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Viral diseases often begin in other animal species and pass to human hosts. In the case of COVID-19 (also called SARS-CoV-2), the coronavirus is widely believed to have originated in bats. But how are bats able to carry the closest known relative of the virus that has swept through the human population without getting sick?

Dr. Angelique Corthals, Associate Professor of Sciences and a biological and forensic anthropologist, is on the case. She’s part of two teams that have received RAPID grants from the National Science Foundation to study possible reasons why bats infected with coronavirus don’t appear to suffer ill effects, while humans can become deathly sick. In her words, the goal of both grants is to identify patterns of immunity that are different or similar between bats and humans, which can then point toward better targets of treatment and, ultimately, a vaccine.

One potential mechanism, which Corthals is studying in cooperation with biologist David Ray at Texas Tech University, is that bats may dampen their immune system response to the virus, in essence learning to “get used to” its presence. Since a lot of the damage done by the virus in the human body can be attributed to our extreme immune response, dialing back immune responses to COVID-19 may help mitigate the damage the virus can cause in serious cases. The team is analyzing massive databases of bat genomes from 10 species, hoping to find out which genetic changes keep bats safe.

For the second project, Corthals will look specifically at certain cells in bat noses, called goblet cells, that may be instrumental in the body’s first virus response. Both bat and human noses contain goblet cells, which are part of the lining of our organs and play a role in immune responses like producing mucus. Because there is evidence that COVID-19 attacks the upper respiratory system first, figuring out how cells in bat noses resist viral attack could be a key step in understanding humans’ symptom development. She will work with Stony Brook University’s Liliana Dávalos and Yale University’s Laurel Yohe.
UPROOTED BY CHANGE

It’s safe to say that the world doesn’t look anything like what we expected when we began mapping out the contents of this issue—we’ve since weathered months sheltering in place due to a pandemic, a series of heartbreaking deaths at the hands of police, the outbreak of protests for racial justice on the streets of major cities across the country, an impeachment trial, and much more. We’re all trying to find our footing in a social landscape uprooted by change. For this reason, along with so many others, I am grateful to our community of incredible scholars and creators, faculty, staff and students who are looking toward the future and working hard to make a better, safer and more equitable world.

This year, we are bringing you the highlights of some of the research that touches on issues of concern and interest to the John Jay community. We are featuring a group of scholars who are using forensic investigation techniques to uncover the truth. We spoke to faculty who are working to combat organized crime across the globe. And we asked researchers to help us understand the effects of lying on the criminal legal system, in our politics, and more broadly.

We are also profiling faculty and staff directly investigating the variable and dramatic effects of COVID-19, celebrating the fifteenth anniversary of one of our respected research centers, and shining a light on some less-traditional scholarship that reaches out to help young people learn and grow. Most of all, the research we feature is making a difference, across disciplines, by sharing evidence and best practices in an effort to influence policy and those who create it.

A final note of thanks to all those who gave their time during a global pandemic to be interviewed, to write and to design this unique issue. On behalf of the Research team, we hope it speaks to your experience and interests, and that you enjoy this look at John Jay’s efforts to advocate for evidence-based decision making and make the world more just.

—ANTHONY CARPI, DEAN OF RESEARCH

CONTACT US WITH ANY THOUGHTS, QUESTIONS OR OTHER FEEDBACK AT OAR@JJAY.CUNY.EDU.
The United States makes up just five percent of the world’s population but houses nearly a quarter of its total prison population. The prison system incarcerates a population that faces structural racism, historic marginalization, and numerous barriers to fully reentering free society.

Since its founding in 2005, the John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity has sought to support and collaborate with those directly impacted by policies and practices that dehumanize and marginalize people with conviction histories. This year the Institute, formerly the Prisoner Reentry Institute, is celebrating a name change along with its fifteenth anniversary. Over the years, the Institute has significantly expanded its scope of work to offer a continuum of programs that create pathways from criminal legal system involvement to higher education and career advancement. Their ongoing and varied advocacy is suited by a new, more aspirational name that speaks more broadly to the many pathways and possibilities facilitated by the programs and services it offers.

The Institute works to lower barriers and to support access to housing and higher education for the justice-involved. In addition, it invests in programming that prioritizes success and community-building post-system involvement—opportunities for hands-on learning like their College Initiative program, which has supported nearly 1,500 people in pursuing higher education, or trainings and fellowships that facilitate career success and nurture the next generation of leaders in justice and advocacy.

In 2020, the Institute released a new report that explores CUNY’s tremendous potential for welcoming and supporting students impacted by the criminal legal system. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, Institute staff, led by executive director Ann Jacobs, have worked to adapt all of their programs for remote learning. They are also using the unprecedented circumstances surrounding COVID-19 to expand their programming and reach new audiences.

For more information about the Institute for Justice and Opportunity, past and present, visit justiceandopportunity.org.
SPEAKING JUSTICE

Crystal Endsley blends art with advocacy

UNTITLED
I thought I could love
You out of dying if not
I’ll write you alive.

For Associate Professor of Africana Studies and spoken word poet Dr. Crystal Endsley, spoken word poetry and social justice activism go hand in hand. Though social justice looks different depending on where you are in the world, she says, performance and writing offer us universal tools to analyze our relationships. “Everything we do is filtered through our physical bodies,” says Endsley. “I am interested in how our bodies determine so much of our existence, and the ways that performance can intervene, can help us teach and learn through that performance of identity.” She sees her performances as collaborations, negotiating power and meaning, creating different experiences that feed on the energy and reactions of her audience.

Using poetry as a tool to challenge oppression and further justice in the communities where she lives and works is a theme in Endsley’s work, one that is strongly rooted in both her upbringing and background in theater. Her first book, The Fifth Element: Social Justice Pedagogy Through Spoken Word Poetry, outlined the way students can use poetry to navigate obstacles and explore activism and identity. And Endsley’s current project is a manuscript about her years with the Girls Participation Committee, part of the Working Group on Girls, an NGO with ECOSOC status at the United Nations.

That committee advocates for girls’ rights as human rights around the world and engages them to advocate for themselves. Endsley, for example, is co-director of its annual Girls Speak Out, which takes place at UN headquarters each October. She invites girls to use creative outlets to talk about what it means to be a girl where they are; many pieces of their art are showcased live at the Speak Out, sharing girl activists’ thoughts and concerns before high-level policymakers, and on a global livestream. Endsley also hosts a Teen Orientation each year at John Jay for teen visitors to the UN Commission on the Status of Women in March. She is devoted to elevating girls’ voices and creating opportunities to inspire others to action.

When Endsley began her Ph.D., there was little scholarship to speak of on hip hop and spoken word. So she sees her work as having “one foot in the community, one foot in the academy,” reflecting her dual role as an academic and a performer, jointly working to create justice.

Published in Culture, Community, and Educational Success: Reimagining the Invisible Knapsack

UNEQUAL EMERGENCY

The global outbreak of COVID-19, and the changes it has forced on nearly every aspect of modern life, have thrown a stark light on inequalities already present in our society. Dr. Isabel Martinez, Associate Professor in the Department of Latin American and Latinx Studies, is interested in how Latinx college students are coping. Already members of a population subject to unequal access to quality health care and technology, and disproportionately employed in low wage service industries, these young adults are encountering new barriers created by the public health emergency at a higher level as well. Martinez is developing a pilot research study to interview Latinx students in New York City and El Paso, close to the U.S.-Mexico border, to find out how they are adapting to these extraordinary circumstances and what they need to survive and thrive in a post-COVID world.

Published in Impact 2020.04
Devon Kaat is a junior in John Jay’s Honors Program, but he has been thinking about educational psychology since his high school days. With the help of mentor Dr. Saul Kassin, he is building on key foundational studies on the relative age effect, which says that older students in a grade cohort are more likely to succeed compared to their younger classmates. In fact, studies show the effect is likely to persist through early childhood education. This is due in large part to school cut-off dates: older students, born in months closer to the cut-off date, have months of development under their belt that their classmates born in late spring or summer do not. At such an early age, those months translate into real acquired skills and, often, into increased teacher attention that boosts classroom performance.

With the support of an Office of Student Research and Creativity (OSRC) student research grant, Devon is working on collecting data from high schools that will allow him to compare the prevalence of this effect across urban and rural schools. But in the long run, he’s really interested in maximizing student potential no matter where they are being educated. “You are comparing students to each other when you really should be comparing them to themselves,” he says. Instead of holding all students in a given year to the same set of standards, he is brainstorming ways to shift classroom learning to individual skills acquisition. “It’s a way to judge students based on previous performance, maximizing each student’s personal potential.”

Devon has already received a second OSRC grant for the 2020-2021 academic year, to continue work on this project. He hopes to see more educators become aware of what is called the “Matthew Effect,” and work to reduce its impacts in their own classrooms.

Ph.D. student Lauren Moton has always been exposed to criminal justice—her dad was Toledo’s Chief of Police—so her decision to pursue higher education in that field isn’t a surprise. But it wasn’t until beginning a master’s degree in criminal justice that she discovered the driving force behind her current research. Looking at policing, sex work, and human trafficking through the lens of feminist and queer criminology led her to her current position as a research assistant for John Jay’s Exploitation and Resiliency Project (ERP).

Working with the project’s PI Dr. Meredith Dank, Lauren has had the chance to head out into the field to talk to survivors of intimate partner violence as part of an evaluation of a local nonprofit’s career readiness program. Although the COVID-19 outbreak has put fieldwork on hold, Lauren is also contributing to ERP research that spans the globe: studies of forced child begging and sexual exploitation in Uganda, sex trafficking in Belize, and labor exploitation of American citizens in cities across the nation.

Lauren says she appreciates the opportunity to work with Dr. Dank, as she sees a great deal of overlap in their research interests. Lauren is currently working on her dissertation, a comparative look at the workings of Human Trafficking Intervention Courts in New York City, Ohio, and Texas. She is interested in the courts’ insistence that sex workers identify as victims before they can be offered diversion from the criminal justice system, a practice she says incorrectly conflates sex work with sex trafficking.
IMPACT

COVID AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Identifying overlapping disparities in public health and the criminal legal system

BY: RACHEL FRIEDMAN

Prosecutors have significant power to hold the criminal legal system accountable. Within statutory limits, prosecutors decide who goes free, who to prosecute, and which charges to bring. Few understand the potential of this power for change as well as Lucy Lang, former Assistant District Attorney in Manhattan and the Director of the Institute for Innovation in Prosecution (IIP), a think tank and research center at John Jay College. She has led the IIP to become a powerhouse for thoughtful discussion of vital criminal justice issues, bringing many voices together to support the evidence-based creation of tools for change, often but not exclusively centered on the constructive role prosecutors can have in making the system more just and focused on human dignity.

So often, issues of public health and criminal justice reform are intertwined, and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has presented IIP with a new lens through which to look at its existing goal of prosecutorial reform. The COVID-19 outbreak has made existing disparities in and problems with the criminal legal system increasingly evident. As the pandemic hit New York, for example, many DAs began to limit what they would prosecute in order to keep people out of jails and prisons, and individuals convicted of low-level offenses were released from jails; the IIP raises the question, why were these cases being prosecuted in the first place? The spread of COVID-19 in prisons and jails provides New York State, and beyond, the opportunity to reassess not just the conditions of incarceration, but its purpose.

To meet this opportunity for reform and rethinking, the IIP is working to highlight how the pandemic affects the vulnerable and the justice-involved across the spectrum of the legal system. Since the start of the COVID-19 crisis the Institute has hosted virtual panel discussions on how the stay-at-home orders have affected rates of domestic violence reporting and the ability to respond, and on how the pandemic has intersected with existing challenges associated with reentry. One key theme is the way that already vulnerable and disadvantaged populations are most susceptible to falling victim to the effects of both a biased criminal legal system and a public health crisis like COVID-19. The IIP’s ultimate mission is to contribute to the creation of a system that promotes dignity, safety and fairness, connecting prosecutors, advocates, and those most affected by the criminal legal system to influence policy decisions that center communities and generate real avenues for change.

In addition to conducting policy conversations, the Institute is committed to collecting resources that will help the most vulnerable make it through this uniquely difficult time, compiling links to groups providing on-the-ground assistance as well as educational materials. Over the long term, the IIP aims to convene two working groups, one of which will focus on the intersection of public health and the legal system, and the other on reimagining the future of prosecution while reckoning with the reality and legacy of COVID-19.

“In the devastating wake of COVID-19,” says Lang, “the American criminal legal system has an opportunity to rebuild itself in a way that is smarter, more equitable, and more compassionate. Our choices will determine whether our children will face a future in which the criminal system perpetuates harm, or instead does its part to help foster thriving communities. The IIP is committed to working with our community and prosecutor partners to ensure that this moment does not go to waste.”
IMPEACHMENT FOR TEENS

Andrea Balis’s playful approach to history helps young learners think critically

BY: RACHEL FRIEDMAN

Long before the Trump impeachment was above the fold of every newspaper, Assistant Professor of History Dr. Andrea Balis had impeachment on her mind. The Watergate burglary that embroiled America’s 37th President Richard M. Nixon in scandal is part of the American cultural lexicon. But Balis noticed that many of her students came to class with gaps in their understanding of that key period in 20th century American history. So she set out to fill them.

Published on the 45th anniversary of Nixon’s resignation, Bringing Down a President—written for middle-grade students—takes readers through the story of Watergate, from Nixon’s childhood ambitions to his resignation from the presidency, in snippets of dialogue and plain-spoken narration. Though it’s a departure from traditional academic writing, the history is heavily sourced. Clocking in at just under 200 pages, the book contains more than 300 footnotes. Balis and her co-author, Elizabeth Levy, spent months sifting through primary source material to fill in quotes that perfectly illustrated the story they wanted to tell about the Nixon Administration’s corruption and the “sense of anti-democratic impulse” that permeated the whole affair.

Bringing Down a President takes an unusual and engaging approach to history: it tells the story from the point of view of its main actors, and in their voices. The authors wanted to bring the story to life. “But we kept stressing in our book that just because someone said it doesn’t mean it’s true,” says Balis. “It’s crucial to be a critical understader of events, to remember that people lie.”

Balis holds a growing conviction that classroom learning should be about the joy of critical thinking, not just content mastery. Bringing academic knowledge and research out of the ivory tower gives students the tools they need to engage and learn at a college level. And the lesson doesn’t just apply to middle and high school students. “We wanted to write a book that many people would read,” she says. “That line between scholarly and non-scholarly is very porous. Adults that read the book say they learned a lot.”

Although Balis and Levy had the idea to write this book long before Donald Trump became the third President impeached by the House of Representatives, its publication ended up being very timely, and there are lessons to be learned by students of history living in the present day. Although they decided not to include Trump quotes in the book, the authors saw many similarities between Nixon’s day and our own.

“We don’t predict the future,” says Balis, “we tell the story and explain it. It’s not that people who don’t know history are doomed to repeat it; it’s that people who don’t know history don’t have insight into what’s going on around them.”

In a day when misinformation and partisanship abound, being a critical observer is more important than ever. Though some celebrate Watergate as a success of Constitutional checks and balances, Balis’s book holds a warning that “the cynicism and skepticism of our current political culture has its roots in the years of the Nixon scandals.” Understanding the historical context may now be key to keeping the checks and balances vital to the health of our republic strong.
UNDOING THE TIES THAT BIND US

What are the real harms of lying on our justice system... and our society?

AUTHOR: JUDY GELMAN MYERS

RESEARCHERS: MARIA HARTWIG, ANGELA CROSSMAN, JONATHAN JACOBS, HEATH BROWN
Our society is built on trust. We depend on witnesses to tell the truth, corporations to conduct business in good faith, elected officials to honor their oaths and serve accordingly. On the whole, we trust each other not to lie.

But everyone lies, for better or worse, and lies are often difficult to detect. Research shows that even people trained to distinguish truth from lies do so with 54 percent accuracy, or slightly better than chance.

Given the ubiquity of lying and the difficulty of spotting it when it happens, can trust truly serve as the bedrock of a stable society?

DETECTING DECEPTION

For decades, airport security and law enforcement officials have been trained to detect lies using the Microexpressions Training Tool (METT). METT is based on the idea that “microexpressions”—fleeting facial cues purportedly betraying some underlying emotion—reveal whether a person is lying, and the official only needs to know how to read them to spot a liar.

John Jay Psychology Department Professor Dr. Maria Hartwig, an expert on detecting deception, recently testified before a House Subcommittee that METT is based on a faulty proposition. In fact, she says, microexpressions don’t exist in sufficient quantity to indicate whether someone is lying or not; she compares lying to a disease with few symptoms, making diagnosis difficult. “Mapping that reasoning onto the deception problem, it’s not that we need to inform people how to be better diagnosticians, it’s that we can’t assume liars automatically leak signs of deception and we can just sit there and passively watch them. We have to interact with them in some fashion that elicits different behavioral pathways for liars and truth-tellers,” says Hartwig.

To do that, Hartwig has developed an interview technique called strategic use of evidence. Standard police practice includes showing a suspect all available evidence to bully him into a confession; Hartwig suggests withholding the evidence and developing a set of questions that truth-tellers and liars would answer differently.

Such questions would vary according to context. Say an interrogator has footage of someone entering a room where a crime was committed. An open-ended question like, What did you do on the 10th of April? will likely elicit two different responses from a suspect who entered the room but isn’t aware the footage exists: the subject who committed the crime likely won’t mention entering the room at all, while an innocent subject may mention being there, not having any idea that a crime had been committed. Other techniques involve putting a strain on the suspect’s memory, for instance by having him or her repeat a cover story in reverse chronological order.

Hartwig and PhD candidate Gregg Braden Campbell are creating an online platform where law enforcement professionals and researchers can exchange ideas. “I can generate research on how to improve accuracy through strategic interviewing, but it’s an exercise in futility if the techniques are never presented to the police as alternatives to current practice,” she says.

ELICITING THE TRUTH

Adults are no better at detecting children’s lies; the 54 percent hit rate still applies. Dr. Angela Crossman, Chair of the Psychology Department, has spent her career studying the lies children tell and why they tell them. She’s found that in the context of the criminal justice system, the biggest problem with children’s testimony springs not from the children themselves but from the adults in the room.

During a criminal investigation, many interviewers push their point of view so hard that they introduce false information, which kids subsequently confirm—an error known as confirmation bias. Other interviewer behaviors can result in a child’s unwillingness to respond at all.

From the child’s point of view, the interview context represents a fundamental difference from real life. In real life, adults usually know the answers to the questions they ask children, but in an interview, it’s the child who knows the answer and the adult who doesn’t. A good investigator treats the child as the expert and makes him or her comfortable enough to reveal the truth of what happened.

Ironically, Crossman says, we teach children not to lie, but we also teach them not to tell the full truth. She recently conducted a study of adults’ reactions to children who were very honest or very dishonest. She found that the adults would punish the liars but also reacted negatively to the kids who told the blunt truth. Says Crossman, “It’s an interesting mixed message that you really should be honest, but I don’t really like you if you tell me the whole truth.” That mixed message can have severe repercussions in a criminal justice setting, where it can impede the search for truth.

THE POWER OF TRUST

To Dr. Jonathan Jacobs, Chair of John Jay’s Department of Philosophy and Director of the Institute of Criminal Justice Ethics, honesty should form the basis of the criminal justice system. “One of the most central, fundamentally important things that criminal proceedings can do is convict the guilty and acquit the innocent,” he says. “We want it to do that accurately; for that to happen in a reliable way, and in a way that is morally intelligible, that would seem to, in general, require that people represent their minds truthfully.”

As honesty is a vital part of criminal proceedings, so too does Jacobs consider trust a vital part of society. But he sees current practices in incarceration as undermining that foundation. While those living in a free society can interact and build trust with all types of people on any given day, Jacobs argues that these interactions are limited in a carceral setting. As residents of what sociologist Erving Goffman calls a “total institution,” incarcerated persons live separated and highly regimented lives that, due to arbitrary decision-making and poor conditions, give them few reasons to develop and practice trust. And the worst effect, he says, is the lack of trust returning citizens encounter once released from prison. People with a record may have trouble borrowing money from a bank, finding housing, or getting hired. To Jacobs’ mind, this creates enduring punishment that lasts long after a prison term is served.

According to Jacobs, creating conditions through incarceration that make the justice-involved less capable of participating in civil society once they are released is doing them a very serious harm. “If I’m not extending trust to you, it means you are not being fully included in the social world. It’s internal exile. That’s
not just bad for that person; it diminishes our society as well.”

**THE BIG LIE**

Historically, we haven’t just trusted in each other to behave honestly; we’ve also trusted in our government. But affective partisanship—a deeply held distrust of people from the other political party—is currently gripping our country so tightly that it undermines values of honesty and transparency, from the campaign trail to Capitol Hill. Being honest holds less persuasive power, from everyday Americans who support politicians solely on the basis of party affiliation, to members of congressional subcommittees who only accept evidence presented by their own parties.

“When you have such high levels of partisan identity that candidates can do almost anything and their party will continue to support them,” says Dr. Heath Brown, Associate Professor of Public Policy in the Department of Public Management, “lying in politics becomes almost inconsequential. The fact that lying doesn’t matter like it would have mattered in the past is an incredibly damning feature of our politics today.”

The link between partisanship and non-transparency is evident in presidential campaigns. Increased spending on digital media advertising caters to partisan bias. While TV advertising is basically open and well-regulated, Brown argues that social media ads are much less clear. “We don’t know where it’s coming from, whether what I’m seeing is the same thing that you’re seeing, whether language has been altered,” he says.

In addition, what Brown characterizes as one of the biggest lies in presidential politics is told by every candidate regardless of party: glossing over policy proposals and avoiding discussion of their transition and legislative plans in favor of ideology- or personality-driven campaigning. “If candidates didn’t have to be transparent at all, most of them wouldn’t be,” Brown says, because it opens campaigns up to “gotcha” questions and accusations of arrogance. This behavior is pernicious in Brown’s view, because preparing to govern is a good and responsible thing that every candidate should be doing in full view of the voters, and especially important when weighing a candidate’s agenda.

“No one should want for the person to start planning for governance on the day after the election. Debate moderators should always ask candidates to rank their priorities, rather than asking, What’s your opinion on this or your plan on that? In 2008, Barack Obama made a decision to put healthcare first and immigration somewhere else down the agenda. It’s why we have the ACA and we didn’t end up with an immigration bill,” says Brown. “It’s the agenda that matters so much.”

**ALL THE WAY DOWN**

If trust is the glue that holds our society together, will lying be its undoing? Jonathan Jacobs fears it might. Says Jacobs, “From my perspective it’s shocking how comfortable some senior administration officials have been about either refusing to disclose things, misrepresenting things, or just lying.” He’s especially concerned that today’s teenagers believe this is simply what politics is like. Worse, they get the sense that lying is discretionary: it’s okay to lie when there’s something to be gained from it, and if they’re caught lying, it’s okay to lie about having lied.

He’s also worried that many Americans don’t understand the principles and values that are supposed to be reflected in our political institutions and the way they work. “They’re getting the impression that those things are just rhetoric. It’s as though there’s no civics anymore—there’s only politics,” he concludes.

So what can be done? Heath Brown has proposed one way to mitigate polarization at the level of local and state races, which he calls “democracy vouchers.” The idea is to democratize the effect of money in politics, by giving money to high school students between the ages of 14 and 18 that can be used for campaign contributions. This forces candidates to take younger voices into account, grows youth engagement, and may help to restore trust in the system, to the benefit of all. “JJ

**“RESEARCH IS AN EXERCISE IN FUTILITY IF THE TECHNIQUES ARE NEVER PRESENTED TO THE POLICE AS ALTERNATIVES TO CURRENT PRACTICE.”**

—MARIA HARTWIG
The Global Map of Organized Crime
As international criminal groups’ reach has grown, so have approaches to stopping them

**AUTHOR:** MICHAEL FRIEDRICH

**RESEARCHERS:** MANGAI NATARAJAN, JANA ARSOVSKA, YULIYA ZABYELINA, ERIN THOMPSON
Over the last few decades, rapid globalization has brought globalized crime. “The increased rate of transnational organized crime, particularly in connection to the narcotics trade, has become a distinct security threat at the societal, national, regional, and international levels,” said Dr. Mangai Natarajan, director of the International Criminal Justice program at John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

Natarajan is a pioneer in the field of transnational organized crime studies, which examines the activities of criminal groups that operate across geographic borders seeking power, money, and influence. They include not just mafia-type cabals but also terrorist organizations and more loosely-affiliated groups. Current researchers suggest that organized crime consists of a much larger number of small criminal enterprises, often transitory in nature, that develop to exploit opportunities for illegal profit.

Those opportunities can include everything from trafficking in drugs and sex to money laundering, extortion, illegal mining, environmental crime, wildlife crime, and looting of cultural sites, Natarajan explained. “New forms of organized crime have emerged in response to new opportunities for criminal profits, resulting from globalization and technological development,” she said. They can destabilize whole regions, even whole nations.

The field has come a long way. When Natarajan began her career at John Jay, 25 years ago, scholars were less confident in their understanding of transnational organized crime, and few central texts existed to guide research. She has since edited several volumes and written countless publications on international and transnational crime and justice—with contributions from a host of John Jay scholars—that have become touchstones in the field.

The study of transnational criminal organizations is crucial to global safety, Natarajan said. It is important to build knowledge about how they are evolving, so policymakers can develop informed responses. Today, an array of John Jay researchers are mapping the landscape of organized crime across the globe.

CRIMINAL GROUPS ON THE MOVE
International criminologist Dr. Jana Arsovksa has been a member of the John Jay community since 2009, studying Balkan and Albanian organized crime. A native of North Macedonia, part of the former Yugoslavia, Arsovksa was drawn to the study of organized crime because she saw firsthand how unrest in the region allowed the emergence of groups engaged in smuggling and other illicit activity. In 2001, before Arsovksa was a researcher, she owned a café in North Macedonia that was subjected to extortion by local criminal groups.

Today, Arsovksa studies the features of such groups, including criminal mobility, or the way groups move across territories. Developed countries often believe organized crime is an imported phenomenon. “They think it’s an Italian thing, it’s a West African thing,” she explained. “We want to talk about organized crime as if it’s this sinister entity coming from foreign regions to threaten the civilized Western world.”

Her research suggests that’s not the case. A 2016 study by Arsovksa, funded by the National Institute of Justice, looked at Albanian organized crime groups in New York City to learn whether they were recently transplanted from their home country or more firmly established locally. By interviewing Albanian offenders and New York City law enforcement officials, she found that groups tend to be home-grown. “Strategic transplantation is a rare phenomenon,” she said. “The ties are very weak.”

In other research, Arsovksa has looked at the roles female offenders play in human trafficking networks, as well as how fentanyl flows in darknet markets, the subject of a forthcoming paper.

In all her work, the policy implications are of key importance. She hopes knowledge about transnational crime will lead to proper harm-assessment studies. “We have this big list of transnational crimes, but what is the real harm of each of these products that people demand?” she asked. Research can help policymakers focus on the crimes that really matter and decriminalize those that are less harmful.

CUTTING OFF TERRORIST FUNDING
“The crime-terror nexus can be defined simply as criminal organizations that are motivated by economic gain, working together with terrorist organizations. They become interested in criminal activities for money rather than just ideology,” said Dr. Yuliya Zabyelina, an international criminologist who studies transnational organized crime and corruption—and how to prevent it.

Zabyelina has researched human trafficking and illegal mining, as well as unsettling topics like the trade in human organs. Recently she has become interested in how terrorist groups use organized crime—like extortion, illegal oil trade, looting of cultural artifacts, and drug smuggling—to support themselves and fund their political activities.

In a 2019 study, Zabyelina conducted a qualitative analysis of extortion methods by several terrorist organizations. “One of the organizations that showed incredible capacity to participate in criminal markets is ISIS,” she said. Her research shows that ISIS and other groups extort local communities under the guise of taxation, in return for protection and services, but also to fund and expand their role as governing bodies.

The absence of national and local governance is a key feature that allows the crime-terror nexus to flourish. “If the state fails to provide vital goods and services to the population, citizens will seek them elsewhere,” said Zabyelina. Groups like ISIS gain regional legitimacy by managing a population’s needs.

A native of Ukraine, Zabyelina has first-hand experience in why international intervention is so critical. “I was a teenager when the Soviet Union broke up, and I experienced the failure with my own eyes, where there were no services provided and you needed to pay bribes for pretty much anything you wanted to do,” she said. “People had little trust in state institutions.”

“The international community should help countries that experience state failure or weakness,” Zabyelina continued. That includes conflict zones and other crisis zones where the rule of law has broken down. Law enforcement agencies, as representatives of the state, must ensure that norms are not dictated by criminal
organizations. “This is an incredibly important topic because it has to do with human suffering, and the ability of law enforcement in different countries to identify and prevent this form of exploitation.”

CRIMES OF ART
One lesser-known sphere of organized crime is the art world. That’s where Dr. Erin Thompson, the only full-time professor of art crime in the U.S., focuses her efforts. “Art crime is often transnational by nature,” Thompson explained. “For example, one of the latest things I’m working on is researching how a sculpture of a deity made in Nepal in the 14th century, stolen in the 1980s, ended up on display in a museum in Dallas.” As a result of her work, the museum is now in negotiations to return the sculpture.

Questions like this consume Thompson, who has also researched the way in which stolen art and cultural artifacts are used to fund criminal activities. Because of how artwork is valued in wealthy Western countries, crime groups often loot cultural objects from shrines, archaeological sites, and cemeteries in developing countries to sell on the international art market. Research also shows the art market can be used to launder money, since it lacks the regulations of, for example, the finance industry.

Terrorist groups also traffic in art-related crime. “We know that terrorist groups have destroyed art to intimidate civilian populations,” said Thompson. “ISIS, the Taliban, and other terrorist groups have also sold stolen antiquities in order to fund their terrorist activity.” In conflict areas like Palmyra, Syria, with once-robust tourist industries, these acts of destruction and theft make economic recovery challenging.

Because of how harmful these groups can be, Thompson is dedicated to raising awareness of this issue. “People think that stolen art is some tiny problem in the scale of things,” she said. “But actually, we know that there are a huge number of ways in which art crime is related to crime with human victims.”

Thompson has gone to Washington, D.C., to advise the federal government, presenting evidence that art looted from cultural sites has been used as an income source; her interactions with policy makers help them develop strategies to disrupt these revenue streams. “Something that I’m campaigning for when I talk to police forces, prosecutors, governmental authorities, and other professors of criminology at John Jay is to look at the art.” More knowledge about art can help law enforcement and prosecutors track down and seize the proceeds of illicit acts, and return them to victims.

Thompson also wants to educate collectors, whose participation in the market contributes to social harms and the destruction of important cultural artifacts. “It’s an education of consumers, just like blood diamonds, or ivory,” she said. “You don’t want to buy something that’s beautiful if your participation in the marketplace is harmful to other people.”

In the end, Thompson’s work is about preserving culture. That’s something we share as a human right, she said.

THE FUTURE OF TRANSNATIONAL JUSTICE
With such a diversity of research addressing today’s important questions about transnational organized crime and justice, Mangai Natarajan is sanguine about John Jay’s place in the field.

Students in the international criminal justice program are going into research and policy avenues across the country, said Natarajan. “They make a lot of difference because of their degree in ICJ.” She points to one example, a student who worked under her on a typology of drug-trafficking networks in New York City for his capstone thesis project. He has gone on to work at the United States Agency for International Development. Natarajan says he’s one of many.

“This is all because of our program,” she said, “and what we have learned over 25 years at John Jay.”
FINDING EVIDENCE

A Sea Change in Forensic Science

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In a court of law, jurors are expected to base their verdict on hard evidence rather than hearsay or opinion. That wasn’t always the case, though. Advances in science and technology, as well as high-level government intervention, have altered the mechanics of forensic science, its role in the criminal justice system, and the skills investigators need to collect hard evidence.

**FORENSIC TOXICOLOGY**

Forensic toxicologists analyze tissue samples and body fluids to detect, identify, and measure foreign substances in a body, whether it’s alive or dead. According to Dr. Marta Concheiro-Guisan, Assistant Professor of Forensic Toxicology, the biggest problem in analytical toxicology today is keeping pace with the explosion of novel psychoactive substances (NPS), which emerge almost weekly. When asked to verify the presence of a particular drug in order to assess a person’s cause of death, criminal liability, or health outcome, forensic toxicologists easily recognize familiar substances like morphine, based on previous analyses. However, drugs like Alfentanil, Sufentanil, or Remifentanil present unfamiliar chemical compounds, sometimes in low concentrations, making them more difficult to analyze.

Fortunately, technology is also evolving very fast, so it’s “kind of a race” between the new drugs and the technology used to identify them, says Concheiro-Guisan. The most sophisticated instrumentation in use today—liquid chromatography combined with high-resolution mass spectrometry—identifies the individual components in a sample, then analyzes their molecular weight down to seven decimal places, determining their molecular makeup with extremely high specificity.

Once a drug has been identified, the question turns from, What drug was it? to, When was it ingested? Biological samples, called matrices, provide answers to this question and others asked in legal and clinical settings.

Different matrices serve different purposes. Blood indicates what substances are present at the time the sample is taken, while hair indicates what happened a month or two months earlier; when drugs are ingested, they enter the hair and move along with it as it grows, at about a centimeter per month. Explains Concheiro-Guisan, “Imagine a custody case, where one parent accuses the other of being an alcoholic. You run a blood test and it comes up negative, showing that person did not drink that day. Then you take the hair and do segmental analysis and say, ‘I found this ethanol metabolite with an EPD above this level, so I know this person is an alcoholic.’”

Toxicologists also use urine when searching for the presence of drugs. While studying community drug use in the five boroughs, Concheiro-Guisan collected raw sewage from wastewater treatment plants throughout the city. Raw sewage contains a lot of urine, making it a good indicator of what drugs have been used—and expelled—by a community. She says this is a much more objective way of finding out what’s going on in a neighborhood than traditional methods, such as asking people to fill out surveys, tracking emergency room visits, or monitoring drug rehab programs.

**FORENSIC BIOLOGY**

Every time you don a coat, write a letter, or load a gun, you leave a biological trace of yourself behind. Often a forensic biologist can use a trace to identify the perpetrator of a crime, but sometimes there’s simply not enough material to work with. Dr. Mechthild Prinz, Associate Professor and forensic molecular biologist, researches how to squeeze the most information out of every flake of skin or drop of sweat.

DNA traces are the gold standard of forensic biology. The most straightforward way of getting the best results is to retrieve the most DNA, but that’s not always easy. Take, for example, a ransom note—the challenge is lifting the author’s skin flakes off the paper without pressing down on it and smearing the fingerprint.

In some cases, there may simply not be enough DNA in a sample to recover by any means. In those cases, Prinz suggests reintroducing a technique that was replaced by DNA testing in 1985: protein analysis, which can be used to identify what types of body fluid are present in a crime scene sample, or to identify one person from another.

Semenogelin, a protein in semen, has a biological marker different from that for saliva, for example. When that biological marker is present in a sample, the forensic biologist knows she has discovered the presence of semen. Prinz is not the only scientist working on protein analysis, but she has advanced the technique by showing that it can be done on a relatively inexpensive machine. Says Prinz, “No crime lab will actually do this test if they have to buy an $800,000 machine. But if they can run it on a machine they already have for doing drug testing, it’s more feasible to move this into operational practice.”

Identifying one person from another is a little trickier with proteins and is only used in the absence of sufficient DNA. Recent technological advances in proteomics, the study of proteins, make it possible to see genetic variation at the amino acid level, which directly reflects a person’s DNA. Explains Prinz, “A DNA sequence translates into amino acids, which then give you the full protein. So, by reading the protein, you’re basically getting the genetic code.”

Prinz views her work as mostly science with a dash of creativity. “For me, inventing different ways to recover DNA is very similar to cooking. In the kitchen, I’ll say, ‘Let me try this stew with oregano instead of thyme.’ In the lab, we say, ‘Let’s try trypsin instead of protein.’ The creativity comes in inventing new ways to collect evidence.”

**ROOTING OUT CORRUPTION AND FRAUD**

Creativity is only one of many skills an investigator needs, according to Dr. Chelsea Binns, Assistant Professor in the Department of Security, Fire, and Emergency Management. In 2019, Binns published *The Art of Investigation*, a compilation of soft skills that every investigator needs to excel at his or her work, whether it’s analytical toxicology or rooting out systemic fraud.

The most important skill an investigator must have, Binns says, is adaptability. “No matter how many times you go over something in your head or map out a plan, inevitably it doesn’t end up that way,” she says.
“A big problem in analytical toxicology today is keeping pace with the explosion of novel psychoactive substances. It’s a race between the new drugs and the technology used to identify them.”

—MARTA CONCHEIRO-GUISAN

For instance, an undercover cop posing as a drug buyer must adapt moment by moment to volatile, quickly changing scenarios. A bank fraud examiner doing background checks must quickly find a new source of information when a trusted resource is suddenly shut down.

Good investigators also need top-notch assessment skills, says Binns. This is especially true for her students who are studying to be first responders. A first responder needs to immediately appraise a scene, asking the right questions and getting as much information as possible from people before they walk away.

Finally, Binns suggests that investigators need a healthy dose of skepticism. She puts it this way: “Whatever you see or hear, you’re always asking, Is this real? Is there another possibility here? Healthy skepticism is a really good skill, especially for people who are new investigators, because there are so many cases where things are not what they seem. There’s always more to the story.”

FROM SPECULATION TO SCIENCE

Healthy skepticism, effectively applied, cannot only help investigators track down perpetrators, it can also help them exonerate the innocent.

Jurors today can rely on the scientific validity of forensic evidence presented in court thanks to a ground-breaking study conducted by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) in 2009. The US Senate was so appalled by the questionable state of forensic science at that point in time that they directed the NAS to conduct an extensive analysis of the field. Three separate committees of judges, law enforcement officers, lawyers, and scientists contributed to the academy’s seminal report, “Strengthening Forensic Science in the United States: A Path Forward.” They concluded that faulty forensic science analyses may have contributed to wrongful convictions. The report decried the legal system’s reliance on testimony from “expert witnesses” and recommended a more scientific approach, advising forensic scientists to work closely with research universities to take advantage of advancements in fields like molecular biology and analytical chemistry.

According to Sarah Chu, John Jay PhD student and senior advisor on forensic science policy for the Innocence Project, that report initiated a sea change for forensic science.

“It changed how we talked about forensic evidence, and it shifted what the goals were. We used to accept individuals’ training and experience as the basis for why this discipline is valid and reliable, but now we understand that you need empirical evidence to show accuracy and validity,” says Chu.

The Innocence Project was founded in 1992 to use DNA testing to exonerate people who were wrongly convicted and prevent wrongful convictions before they happen. At the federal level, Chu advocates for continual funding for forensic science research to address the problems identified by the NAS. She’s also campaigning for the creation of a scientific oversight agency to evaluate the validity and reliability of evidence before it enters the criminal justice system. Says Chu, “The courts have always performed that gatekeeping function, but they don’t always scrutinize scientifically the evidence that’s coming before them. At the Innocence Project, we think that, with complex scientific issues, we need scientists to evaluate forensic science methods and technologies before they’re submitted as evidence in court.”

Chu has also been working on the duty to correct and notify. She identifies errors arising from a misapplication of forensic science, then works on implementing actions that will prevent it from happening again. In 2015, the Innocence Project helped uncover a scandal at the FBI, where agents in an elite “microscopic hair analysis unit” falsely testified for decades that hair analysis could be used to identify a unique individual. To date, the Innocence Project has achieved 70 DNA exonerations for people wrongfully convicted on the basis of microscopic hair comparison analysis.

Institutions like the Innocence Project, and fields like forensic toxicology and biology, prove that hard evidence can prevent wrongful convictions. However, as advances in forensic sciences and technology reduce the rate of wrongful convictions, we must not lose sight of the ethical and social implications of how they exacerbate disparities in the criminal justice system. It is important to implement potentially-invasive innovations, for example surveillance technologies, with an eye toward privacy and dignity, not just public safety. As Sarah Chu points out, “Just because you have a superaccurate tool doesn’t mean you should just unleash it on society. We need to have discussions about how we use these technologies and what we’re giving up when we do.”

As Chelsea Binns reminds us, there is always more to the story.”

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AMERICA’S RACE AND GENDER PROBLEM IN THE WORKPLACE

Michelle Holder tracks labor market disparities in the African American population

BY: MICHAEL FRIEDRICH

In the U.S. labor market, success often seems to depend on the demographic group you belong to.

African American women suffer from a monumental wage gap when compared with white men. Labor economist Dr. Michelle Holder, an assistant professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, has spent her career investigating why some groups face greater barriers in the workplace. “There’s this narrative in our culture that if you work hard enough, if you put in enough time, put in enough effort, then you too can succeed in this economy—that it’s open to everyone,” said Holder. “But that narrative misses a lot of things.”

Namely, it overlooks the well-documented wage gaps associated with belonging to non-white, non-male populations in the United States. According to the Institute for Women’s Policy Research in 2018, women’s median annual earnings were 81.6% of men’s. And according to the Economic Policy Institute in the same year, Black workers were paid 16.2 percent less than white workers. Black women workers are subject to both effects.

In March, to coincide with Equal Pay Day, Holder published new research through the Roosevelt Institute that focuses on that “double gap.” The study uses three quantitative methods to estimate that African American women involuntarily forfeited approximately $50 billion in wages to corporate America during 2017, a staggering figure. “The double gap essentially means that African American women are vulnerable to two different types of wage discrimination,” said Holder. “There’s an intersectional kind of mechanism going on here.”

These findings are crucial. While previous studies have shown that Black women earn around 61 cents on the dollar when compared with their white male counterparts, this new aggregate number makes clear how massively pay disparity harms this population and benefits corporations. “That means fewer assets in the Black community. That means a loss of income to Blacks in the U.S.,” said Holder. “It has implications for single Black mothers struggling to provide for their children.”

For Holder, labor economics is personal. Born and raised in Brooklyn, she watched her single, immigrant mother struggle to get ahead in the job market. “It didn’t seem like public policies were helping our particular family or the families that I grew up around,” she said.

Holder’s previous research focused on discrimination in the workplace for African American men. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash, she was living in New York City’s historically-Black Harlem neighborhood, and saw firsthand the damage it was doing to men in her community. That inspired her 2017 book, African American Men and the Labor Market During the Great Recession, which found that unemployment was especially high among Black men in the U.S. They were not just crowded out of high-wage occupations; they were crowded out of the labor market altogether.

“One of the things I suggest is that discrimination probably occurred,” said Holder. “You had fewer job openings. You had many, many applicants for every opening. So employers were able to engage in behaviors where their biases could be satisfied.”

Holder’s research provides important information about how race and gender discrimination work together to disadvantage Black communities. “It’s important to continue to talk about these things, to write about these things, to dispel the notion that in this country, all you need to do is work hard and you’ll succeed just like everybody else.”

But Holder is not only concerned with diagnosing the problem. She believes her research can help policymakers develop ways to address racial disparities in the workplace, and has recently written an opinion piece for Ms. Magazine urging advocates and legislators to push corporate America toward fairer pay and greater transparency. She also sees her role as a professor at John Jay College—where she often teaches students from immigrant, single-parent, and working-class backgrounds—as a chance to shape young people’s understanding of labor in America. “This is where I feel like I can make the biggest impact.”
A LEGACY OF HARM

Although the National Network for Safe Communities (NNSC) primarily focuses on issues of public safety and law enforcement, Danneile Davis, Field Advisor for NNSC’s Intimate Partner Violence Intervention, acknowledges their work’s broad intersection with public health concerns brought to the fore by the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak. Both systems of authority—police and law enforcement on the one hand, medical authorities on the other—have a lot of work to do to grapple with and overcome a legacy of harm committed against Black communities in order to build trust. Davis sees this pandemic as an opportunity to do that work.

“The more authorities can meet communities where they are and address their most basic needs, the more powerful in terms of building trust,” she says. NNSC’s focused deterrence project managers across the country have reported a shift in the way they respond to community needs, incorporating the current public health crisis into their outreach plans. “People who might be involved in groups or gangs, there are certain things that they need, practical needs,” says Davis. “They may need the message of anti-violence and support, but may also need a mask, some hand sanitizer, and some help finding a new job.” In some jurisdictions, outreach teams have been designated essential workers and given support to continue going out into communities, a ringing endorsement of the critical nature of NNSC’s interventions.

Exploring the legacy of past harm is a vital part of NNSC reconciliation efforts, which recognize systemic and structural reasons for a lack of police legitimacy. Normally this work brings community members and law enforcement officers together, but COVID-19 has made clear that the same structural dynamics are at work in public health systems. Data show that Black communities across the country have experienced disproportionate effects from the virus, due to factors including racial bias, less access to health care, a greater concentration of preexisting conditions, and misinformation.

NNSC hosted a panel, moderated by Davis, that brought together national leaders in violence prevention and public health to explore the reasons for this, and to discuss the fraught history of Black mistreatment at the hands of the medical community, from nonconsensual medical experimentation to the racial gap in maternal mortality. To build legitimacy, it’s important to understand and acknowledge the roots of mistrust.

Davis hopes to see reconciliation applied to systems across the country to a greater extent, systems like public health and safety, education, and more, where inequities have been laid bare by COVID-19 and the summer’s wave of protests for racial justice. “I’d like to see a lot more of impacted communities being at the table not just represented but truly listened to,” she says, “to stop having public safety being something that is done to us, and to really transform what public safety means.”