, to be honest with you. But also, there's lots of things that happen in the field that are happening right then. And the first call is not to..." They're trying to deal with what's before then. Then they will get [crosstalk 00:25:06]

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So it was one of your command staff on the ground kind of said, "We've had enough"?



**Carmen Best:**

I think a few of the commanders were like... And not simply that we had enough. They were thinking, "We've been told by the fire department that our building, which has contiguous walls to other buildings, that if it gets set on fire, it's going up quickly." That's a danger. And we already had the one precinct in Minneapolis had already been burned. And so, we were concerned about the building going up.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah, you can lose the police station, but you could have burned down the rest of the block.

**Carmen Best:**

As well. So we certainly were concerned about all of that, whatever was in the station, sensitive material, weapons, other things that are held there in various areas, so all of that. They were considering what could happen here? And because the city had really decided, to be honest with you, that we were going to open up those streets. It wasn't our first choice to do. It was a command... See, I'm just going to be honest here. We did not want to open up the streets. But the mayor's office and others were like, "Look, there's a skirmish line there and that's a point of contention if you leave people there."

**Carmen Best:**

So I understood that. But the way the precinct is built, it's right on the street. So if we open it up-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

There's no buffer. People can put hands on the building, can't they? Right.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah, right. Yeah, exactly. So it felt not safe. Once the decision was made that we were going to do it and we took the barricades out, they decided, "We're going to get our people out of here. We're going to get our sensitive material out of here. The building's under threat." The FBI had told us that police precincts were under a threat. That came from the FBI. And I repeated it. And I had politicians telling me I was making it up. And I was like, "I'm not making it up. It came from the FBI." I actually had to get the FBI director on the phone to announce to some of the folks and to the media. Like we would just say that just to say it. No, the precinct is at risk. We have a FBI warning. We got a warning from our fire chief. And plus, our common sense tells us this is not a good place to be.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So you've got local commanders on the ground in East Precinct kind of saying, "That's it. We got to bail."

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And I don't blame them for that decision in the slightest. What were you thinking? You're at headquarters at the time?

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah. Well, that was just one of those days, one of those days where you just earn your dollar because it was we had been told that we were going to lift those barricades. And against our better judgment, we were going to lift the barricades.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

What was the time frame between the barricades being lifting and the guys kind of-

**Carmen Best:**

Pretty quick. Yeah, I don't have the exact, but less than an hour.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Less than an hour?

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Right. The barricades are off. People are surrounding the building. We're leaving.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah, and we're leaving now. Right

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And they decide just to leave, yeah.

**Carmen Best:**

Around the hour's time. My conversation with one of the chiefs who called me and said, "Hey, there. The city is looking for a evacuation plan in case we have to evacuate the precinct." So I said, "Well, listen. We are not going to evacuate that precinct. We're not going to evacuate the precinct." Because I wasn't at the precinct at the time. So I didn't see what was happening, boots on the ground. And that was my last word. She hung up. I hung up. A couple hours later, it was like, they evacuated the precinct. I'm like, "What happened?"

**Carmen Best:**

So it just wasn't clear exactly what transpired. But I think the idea was that the next day, the demonstration would happen. These things usually lasted till 2:00 or 3:00 or later in the morning. And then, once the crowd dissipated, we would start moving equipment and people back into the precinct. But it didn't. That's not what happened, right? They started barricading the same areas that we had barricades now had barricades from others.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Isn't that an irony that barricades work if only the city had listened to you on that, right?

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah. Yeah, they keep people out, don't they? Yeah. Because we were now on the opposite side of that. And it was such an incredibly surreal thing. And we didn't know. So the next day, one of the captains and one of the acting lieutenants facilitate people going back to the precinct and then, met with armed people who told them basically, "Get off our sovereign property." It was really interesting because when it happened, they brought me a copy of the video and showing me what was going on. But we never seen anything like that.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah, I don't think anybody's seen anything like it. This is-

**Carmen Best:**

You're right, because I talked to a couple of our federal partners who were looking at it saying-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

This is one of these old movies like Assault on Precinct 13, an old movie, yeah.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

This is for real and it's in Seattle.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah, we haven't seen anything like it either. I mean, they were really saying, "Look, we had occupy. We've had coups and takeovers, but not quite what you guys are experiencing there, eclectic groups of people coming in and just taking over a public neighborhood in that fashion." Right? Usually, there's some sort of, "We're part of the such-and-such group. And we're protesting this, that and the other." But it really wasn't that. We couldn't even figure out the leader.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Like it was even organized, it seemed, just a more-

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah, it just came to be, although there were armed people that initially were like, "Don't come in." Once they really established the ground and we were-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It's so difficult to move people once they're embedded.

**Carmen Best:**

Yes. And they started calling for others to come. So the group just started expanding and exploding with the population.

**Carmen Best:**

I got to tell you though, we were pretty clear. I just thought it was terrible and that we had a real problem and we need to get on this and figure this out. Hence, why we were talking to other agencies.

**Carmen Best:**

But the city, the political world, was not there to do anything. The Parks Department's talking to people and they're digging up the park and putting a vegetable garden in there. Seattle Public Utilities in bringing in porta-potties for these folks. And I think the mayor was quoted as saying, "Summer of love." And there was no one that I could really turn to and say, "Does anybody see how bad this is and how this is going to be a problem?" But it wasn't there. It really wasn't there.

**Carmen Best:**

It wasn't until a few weeks had gone by and we had those murders. We had a murder. I think it was on June 20th that that murder occurred, because it was the one day I had taken off to go see my daughter in California. It was her baby shower. I am here all the time, seven days a week, always there. But that one time, I took off to go to my daughter's baby shower. I get a call. They called me to say there was a murder, a child.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Guess what?

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah. It was probably just before 5:00 a.m. It was early. And I was like, "Okay." So I called the mayor and others to say, "Hey, we had a murder out there." And then suddenly, everybody's like, "Let's get back. Let's get a plan. Let's figure it out."

**Carmen Best:**

But I'm like, "Listen, it's my first grandchild and my daughter's baby shower. We can talk about this. And I'll get Chief Diaz, who's filling in. But I'm not missing that." I mean, there's no coming back from that.

**Carmen Best:**

So I was on the phone all the way up until we literally drove up to the baby shower place. I turned my phone off, enjoyed my time with our family and all of that, hugs, kisses. We got back in the car and was back on the phone the whole time.

**Carmen Best:**

But I'm telling you, the whole time, the officers and the people who were responding to that area knew it was a problem. And we had been saying, "Look, our response times are up. We've had rapes. We had robberies. We had assaults." And I remember giving a press conference at some time along the way and holding up the reports, because every time I said something, people would say we were just making it up. I go, "No, I have police reports of real victims that you can look at to verify these things are happening." Right?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Well, I think it sounds so typical, because I've spoken to a number of police chiefs over the years. And it's this whole process of the city creates a problem over a period of weeks, exacerbates the problem, makes it worse. The inevitable happens and then, suddenly, "Can you drop everything about your personal life and fix this right now?"

**Carmen Best:**

And that wasn't going to happen. There was no immediate fix anyway.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

No, because it takes time to bring back some sense of order.

**Carmen Best:**

That's exactly it. So we were really concerned with planning how we were going to facilitate ending the CHOP, but do it in a way that people didn't get hurt. I think I was standing up strong for it, but on the inside, I was terrified about this becoming like a mini Waco. We know people are in it. We know people are armed. We know some of the people, their mental state was questionable on a good day. We had a behavioral analyst that sort of gave us their perspective about some folks really now so committed to what they were doing in the CHOP that having them move, it was going to be very difficult to make that happen without them being very resistant.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Because if they don't see the problems, they think everything's fine.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah. And because this was their 15 minutes of fame. I mean, CNN and Fox and all these international papers are down there every day interviewing people and wandering around the crowd.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

But meanwhile, crime was going through the roof.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah, and particularly in that area. I mean, we really needed to do something. And as tragic and sad as having a young person murdered there was, it took that for people to realize, "Oh. Yeah, maybe we should be doing something about it."

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

So what's the future there? And I think there's broader lessons beyond just East Precinct, right?

**Carmen Best:**

Oh, yeah. Sure. I think a lot of this is based, my personal view, a lot of the problems that we're facing are based on race and the way we approach race and discrimination and our own biases that we bring to us in every profession and every manner and everybody has them. So it's a part of the reality of the world that we live in.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

But America never seems very good at dealing with these kinds of things.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah. It's a struggle, right? It's been a long-term struggle. I think there's been improvement, but definitely a struggle. And so, I think we're going to have to address in my view, the institutions and the race as a whole. Certainly, look at policing because they have ability to take your life and use a leap of force and all those things. So of course, it stands out more.

**Carmen Best:**

But I got tell you, it is detrimental when your teachers are racist, if your bus drivers are racist, if your mailman. Any of those folks who use race to dictate how they're behaving, that's a problem for us, all of us, right?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Absolutely.

**Carmen Best:**

And I have said this before. I could fire the racist cop. I have. But that cop doesn't disappear. Now, he's your racist, or he or she, whatever else they decide to do afterward. Does that make sense?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

It does.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah, so we have to deal with the root causes. I think it was Chuck Ramsey who said, "Even if you can make your police department completely no race issues, none of these issues of bias at all, it doesn't matter if everything else around it still has those same issues." Right?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

There are race problems everything through healthcare and the medical, through government, through education.

**Carmen Best:**

Yes, right. Right.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Yeah, they're endemic through the society.

**Carmen Best:**

Right. So people call in 911, and is it really a suspicious person, or-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And then, they put the police department in an invidious position because you can't just turn around and say, "Yeah, you're just being a racist. We're not going to turn up."

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

I don't know. Maybe we will be able to get to that point. Yeah.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah, maybe. I don't know. But-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Everybody gets one or two freebies. And then, after a while, "You're just a racist. We're not coming out to you anymore." I don't know.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah. I do believe there's a place for consent decrees, time limited, focused on real issues, having some continuity, policies and practices. Having a national standard, I think would be incredibly important.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Oh, yeah. 18,000 police departments just all doing their own thing.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah, yeah. But these are the things that should be consistent across. People should have body-worn camera. No no-knock warrants. Do we need those anymore? Go away, right? And somebody says, "Just do them." And somebody just says, "No." I don't think Seattle's done them in almost 20 years, right?

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Right.

**Carmen Best:**

And so, the choke hold, all of those things, just across the board, no matter what your zip code is, you should understand that these things at a minimum, you're going to get from your police department.

**Carmen Best:**

One of the things that I would really like to chat about a little bit is technology and how technology can help enhance the ability to have better public safety. I know there's a lot of discussions about surveillance and privacy. But I think there's space there to have those discussions but still utilize technology in ways that advance our ability to protect people. So we should be able to use for example, drones, or facial recognition down the line.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Did you see the furor in New York about using the small robot that looks a bit like a dog? And they put it into a situation where the officer would have been at significant risk. But everybody was up in arms because it looks like a dog. It was the most crazy discussion I think I've ever seen.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah. Well, people in America, they care very much about their privacy, especially when it comes to Big Brother or government. I totally get that. So I think that there should be appropriate oversight, mechanisms in place so people feel more comfortable. But we also, we could do a better job with these enhanced technology advancements.

**Carmen Best:**

I even saw where they could show an officer's heart rate and temperature. So they could be going into a situation where they're elevated. Maybe that's a time that they can physically step back and take a deep-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Just have some awareness.

**Carmen Best:**

Yes. Take a deep breath and get a little, you know. All of those things, they can help us.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

You're aware that I go to some police departments that are still on Windows 95 and fax machines, right?

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah, I know that to be true. But there's also these great conferences where they're talking about the innovation and technology. So I'm really hopeful, and I do believe at some point we'll be able to utilize that better.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

We're seeing across the country the proactive policing, police officers using their discretion to do pedestrian stops and field investigations and traffic stops. That's all just dropped precipitously. Do you think the public would ever accept those again? Or do you think we've moved away from proactive policing for the foreseeable future?

**Carmen Best:**

Well, I think that there's still going to be some proactive policing, but what does that mean? Proactive, I would expect you, if you see a problem, to address it. That's part of your job. I've gone up and just the social contact. Talk to guys like, "Hey, what are doing up here at this school? I'm a patrol officer working this area and I've seen you and your car up here, but I've never seen a kid."



**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Well, a lot of that seems to be rolling, especially on the East Coast, I mean, I'm speaking to a lot of people that that's all going away. Police officers are just keeping their heads down. They don't want to get in trouble. They don't want to start something that could escalate.

**Carmen Best:**

Well, I think there's probably an element of that that happens. When we first had the consent decree, our proactive work, it plummeted, right, because everybody's feeling the weight of this thing.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

They don't want to get jammed up.

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah. But eventually, it comes back up. We were still on the consent decree. It didn't go away. But it went down for a time. Then it started moving back up as people started adjusting to what they were doing and how things were going. And they did do proactive police work. And I think people will always do things proactively. But if it's proactive and it's biased or proactive and bigoted, that's what you don't want. But you do want your officers being proactive. You do want a cop like I was 30 years ago, almost 30 years ago, seeing somebody that's in the neighborhood every day at the school in the morning, and what's up with that? And then, I stop, a legitimate stop, and ask them, "Hey, what are you doing here?" It was a conversation. There was no arrest. But I didn't see his car anymore. Proactive work.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Perhaps it goes back to what you started talking about, which is the importance of working with the community. So go to the community and say, "We think we would benefit from more proactive work. How do you feel about that?"

**Carmen Best:**

And there's something to be said for building those relationships with people. Policing is local. So while people will sometimes have a lot of perspectives about what's happening nationally, a lot of people like the neighborhood officer. They like to talk to them and have them over and they'll have coffee. They'll have coffee with a cop, thank kind of a thing.

**Carmen Best:**

So my belief is, and my hope is that we'll continue with that aspect of policing. But we'll have some national standards so that people can expect a certain level of policing that will continue to keep a laser focus on things when they're outside of the norm. If everybody's stopping people and suddenly this person is stopping only a certain type of people, then we'll be much more aware of it and cognizant and tracking so that we can ensure that people are behaving in the way we want them to in the field.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

And so, what's next for you?

**Carmen Best:**

That is a good question. Well, right now, I'm enjoying what I'm doing now, because-

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

What are you doing now?

**Carmen Best:**

I have 27 jobs. But I am working for a private security company for one of their global accounts. In this line of crossover between securing facilities and buildings and garages and that kind of thing. Also, I've been a contributor for MSNBC and CNBC, all the NBCs, right? And I love doing that because it keeps me focused on what's happening in the field.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

But we also need sensible heads and voices out there.

**Carmen Best:**

Right. Some would disagree. But I'm probably the most conservative woman that lives in D.C. But I do like doing it. And co-chairing the Human and Civil Rights Committee with Chief Diaz, that's just a labor of love. I love working on those issues and working with people who care immensely. We have people on that committee who are law enforcement, retired law enforcement, current, a couple of mayors, people from other places. And I find that incredibly rewarding as well.

**Carmen Best:**

So I don't know. I mean, I could be chief again one day. After that last stint, I'm having a little break. I'll have a year or two of a break. But then, I could see doing that again maybe. I really don't know yet. We'll see.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Well, whichever city it would be would benefit hugely from having you there.

**Carmen Best:**

Oh, thank you for saying that.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Well, this was a great recommendation for a restaurant. So thanks very much. This is-

**Carmen Best:**

Yeah. And I love the way you licked your plate. It was great.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

My God. That's going to have to say in now, isn't it? Yeah. Can't take me anywhere. You're a shocker. Carmen Best, you are a shocker.

**Carmen Best:**

Oh, just teasing, yeah. But this is great. Thank you.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

Thanks so much.

**Carmen Best:**

All right.

**Jerry Ratcliffe:**

That was episode 35 of Reducing Crime, recorded in Seattle in May 2021.

New episodes are announced on Twitter @\_reducingcrime. Want to use an episode or two for class? Then you can find a transcript of this and every episode at [reducingcrime.com/podcast](https://reducingcrime.com/podcast).

This episode is dedicated to the memory of Ron Schlieff.

Be safe and best of luck.