

#16 (MARCUS FELSON)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Jerry Ratcliffe again with Reducing Crime at podcast featuring influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers.

Marcus Felson is a Professor of Criminal Justice at Texas State University in San Marcos and the originator of the routine activities approach to crime. We talk about the theory's origins and importance to crime prevention. Find out more in this episode at reducingcrime.com and on Twitter @_reducingcrime.

Hello again, folks. You can hear my chat with Marcus in a bit, but first a note about some upcoming police commanders crime reduction courses. If you think you can put up with me for three days, I'll be running a number of courses in early 2020. One course will be in central New Jersey. We're just trying to finalize exactly where the location is, but it's going to be in the New York metropolitan area. And that'll be from the 28th to the 30th of January. I'll also be doing another one in beautiful St. Petersburg, Florida, in the Tampa Bay area from the 10th to the 12th of February. Details of all these courses can be found at reducingcrime.com/events, and new courses are announced on Twitter @_reducingcrime. Now onto Marcus.

Marcus Felson originated the routine activity approach to crime rate analysis. He's one of the biggest names in criminology and an expert in how to think about crime in tangible terms and how to reduce it using that thinking. He's the author or coauthor of over a dozen books, including *Crime and Nature* and *Crime and Everyday Life*, which is now in its fifth edition. His work's been applied to understanding business crime, juvenile street gangs, co-offending, organized crime, the nighttime economy and outdoor drug sales. Marcus and I discussed his seminal routine activities theory after a conference in Guangzhou, China, even though we were both fighting off some killer jet lag. He explains its origins and clarifies the right terms to use. He also has some choice words for mainstream criminologists and fans of social disorganization and collective efficacy. I've known Marcus for over 20 years. While he may be 72 now, he's still as feisty as ever.

Marcus Felson:

I may fall asleep during the-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, I would too. I think most of my listeners do.

Marcus Felson:

How many of these have you done?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

14, 15, something like that.

Marcus Felson:

You use them in your courses?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. I prepare multiple choice questions for all of them.

Marcus Felson:

Well, if I give four contradictory answers.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's your modus operandi, isn't it?

Marcus Felson:

On the one hand on the other.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, but isn't that all part of the whole process of figuring out?

Marcus Felson:

Well, I don't know.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, this whole business is trying to set up generalize rules, but everything ends up, there are always exceptions to the rules, aren't there?

Marcus Felson:

Well, I try to do what the mathematicians do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Which is?

Marcus Felson:

Well, basic math is you find the basic principle, then the variation. So you've got a point, then a line, then an area. You've got a square, you've got a trapezoid. In other words, you try to order them and learn the simplest first and then complicate. And a good mathematical approach does that. And there's no reason for social scientists not to do that. So you start with the simplest model, like offender, target, guardian. But you don't start with offender and victim

because that's distracting. Then, once you've got that, you elaborate and start adding. You add the handler and all the other issues and elaborating, but you can always go back to the patient model.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is this how you started routine activity theory?

Marcus Felson:

Yes. Basically, this is how my mind works. I try my mind. First of all, I look for tangible things.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you go for the simplest thing possible?

Marcus Felson:

Simplest possible, then complicated.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, that's how my mind works. I go with the simplest possible. I just don't have the capacity to go for the complicated after that.

Marcus Felson:

Well, I often stick with the simplest as long as I can. But the funny thing about it is I've really given up on a lot of the glitter that's part of academic life. I think the glitter is a distraction. And there's a fundamental contradiction between the sciences and the social sciences. The science doesn't seek elaboration of models. It's seeks simplification, but then you elaborate with facts and applications. The social sciences tends to start out with a complicated model, trying to get everything in to the model. And then that the model is unusable.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But we've seen some presentations here at this conference where people seem to go for as complicated as possible, straight off the bat.

Marcus Felson:

Well that's because some of them are not that experienced. I think particularly some of the young scholars aren't that experienced and they don't know that that's a dead end.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So before routine activity theory, who are you hanging with? What were you talking about?

Marcus Felson:

In a way, if we drill back, I was an undergraduate at University of Chicago. I had a couple of courses that influenced me the most. One was of course, on demography, taught by Philip Hauser. Philip Hauser had headed the Census Bureau. He was a famous demographer. And the other that influenced me great was of course called the modern city. The

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modern city was taught by Mayer and Meyer. Harold Mayer was a geographer and Gerhard Meyer was an economist. They put together this course called the modern city, which taught all the fundamentals about cities. It was basically urban geography, urban economics.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you were thinking about this big picture, the macro kind of like in the city?

Marcus Felson:

Yeah, I had the training. But here's what happened. My father had a lot of influence. He was a radiologist.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

All right. I'm dying to see how you're going to tie this into routine activity theory.

Marcus Felson:

When I was 11 years old, he was putting together a program textbook, which in those days had no computer involved. It was just page. You flip the page and got to the next principle. And he broke it down into its basics. You sure you want to hear this?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I can always edit.

Marcus Felson:

Always edit. Well, he put together fundamentals of chest radiology. And one of his fundamentals was called the silhouette side. X-rays are two dimensional, but the human body is three dimensional. So they have to infer three dimensions from two. And what he did is he started with the four elements of the human body.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We're not going back to the four humors here, are we?

Marcus Felson:

No. I'm 72 years old. So this was 61 years ago. The four densities are metal, fat, error, gas and water.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I have all of those in all the wrong proportions.

Marcus Felson:

All right, but you have them. And they show up in different densities on an X-Ray. Then these four elements helps you infer what's on an X-Ray, whether it's abnormal, whether it's cancerous, whether it's something else. Now, what he taught me is to think physically. Think in terms of finite numbers of elements, not too many, to think then about the relations among those elements and to use that to sort out your information. Well anyway, when I was a young professor University of Illinois now, Ken Land got a grant and I was co-investigator to study social indicator models,

change in society annually from 1947 to 74, with annual indicators. And on all kinds of sectors of society. Crime was one of the sectors and he was uninterested in it, so he turned it over to me. So what we did is we hit time series on all the different crime rates and this and that. And we had all kinds of independent variables, the conventional ones, divorce rate, number of police, all the things that at that time, people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The usual suspects.

Marcus Felson:

The usual suspects out of date. What I found is those weren't really working. Then the other thing is I went and I studied the independent variables that sociologists thought would work. It turns out the period of massive crime rate increase in United States in the sixties was not a period of great growing poverty, was not a period in which the minority population was increasing. Divorce rates were increasing, but they'd been increasing before and after. There was no reason, using conventional sociology, it just couldn't explain.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you were heading into heresy territory at this point.

Marcus Felson:

I was born a heretic in a family of heretics. I couldn't find any way to make the traditional inequality. Inequality was quite stable through that period, the gini ratio. So none of it was working. And so I concluded none of it was working. And I said, "Well, what does work?" Well, the first thing I did is I studied the time series in victimization and offending and found that they were kind of similar. And the other thing is I studied the micro data and found that the same demographic groups that were highly likely to be offenders were also highly likely to be victims.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yep. Still holds true to today.

Marcus Felson:

Yeah. And the other thing is the age structure wasn't working quite well. There was a 30% increase in the number of young males, but there was a 300% increase in the number of crimes during that period. So it didn't make sense. Now a mathematician would tell you, and in fact, one of them did tell me, "Well, that depends on your mathematical function."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It doesn't have to be linear.

Marcus Felson:

Correct. Except it's stupid.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

A lot of academia is stupid. You're not really narrowing it down there.

Marcus Felson:

You don't have a doubling of the number of youths and a quintupling of the number of crimes they commit. It doesn't make sense.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The first time quintupling has ever been said on this podcast.

Marcus Felson:

Okay. Well, it doesn't make sense. It wasn't even a doubling of the number of users of 30%.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It was something else. Wasn't it?

Marcus Felson:

It doesn't make sense to say that it's mathematically possible. It's like saying don't use any of the sense you were born with because there's a mathematical possibility that something totally nonsensical happened.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I just loved the idea that you think academics are born with common sense. Have you not learned this over the X number of years.

Marcus Felson:

Yes. I wouldn't say I was born with common sense. I would say that every now and then I come back to it. I drift in and I say, "Wait a minute, this isn't right."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you starting to coalesce this picture together that the traditional sociological explanations aren't holding up.

Marcus Felson:

That's right. Then the next thing I thought of, and this was a crucial step was to stop using the word victim. So you use the word target.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay. Why was that a big step?

Marcus Felson:

Because if someone's breaking into your house, when you're not there, you may be the victim, but you're not the target. The target is your house and your property. Normally someone wants your money. They don't want you. Now, there are exceptions. There's a revenge or something like that. But by and large, they want your money. And so the target is the house, the wallet, whatever. And so we need to separate the victim.

Then we need to separate the guardian because it's the absence of the guardian. And it's the absence that became extremely relevant because as I looked over the data, I realized that most of the burglaries occur during the day. Now I had some other stipulations to try to sort this out. I wanted micro macro to both work. I wanted the same relationships to work in a cross tab of individuals and in the macro data. I wanted it to work at every level.

So anything that worked on one level and not the other, it wasn't good enough. So unemployment works at the micro level, a neighborhood with a lot of unemployed people has more crime. But it doesn't work at the macro level. When the crime rates were going up, the unemployment rates were going down.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Marcus Felson:

So if it didn't work at both levels, it's no good. And what happens is people pick the level that fits their ideology and find something that works at any level that fits their ideology.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've just described half of economics.

Marcus Felson:

And sociology and economics. Economists may hate sociology, but they make the same mistakes. They do the same kind of nonsense including believing their own models as a central of reality.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Now, one of the things that we talked about before, probably a year ago now, is that you took some umbrage about the use of the term motivated offender. Because you prefer lightly offender. What's that, again?

Marcus Felson:

First of all, lots of non-offenders may be motivated to be offenders. So you can be motivated, but not have the opportunity.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I can be motivated to break into Fort Knox, but it's not going to happen.

Marcus Felson:

That's right. And I didn't like the motivated because I thought it was a sop to conventional criminology. I've resisted any cooperation with the models I think are confusing. It is my experience that if you compromise with confusion, you become confusion. If you want to be non-confusing, you don't compromise with confused people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And in this example, the confused people are mainstream criminologists?

Marcus Felson:

A lot of them are. They may be sociologists. If you're talking about motivation, variations among individuals being the key to their behavior, you're already giving up opportunity. And by the way, if you build a model that includes the traditional and my stuff, the traditional will ultimately squeeze you out. If you cooperate with them, they will toss you a bone every now and then. But it will not be long before all of your insights are relegated to the back burner.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No, just we ended up back in social disorganization.

Marcus Felson:

That's right. And social disorganization is confusing and vague in its conceptualization and its measurement. The mixture of confusion and clarity leads to confusion.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Marcus Felson:

And therefore I resist all confusion, all vagueness. I don't like vagueness. I don't want anything to do with it. Now I will make this exception. If over time, if you start out vague and intuitive, but you get better, that is you get clearer and clearer and clearer, then that's a process. But what I don't like is in much of the field, you start out vague and get vaguer.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And this is what annoys the hell out of cops because they aspire to speak to academics and academics, especially those with a sociological background and training, have a lot of this vagueness, this confusion, this inability to articulate exactly what's going on. That drives cops nuts because it's so abstract and yet they're so very practically oriented that these things tend to be in conflict.

Marcus Felson:

Well, the word abstract has a double meaning. You can abstract from concrete information and lead to a bigger category. For example, if I take that, there's a lamp over there and there's a lamp over there. And if I put them together in the category of lamps, that's an abstraction. But that's not abstract in the other sense of being fuzzy. I can define a lamp.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But social disorganization or social cohesion.

Marcus Felson:

Fuzzy. Yes. Social cohesion.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And Collective efficacy.

Marcus Felson:

Yeah, collective efficacy's a bad one. The fundamental problem with collective efficacy it's conceptualized differently by many people. It was not started by Samson. It was started by psychologist, Bandura. It meant and still means in Bandura's terms, is that you do good things for the larger society. In fact, what happens in the neighborhood is not for the good of the society. It's for the good of your neighborhood to keep those other bad people out.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Not in my backyard.

Marcus Felson:

Not in my backyard. We don't want those people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But isn't that just the defining of societies as a much smaller group then?

Marcus Felson:

They measure collective efficacy by asking people, "Do you trust your neighbor?" And if people say, "No, I don't trust my neighbors." They say your neighbor's low on collective efficacy.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Marcus Felson:

And they correlate that with a high crime rate. Now let's look at what really happens. Let's say you and I live in a tough neighborhood and there's a lot of crime in our neighborhood. And some guy knocks on my door and asks me, "Do you trust your neighbors?" My answer is going to be, "No, of course I don't trust my neighbors." I live in a high crime area. So you get your correlation, but that's not because it's the distrust, the cause works the other way around.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Marcus Felson:

And they can always get their correlation and then make their declarative statement. But it turns out every time they try to introduce collective efficacy into a neighborhood that doesn't have it, they fail to do so. And it's because of the high crime rates. Ultimately the objective world sets the stage.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So your choosing likely offenders instead of motivated offenders. You're pretty much pushing back against mainstream, traditional sociologically, determined criminology.

Marcus Felson:

Because it's fuzzy.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So how did that work out for you?

Marcus Felson:

Well, some people aren't very nice about it. Some people dismiss it as I'm crazy, you couldn't be serious. Some people embrace it. Some people embrace it 15 years after I said it, but they didn't do it initially.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Was it easy to get published?

Marcus Felson:

No. It took three years. I have reviewers who said such things as "He's obviously talented, the scholar should consider doing something else." One of them said, "This is empirical dribble." One critic in a meeting said, "This is obvious." And then he kept talking and said, "But it couldn't possibly be true." And I asked him, "Well, if it's obvious, how come it can't possibly be true?" And then another, whenever they said it was obvious, I said, "Well, if it's obvious, why did you miss it?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you were a feisty young academic.

Marcus Felson:

I was feisty. I was very feisty.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That hasn't changed by the way.

Marcus Felson:

Well, I'm glad to hear that. Maybe I'm not so old.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I've never said you're old.

Marcus Felson:

Well, I'll be 72 this summer.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You're still causing trouble.

Marcus Felson:

I try to help more. In other words, I try to help with young scholars more. That I try to do. But on the other hand, if I think they're really on the wrong track, I probably tell them. I've probably told you, have I ever told you you're on the wrong track?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

More than once I'm sure. That's pretty much the story of my life though.

Marcus Felson:

Oh, well, but I think I've encouraged you.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've been a stalwart defender of this area and encouraging lots of young scholars. I know that the majority of the people at this meeting have been grateful for the help that you've given us.

Marcus Felson:

Is that a mouse or is that someone breaking in your room?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This hotel makes strange noises. So let's rewind for a moment. You're bucking the sociological tradition of criminology. You're coming up with an idea that really doesn't look at the motivation offenders in the slightest, which is the foundation for so much criminological thought still to this day. I'm kind of interested in the idea of how this became such a big idea, because there were lots of ideas kicking around in academia. And I'm just trying to figure out what occurred that made this so applicable, so practical towards crime prevention when lots and lots of other ideas just fall by the wayside. Is it its simplicity?

Marcus Felson:

It's simplicity. But it's simple as it needs to be, but no simpler. I work very hard on articulation, on every level. I rewrite every word. I design each table and chart very carefully. I can work a week or two on a PowerPoint presentation.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Just to figure out what feels right, what visually conveys what you need.

Marcus Felson:

Presentation is science.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you think that's missing in a lot of current criminology, kind of a lot of current research, a lot of current academia?

Marcus Felson:

Yes. But I have a lot of communications practice and I have to thank my parents because they were very articulate. My mother had a college degree, which was unusual for women born in 1914. They knew how to tell a story. Story is very important for science. People don't realize a story means you rearrange the information so it makes sense.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And that's how you convey material to practitioners, to people outside of academia?

Marcus Felson:

Well, to myself. When I talk to myself, I'm talking to you, I'm talking to other people and I don't talk on a technical level usually.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But the reason I'm asking about this is because a lot of the podcast listeners are not academics. I've got a lot of people who listen, but the few people who are silly enough to keep listening to these random Ratcliffe ramblings tend to be people who are practically focused, who are interested in taking things like routine activities theory and applying it to find ways to actually make communities safer.

Marcus Felson:

Well, I don't even use abbreviations. I won't say RTD or RMD or ECT.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm glad because I've no idea what any of those things are.

Marcus Felson:

I forget it anyway. I'll use the term.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How do you feel about how your ideas have been taken up by practitioners?

Marcus Felson:

I think they're compelling. What happens is it's pretty compelling to say offender, target, guarding. And it's easy to remember. Even the elaborations aren't that hard.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So with are you saying when you're in meetings with police or with policy people or with government and they want to keep dragging it back to that traditional mainstream criminology, that they probably had an education in? How do you get them to refocus?

Marcus Felson:

They're usually not the problem.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Who are the problem?

Marcus Felson:

I have the least problem with geographers because they can think spatially intangibly. I have the most problem with sociologists.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because?

Marcus Felson:

I have three degrees in sociology. But sociologists are taught that people don't have bodies and don't live in the physical world, or that if they do have bodies and moving the physical world, those are nuisance facts. In other words, they don't want to talk about that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And they just want to talk about?

Marcus Felson:

Personality and social traits and social groups. I don't do breakdowns by race. I'll do breakdowns by age. I won't do racial breakdowns.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Not relevant to the opportunity structures of crime.

Marcus Felson:

On occasion it is. For example, in some situations, there are black neighborhoods that have more abandoned property. But it's the abandoned property I'm interested in. Not that the people's skins have more melanin or less melanin.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Where are the areas where, as we're moving forward into the criminology of the built environment, environmental criminology, where can we go with that next? Where are the areas that are interesting you right now?

Marcus Felson:

There are two areas that I think are most interesting. One is the design and management of the night economy.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay. Bars, restaurants, nightclubs, that kind of area.

Marcus Felson:

That's right. And the key question is, are you going to enforce your liquor laws or not? The liquor laws are perfectly good and perfectly adequate if they're enforced. And what we're seeing all across the Western nations is non-enforcement of the liquor laws.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think many police departments have policy constraints or are reluctant to go inside premises. So they end up just policing the residual effects that happen outside.

Marcus Felson:

Well, look, it's very easy in many, many States to close down. All they need is about two or three violations. They can close the place down for the weekend. Another couple, and they can close them down permanently. It's civil law, it's not criminal law.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Isn't that then the equivalent of trying to arrest your way out of the problem, it we're just shutting down bars?

Marcus Felson:

No, because the other bars see that you shut them down and they start to change their behavior. It's much easier to take a license away or put pressure on one bar owner than to try to arrest a hundred customers.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So it's a little bit like the focused deterrence approach?

Marcus Felson:

Oh yeah. I mean, it's much easier and it's civil law. You don't even have to arrest anyone.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This is saving of paperwork right there.

Marcus Felson:

And the evidence level is different. It's not beyond a reasonable doubt. It's preponderance of evidence.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

One of the other things that you've talked about is this difference between outsiders camouflaging the crimes of insiders.

Marcus Felson:

Yeah. Well, I've been on it for years and I can't prove it, but I still know I'm right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay.

Marcus Felson:

All right. Now let's say you and I are kids living in this neighborhood and there's nobody else comes into the neighborhood and everyone knows we're the marginal kids. And so if something gets stolen, we're the usual suspects, the two of us. Now, let's say on the other hand, we lived in a neighborhood where lots of visitors are coming in and out, and everyone thinks it's the outsiders committing the crime. You and I can probably steal some things or do some things surreptitiously and no one will suspect us. They think it's the outsiders. So the insiders are camouflaged by the outsiders. So wherever there are outsiders coming in, not only do the outsiders commit more crime, but the insiders commit more crime.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So it's a little bit taking advantage of our tribal evolutionary background where we're in the same tribe, so we're to be trusted and we don't trust people from outside.

Marcus Felson:

In Culver city, California, there was a block meeting and I decided to go to the block meeting. I lived out there. I decided beforehand, I will tell no one in this meeting I'm a criminologist.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's probably a good rule anyway.

Marcus Felson:

And I decided I will keep my mouth shut beginning to end, which I did. And the officer friendly they sent told everyone, the whole purpose of this meeting is to get the criminals to stay off this block and to go on to the next block. And I thought, "Well, first of all, he's a jerk." The second thing he said is our crime in Culver city, California all comes from outsiders.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And this is how we end up blaming immigrants even though the evidence for immigrant groups causing more crime.

Marcus Felson:

He was including native born Americans who didn't live in Culver city, California. And by the way, Culver city, California isn't that big. He said they were all from some of these other towns around or Los Angeles surrounds there also.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I suppose at least he appreciated the benefit of displacement, right? So when crime went up, it was from outside and when crime went down, I'm assuming they took responsibility for where the crime occurs.

Marcus Felson:

I think they did.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, I mean, there are some people that claim that situational crime prevention is a little bit more right wing politically because it can involve social exclusion and some of those kind of components.

Marcus Felson:

I don't think that's accurate because first of all, situational prevention and crime prevention through environmental design can and have benefited low income areas, including public housing. That's not exclusion. Now, it depends on let's look at exclusion. Let's say you and I are poor guys. We live in public housing and there are other people coming in and stealing our stuff who don't even live in our project. Now, if we have a dorm in there, we're excluding those people who don't live there from coming in and burgling us.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yep.

Marcus Felson:

But he's that social exclusion or is that saying, wait a minute, we live here, you don't? And if we were wealthy or we could have a DORMA, why can't poor people have a DORMA.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Door entry systems, Gates over alleyways, all these kinds of things help to keep those people, their stuff secure.

Marcus Felson:

So these are things that benefit wealthier neighbors. Why not the poor?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If you were training the next generation of say mid level police commanders who actually have some control over doing crime prevention, have some incentive to do crime prevention, would you even suggest them to do a criminology degree?

Marcus Felson:

If they found the right place and learn situation prevention, yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But not mainstream criminology.

Marcus Felson:

No, because it's kind of bankrupt. I mean, it really is. The standard ideas have not been working for a long time and they're working less every year because first of all, the night economy is taking over as a problem. Second, the deteriorated neighborhoods are depleted in population and a bit abandoned. So they don't even sustain crime anymore much. But the third thing is middle class people, including middle-class youths, are committing so many crimes. Usually their crime and disorder is carried out in entertainment districts. So they go to the night economy.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

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So these individual factors that people are working awfully hard to try and predict individual criminology, are largely irrelevant if you just change the opportunity structure?

Marcus Felson:

I'd say that's true, but there are some regularities. Our problem is the enemy of science is a correlation of 0.3. And the problem with those correlations is if they were zero, we could just say the hypothesis is-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

False. yep.

Marcus Felson:

But if it were higher than 0.3, we could use it. But when the correlations are at 0.3, we can't use them and we can't get rid of them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay.

Marcus Felson:

And when you have 10 correlations of 0.3, eating up each other's variance, you end up with complicated models that are inapplicable to anything.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And at that point, academics are presenting on this stuff because they think they've got just enough to present a paper or at a conference on. And all the practitioners are sitting there saying, "What the fuck am I going to do with this?"

Marcus Felson:

Well, the other thing is you can hide your lack of variance because you use logistic regression and a pseudo R squared and nobody can tell how little you're predicting.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm not entirely sure how much of that I'm going to include. Because at that point, we'll have people crashing the car when they're listening to it and they're trying to wrap their head around statistics while people are commuting to work.

Marcus Felson:

You understand my point?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I do. I do. If students are entering the field and they're not wanting to do traditional mainstream criminology, where are the areas where they can actually do work that is actually practically useful, can actually help communities?

Marcus Felson:

A lot of the students, including students in my university, Texas State, do not seem to have the courage to break out on their own. And you do find this. They've got to be willing to break out on their own and try a new topic and look at ways to make it work. And some of them can't do that. They can't bring themselves to do that. Some of them will be able to do it in a few years, but not right now. So these are the kinds of issues you do have to face, is will they pick out an area? I think the key is to try to get them to pick a problem that's narrow enough in application, but broad in ideas that are funneled into that application.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But you took a risk in doing that and the paper for which you're most famous for, it took you three years to get it published.

Marcus Felson:

I had lots of publications during those years in other ways to protect myself. So I was an early promotion. I didn't have trouble getting tenure.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What did that process teach you about getting new ideas into academia?

Marcus Felson:

Well, I was stubborn to begin with. I still am. And also, I was convinced I was right. But there are a lot of different journals. I used to tell people, if you beat your head against the wall enough, the wall finally starts to move.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well your work is now fundamental as just about every textbook, or the decent textbooks, on criminology anyway. And one of the few ideas that honestly most practitioners know about-

Marcus Felson:

Yeah, they do know.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They absolutely do.

Marcus Felson:

Police get it in their training.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And you think about naming criminologists or mainstream criminologists, they can't name anybody, but they know your work.

Marcus Felson:

Often they'll know my work, they may not know my name, which is all right. Those they'll know the routine activity approach, but they won't know. I was surprised one time I came home and the TV show Numb3rs was on and someone says something about what we could use the routine activity approach on this.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There you go.

Marcus Felson:

Yeah. But they didn't name me.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Am I on the script note for the idea in a TV show that's no longer on the television. I don't think it's on the television anymore, is it?

Marcus Felson:

No, I don't think it is.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's the pinnacle of academic achievement. Maybe that's the most we can all hope for.

Marcus Felson:

As academics, we do get caught up in things like I want people to read my article, I want them to do followup work, that kind of thing. And that I find I'm grateful for.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I don't know. I think academics put too much faith in that. I don't see a lot of practitioners waiting desperately for the next issue of the Bangladeshi journal of sheep stealing and criminology, where they can read about the latest ideas. They don't go anywhere near that stuff.

Marcus Felson:

They don't wait for the American journals.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And there's good reason for that because a lot of the journals generally are full of rubbish.

Marcus Felson:

I agree with you, and I think we don't have self-correcting mechanisms. The problem is professors are talking too much to other professors. There's another problem. That's more perverse, policy professors. What they mean by policy is grand policy like I will advise America to stop using capital punishment and it must listen to me. Well, that's not the policy that's needed or is likely. Those go through political. Those changes occur for political reasons, not professorial

reasons. What they do want is the guy who's running a jail is worried about jail suicides. And if you can tell him, give him some research on how to reduce jail suicides, that's in his realm of necessity.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So maybe like all politics is local, all good crime prevention is local as well?

Marcus Felson:

That's a very good point. It's smaller things that are not small to the guy who's got to do it. Well, here's an example. Police departments have problems with PTSD, people coming back from the war zones. They hire them as cops and they get in trouble with their families or other police. And some of the police departments have been very forward looking and hiring vets. And then they're sorry afterwards that their good deeds were punished. So what do you do with the guys with PTSD? And Well, any research is going to help them, help both the officers and the chief. So what happens is many professors are too bored by the practical topics. They want to do the grand topics like giving advice on capital punishment or reduce prisons or whatever. And so there's also a mistaken sense that the world is waiting for our advice. Well, the world isn't waiting for our advice.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It really isn't.

Marcus Felson:

And when the professors tried it out there, it's usually because the politics have changed. They take them off the shelf, let that professor give a talk to support what they were going to do anyway. And then as soon as they're done, they put them back on the shelf. I can actually name people, I won't, who thought they were being listened to. They were not being listened to. They were being trotted out.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They were convenient.

Marcus Felson:

They were convenient.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So maybe the final thought with all of this is that good students of environmental criminology or criminology need to pay attention to the politics as much as the theory and the crime prevention.

Marcus Felson:

Well, that's one way to do it. There's another way, and that is give small advice that's useful.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And that is probably a great place to finish.

Marcus Felson:

Okay.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Marcus, thank you very much.

Marcus Felson:

Thank you.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've been listening to episode 16 of Reducing Crime, recorded in Guangzhou in June, 2019. Other episodes, look at reducingcrime.com or the usual podcasting places. New episodes are announced on Twitter @_reducingcrime. Be safe and best of luck.