Geography of Crime Transcript

Speakers:

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Emily Blackburn

Drawve

Hey there, everyone. I'm Grant Drawve, the host of the Geography of Crime podcast. Today, I have a special guest and a local one, Emily Blackburn, a Director from CAP Index. And with that, Emily, I'll kick it over to you. Go ahead and introduce yourself.

Blackburn

Hi, I'm Emily Blackburn. I work with Grant at CAP Index, and I'm the Director of Geospatial Crime Solutions at our company.

Drawve

Now, you have a pretty interesting career arc trajectory. Can you give us a bit of a background? You were a well-known name in crime analysis before you joined CAP Index, because I knew you from a LinkedIn profile primarily at that point.

Blackburn

I was with the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department. I was there about 15 years. So a huge chunk of my career there in ST Louis. But you know, if you're going to make a career in crime analysis, that's a great place to be. Reaching back further, my undergrad was at SEMA, or Southeast Missouri State University, and I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. So I thought I'll go to grad school as every lost college person does. I went to grad school at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, and still didn't know what I wanted to do. So I got a job at the Missouri Attorney General's Office as an investigator and knew that wasn't it, that I needed to keep looking. And when I found myself in South Florida for a while, I applied for several jobs and got two of them. One was a Medicaid fraud analyst at a very small company, like five or six people. And I did that. And nine months later, the Florida attorney general finally got their background check done and offered me a job as a Medicaid fraud analyst with them. And that was closer to where we were going to live permanently. So I took that and really enjoyed the analysis. So my background's not only in blue -collar crime or street crime, but also white -collar crime, which gives me a pretty broad perspective of crime and crime analysis, which has helped me. I have range in street crime, but certainly I have a broad base.

Drawve

Now, what drew you into the crime analysis field? And over your career, have there been any cases that kind of just made the aha moment that you kind of still think about from time to time?

Blackburn

Oh gosh, I have a lot of cases I think about all the time. But I think what drew me in professionally was the problem solving and the patterns. In each of my roles, I've been able to review people who just do vast amounts of crime. And if you can focus on those folks and uncover these individual patterns and bring them out of the picture, you know, the whole community benefits. And I've done this with dentists and

bank lenders who approve loans and serial robbers and serial shooters. So a wide variety of people. One case I always joke about, it was called Operation Dirty Dozen. And you can still find it if you're good at the internet and the Wayback Machine. But it was a Medicaid fraud case where we did 13 different Medicaid providers, but I joke that they were going to, you know, the jail calls were not very kind to me. And so I find white collar criminals much more dangerous to me as an analyst than street criminals. So that one brings me back always, but I find it personally satisfying to do those types of cases so that I think that's what drew me in and kept me going. But I think the other part of it is, you know, I remember going through North City and the worst parts of North City where everybody thinks that everyone is a criminal. But I grew up in southernmost Illinois, the poorest county in Illinois. So I just thought, I'm surprised more people don't commit crime. I'm surprised at how resilient people are and how most people here are just going on their day to day and doing their thing, but being affected by the crime more. And so being able to work at a police department and help satisfy the needs of those communities and listen to those communities really affected me, I think, having come from places that were poor, where houses didn't always have windows and roofs didn't always have shingles, but had plywood on them. And that was normal. St. Louis didn't scare me like it does people who didn't grow up with that.

Drawve

And I think you bring up a good part there too. And especially with the context of St. Louis, your history there. Now, when you think about that kind of career within St. Louis, too, crime analysis and crime analysts in general aren't common outside of especially medium and larger sized cities. How was that development? How were you able to bridge kind of that gap between the data, the boots on the ground, all of that? And what did you find that kind of worked best for you over those years?

Blackburn

I think really understanding what the question was, and you'll know this from working with me, I ask a lot of questions, like I own that I ask an annoying amount of questions. But what I found is if I don't ask those questions and really get at what the person asking, whether it's a client or police commander or citizen, what their actual end goal is, I can get on the wrong road. And so I think asking a lot of questions and really finding out what people need, not necessarily what they're asking for on the first ask, but what they really need solved helps a lot and goes a long way. So really getting into the dirt and the weeds and having an iterative conversation about where we want to end up gets us there.

Drawve

And I want to underscore how important that is, because it seems simple enough to think about what are we solving for? But for some people, it's very difficult to articulate the end goal and what the initial ask is, is likely going to morph, as we see it now on the job, to what it is as a solution at the back end. So I think that's incredibly important. I always have those career moments of where are we going to go in life? How has it been for you moving from St. Louis PD to CAP Index. How was the transition away from working within a local law enforcement agency, taking those skill sets, and thinking of different career paths? And with that transition across careers, anything surprise you along the way?

Blackburn

I think the thing that surprised me most is the pace. I thought I was getting away from 911 emergency pace…and working for you hasn't been that. I just want to be able to relax. But all jokes aside, the pace is brisk, more brisk than I had thought. But a lot of the same skills come through. And I know what people think about crime analysis. And yes, I need to know the difference between specifically what 6,000

different ways do people say 23F, which is larceny for a motor vehicle. That's the bread and butter of my job. But knowing how to ask questions, knowing what analysis is, knowing what problems need to be solved helps. So we think there for so long and saw wide variety of issues come through my door. I think it prepared me sort of for the kinds of things and problems we solve.

Drawve

Sure. And I think you hit it there. You develop a subject matter expertise, yes, in crime and crime data, but it's also how to approach problems or questions and how to solve for it and where to poke and where to pry a bit more out of that. So that's a key part. Now, you brought up a good portion of your day-to-day now, the nitty gritty of working with data. And I don't know if I even realized to some extent in the almost two years at CAP Index, just how messy crime data can be across agency to agency from inconsistent definitions, geographic differences, all of this. You're in the weeds much more than I am. What are some of the challenges you see with crime data as a whole? And how do we then make sense of this for, say, clients or the average person itself so they can actually use some of this?

Blackburn

Right. So the end summary statistics are always cleaned up that people see, right? They're clean. They go from agency to state to feds, and it's consistent. But what we get, because we get sort of the raw data or the line by line data, right? We don't get the number 50 for auto thefts. We get 50 lines of data for auto thefts. Like that's what we're getting. And I think that the messy part is 240, which is the code for auto theft could mean a variety of things. I think a better example is the 23F, the larceny for motor vehicle. I tease I've seen it 6,000 different ways, but I have. It's burglary of a motor vehicle. It's burglary to conveyance of conveyance, but sometimes that means auto theft. So you have to check the end numbers because you don't want to code it wrong. Or it's grand larceny for motor vehicle or petite larceny for motor vehicle, which is completely different than motor vehicle parts, right? and you have to keep all that separate, but we need one way of saying it for CAP Index so that anybody at our company can pull up a 23 F or larceny for motor vehicle and be very confident when they say this is what this is for this city, for this city, for this city, and knowing that they're making an apples to apples comparison.

And so just that level of detail, making sure the data is super clean so that everybody else at the company can do what they need to do and interpret the data in a successful way. And I have tons of soapboxes about definitions. And so even though, you know, I have to, the FBA isn't always my favorite, and maybe that's a different podcast. But the definitions that they've given us, there's a reason for it.

Drawve

The red tape and bureaucracy can be annoying, but it allows us to make these comparisons on a national scale, because we're all held to the same standard. And that's where you and I have discussed it. We went to the state UCR conference last year for the first time. And the amount of attention to detail that the states take, the employees there that are surrounded in the deep, deep of UCR, NIBRS, validation, descriptions, all the coding, it was eye opening. I was surprised by that level. I had no idea this even existed as a conference, let alone that tender loving care that this gets.

Blackburn

So in St Louis, we had a guy whose only job was to read…maybe not their only job, their main job was to read every police report and make sure that what the officer said met the federal definition and that the statistics we turned in to the state and later the feds were exactly what they wanted. And I knew we did

that and knew we took great care with that. I didn't realize the level of auditing that came in at the state and federal level and how that accreditation really matters to the police department. So I knew that a great job was done, but that was even more than I had suspected or knew of. So it was eye -opening that how much care goes into that, which is incredible.

Drawve

It is. And you said it there. It's like, yes, I know NIRA certification exists. I had no idea to what degree some of these states go through with their agencies within and going around. Anyone listening, check out the conference. It's actually very cool to just learn about UCR data.

And they have actually pretty fun events. I forget where it is this year. I think it was Wisconsin.

Blackburn

or Minnesota was one of those two cities.

Drawve

Somewhere cold in November, so one of those places. Sounds amazing. All right, building from that, and you spend more time with crime data than the average data. As you get through that, and it's numbers after numbers, it's crime after crime, are there any insights you've kind of learned along the way that reminds us that it's more than just the numbers, but it's still about people, communities, and in our case, even businesses? Is there anything that kind of brings that back through this?

Blackburn

I do get in the weeds and in the numbers that that's difficult for me, but I think, you know, I talked about it the first about serving the community and really listening to what they need. So, you know, a lot of mistakes I think are made when well-intentioned people assume they know what's best for a community and do whatever they think is best. And I think taking the time and having difficult conversations and learning from them brings it back. And so I've had a lot of those over the years and, I just, I have to remember that, right? You can't, cause you can't drown in it because I see it all day, all day. I'm like, Oh, 300 motor vehicle thefts. That's not bad. But to the person who loses their car, even once that is, it is bad.

Drawve

So I think it's just a constant reminding myself of that, but you have to, you have to balance it. Right. And it is a bit of a battle of like, yeah. And it sounds bad in the sense of, like, I'm not desensitized to crime numbers, but we also see them on a daily basis, too. So there is kind of this natural comparison of, oh, 300 here is not bad. But if you look at, I mean, Cape Springs, Arkansas, two would be probably incredible here.

So it is some of that. And then it does impact the people, the community, the fear of violence, the fear of crime in general. We know that lives pretty wide right now. It is important to kind of come back around to that.

Now, the fun question. And I've heard some of these and you're coming up on your two -year mark at the start of the year. Now, what grinds your gears when it comes to working with old crime data?

Blackburn

Oh, I mean, I think a lot of stuff, right? Because I'm in it so deeply. But I think if I had to pick one or two, I think what drives me the most crazy right now is that agencies can't always access it in a way that's meaningful.

And that drives me insane. I could do two whole podcasts just on that. It just makes my blood pressure rise thinking about it. And what I mean for those of you who don't deal with this is police agencies, generally speaking, when they have a vendor managing their data, they can get the data to state and federal level through a variety of ways, but they can't always extract it if you ask for it. So through a Freedom of Information Act, and they'll say they can't get it.

And that will boggle your mind. You'll think certainly they can. Why couldn't they get access to their data? That sounds shady. And I think that's what drives me crazy. As a company, as somebody who needs it, I can't get it to get my work done.

But I also empathize with the police departments who sincerely can't get this data out. Either they don't have the IT personnel who have the capacity to get it out, or their vendor wants to charge them astronomical amounts of money to push that data out. And I really think that that should be a base option for any records management system that's sold to a police department. I find that to be unacceptable, and it really bothers me.

You know, I work on some sidequests of how do I improve that for agencies? Because I don't think that that should be the state of affairs in 2025. We should be able to get at that data. Of course. Not because Emily wants it, but because it's the police department's data. Because they can't even do percent change or see patterns or do any kind of analysis if they can't get this data out. So it bothers me, but it also makes those communities suffer. And it's ridiculous. Like, it's ridiculous. Like, I'll just say that I've spent hours on the phone with records departments, emailing them, trying to figure it out. And I've converted stuff from PDF and sent it back to police agencies to be like, here, I cleaned this up for you. I did it for my own purposes, but here, if anybody else does a FOIA, just take it. So I think that that's my, my, my biggest gear grinding right now. And it's a, it's a worthy one. And I'll even say from this week, I've experienced that with two different local agencies around me of, I'm still astonished with the inability of agencies. They're recording all this data. It's going to a state center, then it's going to the FBI, but they don't have the ability to just pull it themselves and look at it other than some summary stats itself, which to your point is mind boggling. You pay for an RMS and then you can't actually look at your own data. So when we think about crime analysis or anything beyond that, You don't even have the means to get it out. One agency pretty much canceled my request because they couldn't do it. The other one, to your point, IT came in and saved the day.

After they called me, they're like, we're trying, but they didn't know how to do it. IT came in and saved the day and it came in two different sheets and a workbook of being able to link it together. It's still not your NIBRS -ish data, but it's enough to get you there. Right. And it's crazy. Right. And for folks with an IT bent, it's, it's mostly because it's relational tables. So it goes in and there's a victim table, um, uh, not victim, maybe a people table, um, a things table, a things police do table, like the stuff that we would add to it.

Like, do we have it on DVD? What did we take from the scene? Um, there's the crime information. So there's all these relational tables and. NIBRS absorbs that as relational tables. But what people ask for with FOIAs are a flat file, and they just don't know how to make these relational tables a flat file.

And there is a lot of degree of difficulty to it, especially if it's a CAD. So you think about dispatch or 911 calls mixed with records management systems, that's a whole data nightmare. And I saw the St. Louis Police Department through a couple of transitions like this, and it was a nightmare. I think that that's really my biggest problem. And I said to various vendors, can you solve this? Like if we buy your software, one of the things we need on day one is an extract. And I always got told yes. Here's what happened. It took about 18 months, despite the fact that I have them on paper saying yes. So yeah, that's a toll somewhere. theoretically possible in the sense of that.

Drawve

But it is, especially with the 2024 NIBRS just being released and Jacob Kaplan doing his magic with it too. Yeah. There is a big part of it. We see a huge increase in other agencies reporting NIBRS and I love it. Love to see that given the 2021 dip and the changeover and the transition with RMS being such a huge issue.

And then now part of our kind of day to day and trying to gather as much crime data around the US and saying great, you have all these neighbors reporting agencies. But it's a small agency bias, especially the ability to pull that out and to use. It's just drastically different. It's easy for big cities. Most of them have a data portal. They've sorted that out because they don't want to handle us for requesting a day -to -day kind of stuff.

And mid -tier, mixed bag, but it is astonishing with some of the cities, the inability with their RMS vendor to extract their own data that they're paying for them to handle for them. It's kind of crazy. Now come in full circle. You've mentored people along the way, you've worked with a ton of analysts. So say any analysts listening, students listening who want to follow a similar path, they're considering going to agency work or they're in an agency now that maybe they want to jump ship, be it, I mean, you've worked public sector university, you've worked now private sector with CAP Index. What advice would you give them?

Blackburn

I think to my former thing, ask a lot of questions. If you want to be really successful as an analyst, ask a lot of questions. Police commanders can be scary. I get that. They'll say, I need a burglary analysis for X, Y, Z area. And you have to know that's the wrong focus and be able to say something like, why are you asking me this?

Because from what I can see from my desk, it looks like you've got a robbery series going on. Is there a particular reason that you want to focus on burglary? Because left to my own devices, I would do this other thing. And maybe there's something you don't know about. Maybe there's an older person after them.

Maybe there's some outside influence, and you do need to do the burglary thing. Or maybe they're like, oh, really? I didn't know that. Yes, absolutely. Pivot to the robbery.

But your job as an analyst is to ask. And that's the thing I was told over and over by police commanders.

Drawve

You're the expert.

Blackburn

You're the crime analyst. You need to be able to tell us. So if you want to be a crime analyst, you have to stand up and say to police commanders what you think. Be open to know. But while being open to knowing, you don't know everything. Right.

Blackburn

And there may be a reason they're asking. So doing that, and my second piece of advice would be like, when you get a moment to breathe, take all the trainings you can. There's always something, some little nugget that will come in handy. It's a webinar here that's an hour, or something there. Try to fit it in. I'm terrible at that now, but I've also got 20 plus years experience.

So maybe I don't need it as much as I used to. But my main thing, what I always ask my analysts was to keep a notebook at your desk beside you. Write down, like physically pen and paper, write down through the week what trips you up, what you're doing band aid repairs on, what takes an hour and a half that you thought was going to take 20 minutes. And on Fridays or whatever day is best for you fix one of those things.

But that to me is the most, if that's taking webinars, you don't know how to fix it. If that's writing an Excel macro so that you don't have to clean the same data over and over, whatever it is, those little things, if you deal with them as you go on, because you can't always, in a police department, you can't always deal with them in the moment. You just can't. But if you take time to deal with those later and write them down and mark them off your list, you start getting that time back and that adds up and it adds up really quickly early on in your career. So I think that's my best advice is really writing down the issues, resolve things you band aid, and resolving them as you go on really gets you a lot of time back.

Drawve

And I'll be the first one to admit, I stole, I wasn't forward Friday from you when you brought that up. And yes, to your point, every week's a little different with our ability to kind of do some of that.

Drawve

But a big part is trying to stay current, especially this day and age with, I mean, AI galore in every other news article you read. But some of these can be your friend in terms of what is tripping you up now. Someone else has probably had the issue. So if it's posting on a blog, if it's the IACA forum, if it's reaching out to friends at ESRI, whatever it may be, whatever is tripping us up, there's usually a path forward. It's just trying to set aside time. And that's kind of the hardest part is blocking time of how do I continue to grow as an analyst at the end of the day?

Blackburn

Well, and I do that now too, and I think that's important. This note thing, and I love alliteration, so Forward Friday all day long, but I'm really good at, I still do, 20 years later, write the notes down. We had a thing where cities weren't matching up as much as we wanted because that's a free text field and officers can write in whatever they want. It doesn't have to match. So I instituted a new rule where even if we do feature city, like we fill in what they did, that we do a trim and proper first, so that at least it's trimmed, there's no random spaces and it's proper case.

And again, it's just writing down my problem the next time I had bandwidth being like, okay, what is the rule I can institute to make this less painful next time and talking to my colleagues and doing it. So, you

know, I still do that to this day is write down those pain points so that when we can fix them, we have it and we have that rule instilled. Oh, and we're benefiting from it. I mean, if you think about where we started almost two years ago, and you're one, two, three. of the band-aid fixes and where efficiencies were built in, more code, more kind of automation feel to it, went a long way.

Drawve

Now with that, your final thought, this can be a soapbox, this can be what grinds your gears, but is there anything you wish the average person better understood with crime data?

Blackburn

I think I wrote down, I kind of knew what you were going to ask. I wrote down a couple. And so I think that my first one we've already talked about, which is how much care goes into crime statistics. And how much, just because I didn't know it, even though I was a seasoned veteran. So I think how much care goes in, I think there's some thought that a police department is going to just say, well, we had 50 last year and we have 20 this year. And you can't do that.

There's so many people and there's a lot of bureaucratic red tape there. And sometimes bureaucratic red tape ends up being a good thing and there's reasons for it. And so there is, and so I think people should know that. My other thing I'd like to say is, to remember that perception isn't reality. Over 10 to 15 years, we have more and more access to information, and that goes across all things, but it seems to be particularly bad with crime. Um, and so we always, our hearts always feel like, oh, the crime is the worst.

Crime is the worst. And honestly, crime was like the worst in the mid nineties when I was graduating high school and in college and just running around anywhere I wanted to in St. Louis with like not a care in my mind, um, during the quote unquote, the worst, the worst part. But ignorance is bliss then, because if you didn't have a subscription to the post dispatch, which is our local paper, or you didn't catch the news at six, eight or 12 or six, eight or 10, right. On the one channel. You didn't know it. And now you can't not know it.

It's in your face. It's on the bottom of your screen, breaking news. You just can't get away from it. So I think with crime, find a reliable source if that's something that bothers you and really look at what the crime trends are. Now, that doesn't help you if you've been victimized, but it does help you have that perception and really base your decisions on reality in a way that's helpful.

And, you know, I remember an anecdote, like around 2018, I was looking at, and I would look at 20 and 30 year crime trends. So St. Louis has got really deep historical data. Auto theft, this is 2018, right before the Kia and Hyundai thing made auto theft do some insane things for like three years. But right before that, we were at the lowest in St. Louis that we had ever been in recorded history. And I'm talking about the 1960s. So we were as low as we were in the early 1960s, like 1962, 63, somewhere around there.

And no one believed me. Like, well, I think it's bad. I'm like, well, you can think what you want. The reality is our rates are around the 1960s. And they're like, well, there's more people there. And I'm like, no, no, no, no, no.

I'm good at my job. The rate, the rate, not the wrong number. Nice try buddy. But the rate, the per person rate. We need to tell you when something is bad at your place or things are increasing at your place so

that you can increase stuff. But we also need to be able to tell you when things aren't as bad so you can decrease because business decisions need to happen.

Drawve

So we want to help you make decisions about where you need to add, but also where you need to take away. And both things are important. And so I think that having that baseline. So I think ordinary people, everybody needs to know that because our little, our little human brains and hearts just haven't acclimated to this constant deluge of information. And I probably have two alerts now from be it rain or another next door app of some type of crime or missing dog or something around my vicinity has happened, right? So the information is always there. It's an interesting part for resource allocation. Yes, we deal with it a very different way now in terms of businesses versus police cities and all that. But it is a key point to this is, there's fluctuation, and you have to know which trends are going up and down, and which ones are staying about the same. Well, Emily, thank you for your time. I found this incredibly insightful. Until next time, everybody else, take care.