



FIGHTING CRIME

## Crime Is in the Air

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### Transcript

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**Cristina Quinn:** I don't know about you, but after a long day of working and parenting, I like nothing more than unwinding with a bath. Does it happen as often as I'd like? Of course not. But in the spirit of journalistic integrity, and because my boss is making me, I'm going to take one right now. Yes, now. And why not light a few candles to set the mood?

Now, you may be wondering why I'm including you in this rather intimate experience. Well, it turns out all these candles are no bueno, because burning candles in all their ceremonious and evocative beauty also release microscopic pollutants called PM2.5. PM2.5 is found in everything from fossil fuel combustion to meals you cook at home and wildfires, and they're a major component of air pollution.

Studies also suggest exposure to these microscopic pollutants can impact our bodies, our minds, and therefore our behavior. They can make us more impulsive and aggressive, pushing people to make poor decisions, which in turn may lead to committing crimes. Well, this bath just got a lot less relaxing. Why can't we have nice things?

This is Fighting Crime, the show that asks big questions about crime and how to stop it. I'm Cristina Quinn, a journalist, and I've spent my career digging into stories to discover the truth. I'm going across the country, from prisons to universities, police chiefs to inmates, to look at the evidence and question everything we think we know about how to make America safer.

I want to know what actually works and meet the people who are making it happen. So join us as we figure out new ways to fight crime and make society safer, and be prepared to think differently.

We've all heard about how crime spikes when the temperature rises but get a whiff of this Air quality can also have an impact on criminal activity. While air quality has always been a public health issue, mainly because of its effects on our respiratory and cardiovascular systems, its negative impact on our behavior has made air quality as a public safety issue a more recent concern.

So hold onto your hats, because in this episode, we'll get into all that and hear about a study that looks at how wind direction can increase rates of violence. But don't hold your breath, because air quality isn't just about air pollution. Poor ventilation can also be a contributing factor to violence, and there are fewer places where that is more noticeable than in prison.

We'll learn about how poor air quality impacts inmates and correctional officers, and which targeted interventions can improve it. First, let's find out a little more about that pesky and pervasive microscopic pollutant, PM2.5. A

**Dr Anne Chappelle:** PM2.5 is actually a descriptor for the size of a particular particle. And this PM2.5, it can be made up of anything.

It can be made up of dirt, dust, ash, wildfire smoke, anything that generates a particle through combustion, internal combustion engines.

**Cristina Quinn:** That's Anne Chappelle, a toxicologist whose specialty is nasal inhalation of substances.

**Dr Anne Chappelle:** Anytime we make any kind of dust or particle, PM2.5 just refers to that particular size, 2.5 microns in diameter.

**Cristina Quinn:** 2.5 microns is tiny. You can fit about 30 of these particles across the width of a human hair, and their being so small is the major issue for us humans. When bigger particles enter the body, your normal immune response can clear them out.

**Dr Anne Chappelle:** The bigger the particle, the less likely it is to be respirable, because it's big.

It gets caught up in your nose hairs, in the mucus that lines your nose, your throat, even in your upper airways.

**Cristina Quinn:** But that's not the case with tiny particles like PM2.5 or smaller.

**Dr Anne Chappelle:** So PM2.5 is dangerous because it enters the very deep lung, where it can be absorbed in through the nasal cavities directly into the brain through the olfactory bulb.

When these substances get into the brain, these PM2.5 substances especially, and smaller, they can cross that blood-brain barrier.

**Cristina Quinn:** And that's where the impact on our behavior comes in.

**Dr Anne Chappelle:** So what we see is that when they get into the brain, they cause a lot of general inflammation. And so that can lead to cognitive impairment.

That can lead to changes in your amygdala and other parts of your brain. So the idea is that when you start to get this inflammation and dysregulation, they tend to increase the probability of violent behaviors

**Cristina Quinn:** So you may be wondering, what does that look like? How does inhaling microscopic pollutants like PM2.5 translate into crime rates?

A number of studies have linked air pollution to crime levels. A study of 70 towns in England analyzed data from pre-industrial times onwards, finding that more deprived areas of towns tended to be to the east of factories burning coal. The theory is that the more polluted air led to cognitive problems and worse health, and in turn, lower earning potential.

To this day, the eastern parts of many towns tend to have lower test scores for school kids and higher crime rates.

**Erich Muehlegger:** When people are put in a situation where they're uncomfortable, they're less likely to behave cooperatively and more likely to behave in sort of a selfish fashion.

**Cristina Quinn:** So rude. But that's what Eric Muehlegger says.

He's a professor of economics at the University of California, Davis. He has studied the connection between environment and behavior.

**Erich Muehlegger:** There's the literature on pollution and productivity. There's a literature on pollution and sort of academic achievement. And so the motivation for this really came about because I was thinking about sort of what are other outcomes that we might care about that air pollution might affect.

There was a literature that sort of documented that air pollution not only had impacts on people's health, but might have impacts on other decisions that people made. And so it sort of naturally came out to think about interpersonal conflict, which, you know, can naturally be measured by looking at criminal activity.

**Cristina Quinn:** And so to see if air pollution can influence crime levels, Eric and his econ buddies designed a study examining wind's impact on crime. But why wind specifically? Think about when you walk through a city. There are sections that consistently smell bad, and blocks that are wind tunnels, right?

**Erich Muehlegger:** There are some parts of a city that might be more polluted and some parts of the city that might be less polluted.

And if we think about any of our experiences in sort of the real world, if, you know, if you're in a part of the city that's close to a lot of industrial plants and sort of things like that, that feels very different and potentially is very different on many dimensions than a part of the city that's much further away from that.

And so what we needed to do was we needed a way to think about pollution being quasi-randomly assigned, and this is one of the things that economists tend to think a lot about, these things economists call natural experiments. So you know, not actual experiments where we're randomizing pollution, but situations in the real world that leads to something which is like random assignment of pollution.

**Cristina Quinn:** You can't randomly assign pollution, but if there's anything you can rely on, it's the fact that the wind blows, and this is the kind of variation they could apply in their study.

**Erich Muehlegger:** So if you think about sort of a particular facility that's potentially creating some pollution, depending on which direction the wind is blowing, the wind might either be blowing that pollution toward the city or away from the city.

**Cristina Quinn:** And what better place to conduct this study than the Windy City herself, Chicago. I mean, the headline writes itself. But it wasn't the pun-manship that drew them to Chicago. It was the city's trove of crime data.

**Erich Muehlegger:** We were looking at all the crimes in the city of Chicago. City of Chicago has a fantastic open data portal where they provide a lot of information publicly available.

And one of the things that they provide is they provide the geolocation, so the exact latitude and longitude of every crime that was reported to the Chicago Police Department over a very long period of time.

**Cristina Quinn:** 11 years to be precise. They studied crime data from 2001 to 2012.

**Erich Muehlegger:** And so the very first thing we did was to essentially explore what happens on days when the wind in Chicago is blowing from either sort of the southeastern or sort of the southwestern parts of the city where there are a lot of industrial plants, things like refineries, corn milling facilities, sort of industrial facilities, things like that.

And on those kinds of days when the wind is blowing from that direction, air quality in Chicago tends to be worse than on days when it's blowing off of Lake Michigan and sort of blowing cleaner air over the city. And so the very first thing we did was just to look at the city level on days when the pollution was blowing from these industrial facilities.

Did we see an uptick in the amount of crime that was happening in the city?

**Cristina Quinn:** And did you? What did you find?

**Erich Muehlegger:** We did. We did find an uptick. It's not it is statistically significant. It's not a major change in crime. It's on the order of several percentage points. But what we saw was on days where the wind was blowing from, you know, from the direction of these industrial facilities, we saw both that pollution levels were higher and also that criminal activity increased.

**Cristina Quinn:** Okay, so on the days where air pollution was higher, there was more crime. But Eric and his team wanted to drill down further to look more closely at different parts of Chicago using wind direction and those well-known avenues of air pollution, the city's interstate highways, where cars are constantly spewing out particulate matter like PM2.5 and other pollutants.

**Erich Muehlegger:** So if you've ever been to Chicago, Chicago is sort of located right on Lake Michigan. And then there are a bunch of big highways that radiate out from the city, kind of like spokes on a wheel. And so what we did to refine our empirical strategy was we decided to look at days where the wind was blowing orthogonally to the direction of the interstate.

**Cristina Quinn:** Can you tell us what-

**Erich Muehlegger:** Yeah, yeah. Totally ...

**Cristina Quinn:** what orthogonal-

**Erich Muehlegger:** Totally.

**Cristina Quinn:** Okay, okay.

**Erich Muehlegger:** Yeah, I'm happy to jump into that. So in the case of [00:11:00] a, you know, a road that's running from east to west, we're thinking about days where the wind is blowing from north to south or from south to north.

And so if you think about all those vehicles on the highway, if they're all traveling east to west, there's a lot of pollution that's being created on the highway. And if the wind is blowing from the south to the north, that pollution is being blown toward the north side of the interstate. But if, let's say, the next day the wind changes and the wind is blowing from north to south, now all of a sudden that pollution is being blown to the south side of the interstate.

And the nice feature that this provided was it provided sort of day-to-day variation on which side of the interstate was impacted, and it also sort of provided a way to compare what happened to crime on one side of the interstate relative to the other side of the interstate. And so the comparison we were essentially doing was looking at crimes on the north side versus the south side of an interstate on these days where the wind was blowing either from south to north or from north to south.

Now we could differentiate by type of crime, so we could separate out different kinds of crimes. And one of the distinctions we draw in the paper is we draw a distinction between violent crimes and property crimes. So violent crimes

are things like assaults, you know, battery, sort of things like that.

Property crimes are things like theft, you know, burglary, you know, things like that. And what we saw in that was that we saw an uptick in violent crimes, but not in property crimes on the downwind side of the interstate.

**Cristina Quinn:** Why is that? Any idea?

**Erich Muehlegger:** There is a medical literature that documents the impacts that air pollution has on different neurotransmitters.

And some of this literature sort of suggests that different kinds of pollution can impact people's ability to sort of inhibit themselves, and potentially people act more aggressively when exposed to these pollutants. And so if I end up in a situation where that situation might escalate or might de-escalate, on the margin, maybe it's slightly more likely to escalate into something that actually becomes a crime versus de-escalate into something that does not become a crime.

**Cristina Quinn:** What does that say, like, moving forward? I mean did the city of Chicago, did they respond? How did they respond to the results of your study?

**Erich Muehlegger:** There was definitely some interest in the results of our study. I think more broadly from a policy perspective, when we think about the impacts that air pollution has on a whole range of outcomes, the reason that's important from a policy perspective is we think about often setting policy to take into account sort of those costs.

What this paper was meant to do was to really highlight that there's another sort of avenue through which air pollution can have negative impacts from society. And so, you know, I think that this paper really fits into this literature of trying to understand all of the [00:14:00] different mechanisms through which air pollution might impact both the health and outcomes of people in society.

And you know, I think lends, you know, lends some credibility to this idea that we wanna take these concerns really seriously when we're thinking about setting air pollution policy.

**Cristina Quinn:** Tightening how much air pollution companies or countries can emit might be one way of reducing PM2.5 in our atmosphere.

But that wouldn't do anything to stop one of the biggest emitters of PM2.5, wildfires, which recent studies have suggested could be behind increases in violent crime across America. And as hotter temperatures are making wildfires in America more intense, more unpredictable, and harder to control, you might think that the only way we can fight air quality in order to fight crime on this front is by tackling the not insignificant problem of climate change.

While we're waiting around for policy makers to do something about that, we must also recognize that air quality's impact on our behavior is not limited to the outdoors.

Many Americans are living and working in hot places and even hotter buildings with poor ventilation and air circulation. This can impact our health and our state of mind. That's something people in correctional facilities are acutely aware of.

**Jeremy Tripp:** Air quality in prisons is a real problem. First of all, most of these places, they were built decades ago for far fewer people than they're now holding.

So when you actually get inside of these facilities, not only is the air quality poor, but the movement of air.

**Cristina Quinn:** That's Jeremy Tripp. He's the policy director of One Voice United, an organization that represents the interests of correctional officers. He says a lot of prisons don't even have HVAC, which stands for Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning systems.

And facilities that do have them, the HVAC systems are old and haven't been updated.

**Jeremy Tripp:** So without them, it leads to poor ventilation, there's mold, there's moisture, heat, humidity, the cold, and then, you know, add that all in with, like, lack of resources for repairs, and it creates a pretty unhealthy environment.

**Cristina Quinn:** An unhealthy environment for the entire prison population, including the corrections officers that work there, which can affect prison security.

**Jeremy Tripp:** That environment inside directly impacts the morale, burnout, retention, the recruitment, and overall institutional safety. There have been some studies that have been done, but, you know, that heat and that lack of movement in the air can lead to cognitive decline.

It can have issues for folks with heart disease, overall cardiovascular health. You know, it could be 110 degrees when you're standing on that concrete. That's, you know, that's tough for somebody to work in for that amount of time and try to keep their wits about them and make sure that they're paying attention.

You know, it's not like these folks are sitting in an office chair, you know, and they're relaxed. They're making sure that not only are they providing security for the facility and the public, but then also for those who are incarcerated as well, to make sure that nobody's being preyed upon and that the, any type of nefarious activity is actually being seen and taken care of.

**Cristina Quinn:** Just imagine yourself as a corrections officer or an inmate. It's like being stuck in your car on a blistering hot day and your AC is broken. The windows won't roll down and, well, this is your reality in prison day after day.

**Jeremy Tripp:** When heat increases by certain percentages, the violence goes up in prison.

That's just a fact. And you can imagine just being on the outside. You know, let's say you bumped into somebody and it's 72 degrees, like, maybe you don't care. You know, it's not a big deal. But when it's now 90 degrees, 100 degrees, 110

degrees inside, that creates a difficult environment. And then you also add in just the other factors.

There's folks that are being crammed into these facilities that they weren't designed for. So whether you're double bunking or you're putting people in a... eight people into a four-person cube, or four in a two, like, that is a real issue, right? Because just natural body odor, other things that come up that now you create, take stale air, that lack of circulation, it's a real problem.

When you look outside, too, so you go out on the yard, it's not like you can go find a big tree that you're gonna, you know, go get shade provided under. So not only do you not really get that relief when you're outside, but now you come inside and you're also not getting it 'cause it's even hotter in most cases inside.

**Cristina Quinn:** To be honest, even talking about this is making me uncomfortable. It's no wonder that poor air quality has the potential to push anyone in an already high-risk environment like prison over the edge. In a minute, we're gonna take a short break. When we come back, we're gonna see if there's anything we can do about all of this, because tackling air quality is a massive undertaking, and clearly this podcast wouldn't be doing its job properly if we didn't give you some solutions that are actually doable.

So if air quality is a public safety issue, what can we do about it? I put that question first to Jeremy Tripp. What has his organization, One Voice United, been doing to seek out improvements?

**Jeremy Tripp:** So we've been pushing really big that we do need to address HVAC. We understand that there are monetary constraints, but we also do believe that this is a responsibility that the state has to look at.

We know that there are states that have tackled this. It is costly. They've started to look at it, and so what we need to do is say, "Okay, maybe we can't you know, take X state. Maybe we don't have 300 million, half a billion dollars next year, but what's our five-year plan? What do we want these facilities to look like 10 years down the road?"

And we have to take that first step to start addressing. Or if we have facilities that are just simply too old, we have to look at what we're gonna do. Are we gonna keep those facilities open? Are we gonna build new state-of-the-art facilities to transfer people into so we can actually provide that level of care, comfort, security, and safety, that we need to?

Those are all questions and conversations that we believe need to take place.

**Cristina Quinn:** But can anything be done sooner, on a practical level, to improve poor air quality and its impact on public safety? One person who might have some answers for us is Dr. Angela Hawken. She's Vice Dean for Research at the Johns Hopkins University School of Government and Policy in Washington, DC.

**Angela Hawen:** Often, people talk about heat or other environmental factors, and will lean on the external data, the outdoor data, but that doesn't always correlate well with what's happening indoors. And if you think about a prison, it's a big cement box, right? And if it's hot outside, it can be much hotter inside. Or if something negative is happening outside, that can really be amplified in the indoor environment.

So having both the indoor and outdoor, I think will have very important lessons for other facilities across the US.

**Cristina Quinn:** Much like Eric Muehlegger's study measured air pollution and violent crime, Angela's is studying things like air quality alongside indicators of prisoner behavior and mood. She had always been interested on the prison environment, but there was one particular visit that crystallized just how grim it can be inside, even with the best intentions.

**Angela Hawen:** I was visiting a prison on the West Coast probably, you know, half a decade ago, and we were there to work on environmental conditions. Like, how could we improve, you know, just the look, look and feel of living in custody? And so we were thinking about things, you know, like color palettes.

Let's, you know, let's change the color of the walls. Let's introduce, you know, nature. What could we do? But it was the middle of summer, and I went into the prison, and it was just... It was hot, really hot. And everybody, all the residents

were really uncomfortable, and so they did a well-meaning activity.

They introduced industrial fans to try to cool people down, and when they brought in the industrial fans, it was deafening. It was so loud that you couldn't hear the person next to you, so we had to go outside to take our meetings. And it occurred to me, you know, the mitigation effect is introducing its own harms.

What other harms are we doing in correctional environments?

**Cristina Quinn:** The solution was adding to the problem, something that made Angela think, "There's gotta be a better way to deal with all of this." And it led to her to conduct the study she's working on now, which is monitoring the impact of poor air quality and other environmental factors in a prison on the East Coast.

**Angela Hawen:** We are designing and deploying sensors that will be the most comprehensive measurement of environmental factors in prisons that we think has ever happened. Maybe someone's doing something we don't know about, but we think this is the first. But we are able to do that with incredible granularity, which means that every second we can collect these measures.

And then because we have an outstanding corrections partner, they maintain their own administrative data. So administrative data on, you know, violent incidents, on all sorts of infractions, on absenteeism from staff, on, you know, grievances. So there's a whole... And or referrals to medical or self-harm events.

So we're able to combine our environmental monitoring data with the behavioral data, incident data, everything else that's going on to tell a comprehensive story.

**Cristina Quinn:** And of course, air quality plays a big part in that story. A lot of people might assume that because prisons are often run at the municipal or state government level, that because they're institutions, they must have air conditioning, they must have central air, and that is not the case.

Something Angela is keen to stress.

**Angela Hawen:** So if you look at prisons in the South, for example, you'll see many of them don't have air conditioning. And there's some really compelling data on what that means. There's data from Mississippi that when, you know, the temperature gets above 80 degrees...

And that's not that hot. I mean, it gets a whole lot hotter than that, but as soon as the temperature gets to 80 degrees, we see a spike and, you know, violence increases by about 20%. Studies from Louisiana, if you get to over 85 degrees Fahrenheit in Louisiana, there are referrals, a 30%, a 30% increase in people who have to go onto suicide watch.

Now, suicide watch is incredibly consequential. A, it's horrible for the person who is in that, experiencing that sort of distress, but it's also terrible for the institution because that's an extremely task, and it's extremely staff-intensive to have that level of vigilance on an individual person.

So you see resources being diverted to, to suicide watch, and actually you have now complications of other parts of the facility might have lower levels of [00:25:00] staffing. There's also a staffing crisis happening at the same time. And it's hot and people are violent. And I think the most compelling data on heat is coming from Texas, where when you have a heat event in Texas, like it's...

And if you think about over 90 degrees Fahrenheit, we see a 15 to 30% increase in all-cause mortality. So about 13% of all the deaths in Texas during like the warm season are because people are hot. And the problem is that this is not a problem that's going away. It's getting worse, right? So we're seeing our periods of extreme heat events are getting longer.

It's becoming more spread about the country. Like some parts of the country we didn't have to think about this it's now an issue. And the really deep concern when it comes to heat is the nights are hotter now too. So if you are hot during the day, but at least your body has an opportunity to cool down overnight, it can reset itself.

When you don't have an opportunity to cool, that's when the health implications are really dire

**Cristina Quinn:** We talk on this show a lot about reducing recidivism and programs in prisons designed to prepare prisoners who will be released for re-entry into society. Dr. Hawken believes that poor air quality also hinders these efforts.

**Angela Hawen:** I think we're really starting to learn just what, how much of a role the environment itself plays to those broader efforts of kind of reducing the incarceration population. If someone's leaving in really bad shape, more likely to return to custody. In giving people a shot at actually participating in programming and those educational opportunities for a pipeline to re-entry that has more promise.

**Cristina Quinn:** So it's clear that poor air quality can cause a lot of problems. So what can be done? Well, Angela is already on the case.

**Angela Hawen:** I'm actually excited about this project because one thing we're able to do is test one mitigation exercise. It's an older facility and it's, and they haven't cleaned the ducts in 30 years.

Three zero.

**Cristina Quinn:** Ew.

**Angela Hawen:** So, well, but, ew for you, but yay for us because we have an opportunity now to roll out this... and we can have the staggered rollouts on the duct cleaning. And what does that mean for the air quality and behavior? We have this beautiful and this, you know, this kind of this natural little experiment we're able to do.

It just coincided by accident with this, the facility deciding to train some staff on doing duct cleaning.

**Cristina Quinn:** That experiment may be ongoing, but you've gotta hope that cleaning air ducts that have been accumulating dirt for three decades will improve the air quality, and consequently inmates and correctional officers' health and wellbeing.

Before Angela even finishes testing mitigation strategies, she knows there are already things prisons can do to improve their air quality and therefore the living conditions for prisoners and working conditions for corrections officers. And importantly, they don't cost that much money.

**Angela Hawen:** There are smaller things that facilities can do right now.

And if we have the data especially, we can help them, nudge them on when to do, take these activities. So the first thing is you really want to just cool people down, so you can have kinda ice water cooling stations. If you see... We can flag for them, "Hey, temperature's at this point now. It's not, it's no longer safe.

Let's put these cooling stations in place right now," both for staff as well as people who live there. It's a very simple thing. It's a low-cost strategy, but it can help keep people cool. There's also things you can do, like, you know, the, what you can do on the roof so you don't get, you know, to cool the building down.

There's all these reflective paints that people can use. We're starting to see these use of these smart outdoor sails that provide, you know, shade protection. Just introducing shade protection can drop temperatures by a sizable amount. Right. So there's all sorts of mitigation, even just these smaller mitigation.

You know, I just... Interesting, my, our post-doc who was... it was her first w- the first time we went was the first time she'd been in a prison, and one of the rooms we went into, one of the living units, was truly... I've been in and out of prisons for 26 years. It was, the air quality was probably the worst I'd ever experienced.

And she, and she was... Again, it was burning. People were burning things. It, you know, there's just no ventilation, so things are... It's a really closed environment. It just hangs in the air. And she was like, "Angela, I'll hit up, I can hit up D-

Home Depot, and for 12 bucks I can fix most of this problem this afternoon."

There are filters you can use almost immediately that can capture a lot of this junk, and that can be done at relatively low cost. So there is no excuse. If there's the will, there's a way, and we can find ways to get people cooled down and to get that air just much more tolerable for humans to breathe.

**Cristina Quinn:** Given the size of the problem of air quality, particularly in prisons, it is crazy to think given all the talk of budget constraints and need for policy change, that a trip to Home Depot for some \$12 air filters could be part of the solution. They may not be doing anything for the heat, but they could remove PM2.5s and other pollutants in the air.

And maybe there's something to be said for their greater use in our homes and workplaces to tackle the link between air pollution and crime. Dr. Angela Hawken's study is taking place right now, and we're excited to find out the findings once it's done and see what we can learn and implement in other places, such as our schools, workplaces, and communities.

The impact of air pollution and air quality on health is well-known, but we've now heard how impactful it appears to be on crime. So what can we take away from our experts on this episode? Number one: air pollution does impact crime. It does this because PM2.5s cause inflammation in the brain. This can make us aggressive and lead to bad decision-making, which can lead to more violent crime.

Number two: poor air quality also has a bad effect on us. So we're talking about things like mold, moisture, heat, humidity. Bad air quality can also lead to cognitive decline and raise our potential for violence. And the impact isn't just on criminal activity. If any of us live or work in conditions with poor air quality, well, we are at risk of suffering.

And number three: yes, we need better air quality policies around this in cities, and I mean, ultimately, we need to do a better job dealing with pollution and the impacts of the climate crisis. But we don't need to just be passive and wait for policymakers. There are things we can start doing in our workplaces, schools, and communities now, such as with air filters and other local methods to improve the air around us.

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