

*This transcript has been edited for clarity and brevity.*

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Welcome to *Justice Today*, the official podcast of Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, where we shine a light on cutting-edge research and practices and offer an in-depth look at what we're doing to meet the biggest public safety challenges of our time. Join us as we explore how funding, science, and technology help us achieve strong communities.

I'm your host Karen Friedman. I'm Director of Criminal Justice Innovation, Development, and Engagement at OJP's Bureau of Justice Assistance, otherwise known as BJA.

Today we are fortunate to have Robin Engel joining us. Robin Engel is a professor of criminal justice at the University of Cincinnati and Director of the Center for Police Research and Policy, a joint project of UC and the International Association of Chiefs of Police. Robin is not only a leading scholar of police practices and policies; she herself has led efforts to reform a law enforcement agency.

In the wake of a fatal shooting by a member of the University of Cincinnati police force, she was appointed head of that agency and steered it through the resulting crisis. She brings to her work not only years of distinguished research but firsthand experience as well. Welcome, Robin. We are so pleased that you can join us today.

ROBIN ENGEL: Well, thank you, Karen. I'm really pleased to be here as well.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Robin, your research has focused on issues that directly affect the stress levels and mental health of law enforcement officers. BJA has a longstanding interest in this area, and we administer several federal grant programs that address these issues. Right now, you and your research team are developing ways to help police agencies better respond to crises and in critical incidents. You want to tell us a little bit about that?

ROBIN ENGEL: Well, absolutely. We're so pleased to be partnered with some great team members and sponsored by BJA to develop new training for police officers. So, as they're responding to persons with mental health conditions and intellectual and developmental disabilities, that we can make sure that those encounters are safe and effective.

That training, actually, we call it CRIT. It's Crisis Response and Intervention Training. And it's based on an original CIT model. But we're really taking this to new levels. I'm working directly with the IACP, International Association of Chiefs of Police, but also with The Arc of the United States and with Policy Research Associates. These experts have so much to offer in terms of bringing different disciplines and information into the policing realm.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: OK. Arc of the United States, what is that?

ROBIN ENGEL: The Arc, actually, they have expertise in intellectual and developmental disabilities. And that's something that we haven't really merged with police training very effectively. So, this is a new opportunity to recognize that it's not just persons with mental health conditions that are really — those situations are different for officers to deal with, but also those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. That is the expertise that they bring.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Very interesting. I know that you've done a lot of work related to de-escalation techniques and helping police officers defuse potentially violent situations. We all know that in the post-George Floyd era that's really sorely needed. I was interested to learn why the word “de-escalation” can be such a controversial word in the world of law enforcement.

ROBIN ENGEL: It's interesting about de-escalation training because that term for some officers means, "You're teaching me to hesitate. You're teaching me to slow things down, but that's going to increase my risk."

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Risk, yeah.

ROBIN ENGEL: That's really an issue that we have to deal with in the field because citizens are requesting it from their police agencies: "We want you trained in de-escalation."

We see some police officers that are interpreting that as potentially problematic. But what we've learned through our research is that actually teaching officers to slow situations down, to use time, distance, cover, those types of de-escalation tactics and techniques, can be very effective and actually reduce officer injury in addition to citizen injury.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Go ahead, sorry to interrupt.

ROBIN ENGEL: Oh, no. That's fine. One of the things that law enforcement agencies are talking about in the field when they do de-escalation training, they're talking about diffusion. They're talking about conflict resolution. So, they're using slightly different terms in some cases. But it's still that core idea that you're giving officers the resources and the tools to be able to bring the temperature down in potentially volatile situations.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: OK. You mention the word "research." I was surprised to learn that in this area of crisis response and de-escalation or diffusion — whatever terminology you want to use — there's actually relatively little research in these areas. You want to tell me about that?

ROBIN ENGEL: Well, that's absolutely true. And I learned that myself a little bit the hard way, quite honestly. In 2015, I took over the University of Cincinnati Police Division, as we had an officer-involved shooting, as you mentioned at the top of the show. One of the things that I wanted to do was to make sure that my officers were trained in use of

force with a de-escalation frame. And I had the best training available. So as a researcher, I looked to the evidence. What is the best training available? And there was, literally, not one study done on police officers to test the effectiveness of de-escalation training.

Now, this was in 2016. We did a systematic review. We crossed all disciplines. We did find some evidence that de-escalation training for professions like nursing and mental health professionals, it had been tested there and was effective. But we had nothing in policing. So, we set out to change that.

Our research team actually engaged in research at the University of Cincinnati with our police division but also with the Louisville Metro Police Department. We're one of the first research teams to actually find that the implementation of de-escalation training had a significant impact on reduction of officer injuries, citizen injuries, and the overall use of force.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Interesting. Now, it's no secret that in the wake of George Floyd and other high profile incidents, relations between many local law enforcement agencies and the communities that they serve have become very tense. What impact do you think that this is having on law enforcement officers and on members of the public?

ROBIN ENGEL: Let's take law enforcement officers first. I think that the crisis — and "crisis" might not be the right word — it really is a challenging time for our law enforcement officers and our communities. For a law enforcement officer specifically, I think what is really happening to them is that these are individuals, men and women, that are drawn to the profession. They're drawn to provide service, to make communities safer, and they're encountering situations where citizens believe that they're actually an occupying force, that they're there not to be helpful but to actually harm.

When you see things like the protests that were happening in 2020 and continue in some communities across the country, officers are in a situation where the very people that they've signed up to protect and serve are expressing very deep-rooted emotional responses and concerns. That is absolutely impacting the mental health of our officers. There's no way that our officers can continue to be engaged with our communities in productive ways if we don't recognize that we need to provide for the mental health and wellness of our officers.

On the flip side, these are community members that are expressing deep-seated, long-term desire for change, something different from our law enforcement community. We need to recognize those needs as well and really be able to thread the needle here so that we are making our communities healthier places.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Yeah. I was on the bench for over 20 years, and one of the questions that we ask when we pick a jury is "If the witness on the stand was a police officer, would you be more or less likely to believe them?" This is just a cross section of

the community, right? When you come to your jury duty, it's a random cross section of the community. And more and more people would stand up for the question of "less likely to believe." I watched that progression, and it was very eye-opening from that perspective to really see what is going on in the community since the jury is really a microcosm of that. So, I totally hear what you're saying. Is there something you want to say on that?

ROBIN ENGEL: Well, no, I completely agree with you. And one of the things that we need to do and think about for our law enforcement profession is to get officers to be thinking about their role not as law enforcement but rather as advocates for communities. Because, truly, they're the closest to the ground. They're the ones that are actually interacting with community members day in and day out. They know what those communities need. And often as a representative of the government, they're in better position to be able to bring those resources, bring the right people to the table, and serve as advocates for these communities. So, I think we really need to be thinking through "How do we want officers to respond, and what is the role of policing moving forward?"

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Yeah. I'd love to pivot to talk a little bit about you because I think that your story is so interesting. It's very rare, if not, unprecedented, for a college professor to also serve as the head of a law enforcement agency, and you've done that. Could you explain to our audience the circumstances at University of Cincinnati that led up to your appointment?

ROBIN ENGEL: Well, first, I describe myself as "n-of-1." For statisticians, they always talk about the sample size. And I have yet to meet any other academic that became a law enforcement executive. I know plenty of law enforcement executives that retired, went on for their Ph.D., and entered the academic world. But I don't know the reverse.

So, it is an interesting story. We had an officer-involved shooting in 2015 on a Black male by a campus law enforcement officer about a half-mile off of campus. This was a year after Ferguson and during a time when we had a series of shootings of unarmed Black males and a lot of concern around police use of force. So, the university very quickly found itself right in the middle, the eye of the storm, if you will, in terms of public concern and unrest.

They came to me and said, "What do we need to do? You're a policing expert." So, I laid out for them: "Here's what you need to do in the short-term for crisis management to handle this particular situation. But long-term, you really need to think through how you're going to reform this police agency. That's a longer plan, and this is what it looks like." And they came back to me, and they said, "Great. We want you to do that."

And I kind of — I laughed to myself. I thought, "I'm a consultant and a researcher. I don't actually do these things, right? I just tell people what they should do and that it works." So, within 2 hours, I found myself as the new Vice President for Safety and Reform, a

new position at the University of Cincinnati, in charge of both short-term and long-term change for this police agency and for our community. So, that's how it happened.

I served in that role for 3½ years, and I have to say I'm so proud of both the men and women of the University of Cincinnati Police Division, but also of our community. Because the work that we did can really be used as a model across the country for effective police reform that also continued to provide public safety and service to our community.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: That's really amazing, really interesting. I know that as head of Public Safety, University of Cincinnati, you spoke directly and extensively with members of the public and police officers. How do you think that that practical experience on the ground affects your research?

ROBIN ENGEL: Well, one of the first things I realized is that most of the research studies that have been conducted are not particularly helpful to police departments or communities. And that was a real shock for me. You know, that was my profession. I was trained as a researcher. I've done it for two decades. And to recognize that we've really failed to fill the gaps that are desperately needed by law enforcement executives who, right now, today, want to put in place strategies and tactics that are effective, efficient, but also equitable.

In many cases, there's no evidence to guide them. They have to operate in real time, and that's another thing that I recognize. You can't wait for the research to catch up. So, our community of researchers has a lot of work to do to be more useful to the law enforcement profession and to our communities. Our research team affiliated with IACP is doing exactly that. We're trying to fill that gap right now.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: It's such an important marriage between the research and policy people and the on-the-ground people. I mean, I feel like that's kind of the role that I'm filling here at BJA. Because since I was in court for 20 years, and I've dealt with the people every day that are affected by the policies that we're making, I feel like I'm here to say, "OK, this policy sounds great, it's very well-intended, but let me tell you when it hits the ground how it's going to affect the individuals that you're trying to affect. And what are the gaps that you may not see from on high, but on the ground are going to be created by the policy."

ROBIN ENGEL: That's exactly it. Those unintended consequences, we really need to be able to think those through but also to build the research and evidence base. One of the things that I tell my law enforcement executive friends and colleagues, I'll say to them, "OK, let's not stifle innovation. You're doing something that's new and interesting. We don't know if it's effective, but let's build in the research along the way so that you can set the path for everybody else coming behind you that wants to try this."

If we think about how we can position law enforcement agencies to being knowledge-learning labs and generate that evidence that can then be continually reinforced and

used in that agency but then in others, I think we're at a position now where law enforcement executives across the country recognize the need and are willing to take chances and risks to be able to provide that information for their own agency and for others.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: So, I'm going to ask you a question that I ask a lot of people that I interview. It's a silly question, but I think it allows you to really explain to everyone where you're at in this area. I always say, "If I gave you a magic wand, what would you like to most change to make law enforcement work better and the public safer?"

ROBIN ENGEL: Wow, that is a big challenge.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Yeah.

ROBIN ENGEL: But really, it's the base of the work that we've been doing for a long time now. One of the first things I would recommend is that we have more standardization and training in our policies and our procedures. We can start at the state level. You know, everyone's talking about we need federal standards. I think that's probably too big to start. For our law enforcement agencies, we can really start and do a lot of effective work at the state level to try to at least move toward more standardized training policies, procedures. But at the same time, we really have to encourage and support innovation in policing because if we just continue to do what we've always done we're...

KAREN FRIEDMAN: You always get same results.

ROBIN ENGEL: That's right. And we're recognizing, of course, that despite our best efforts, we're not meeting the mark in the expectations of our communities. Law enforcement, the men and women that are doing this work, they deserve better from our executives, from our communities, so that we can help push them to be the most effective and equitable that they can be.

So, how do we do this? Well, again, our research community really needs to step up, and we need to be able to very quickly and efficiently provide evidence to test that innovation and to support and encourage the continuation of innovation in law enforcement responses. That's the work. I think if we all commit ourselves to doing that, in another 5 to 10 years, law enforcement and public safety is gonna look very different. Even the terms that we use to describe it, the ways that citizens engage with police, if we do this right, we're at this critical moment, and if we do this right, we're gonna have such an amazing and important impact moving forward.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Robin, thank you so much. This has been such an interesting conversation. I really appreciate you taking the time out of your busy schedule to talk with me. Thank you for everything that you're doing. You're incredibly impressive, and I'm just honored to be able to have this conversation with you.

ROBIN ENGEL: Well, thank you, Karen. It's been such a pleasure and a privilege to be able to work with BJA and all the partners that are engaged in the same type of work to make our police-citizen encounters safer.

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