

Ashley Nickels:

Hi, I'm Ashley Nickels.

Casey Boyd-Swan:

And I'm Casey Boyd-Swan.

Ashley Nickels:

We're podcasting from Northeast Ohio. This is the Growing Democracy Podcast, a space for citizens, experts, and advocates to create community together. Each week, we invite a guest to talk about civic engagement, governance, and how to grow our democracy.

Ashley Nickels:

This episode is part of a series on demystifying policy relevant research. We're talking with academics throughout Northeast Ohio in a range of fields, from public health scholars, sociologists, criminologists, political scientists, and more. We're trying to unpack how expertise is developed, how research gets made and why this is policy relevant work. This is a collaborative series with support from the Northeast Ohio Chapter of the Scholar Strategy Network. The Northeast Ohio Chapter of the Scholar Strategy Network was launched in 2017 to bring together local university based scholars who are committed to using and sharing research to improve policy and strengthen democracy. If you want to be involved in the podcast and get behind the scenes content about each episode, head on over to patreon.com/growingdemocracyoh

Casey Boyd-Swan:

So this was like a flashback almost episode because we had our current guest on with us previously in series two.

Ashley Nickels:

Yeah, no, no series one actually. So I think... Right? It was for the-

Casey Boyd-Swan:

Yeah, series one episode three.

Ashley Nickels:

Yeah, because it was for the Governing During Pandemic and we were early interested in what was happening in prison populations and how we could understand kind of the governance response to protecting kind of this particularly vulnerable and marginalized population of people who are incarcerated.

Casey Boyd-Swan:

Right. And this is a population that has been kind of socially constructed to be, I think at best unimportant and at worst kind of deserving of ill treatment.

Ashley Nickels:

Right. And so thinking about how someone, I think in the first episode we did, we were thinking about how governing institutions were responding to the protections or in some cases not responding fast enough to protections to protect people who are incarcerated, but in this episode, kind of pivoting a little bit talking about the same substantive topic, but thinking instead about how do you do research. How do you do ethical research, how do you do research that kind of recognizes the humanity of people who are incarcerated, and living in corrections facilities. And I think that that was a really interesting way of thinking about the same topic, but from a different vantage point.

Casey Boyd-Swan:

Yeah, and one of the things that really inspired me too is... Right, so we're talking about policy relevant research, and our guest did talk about how policymakers can't act on or react to the research findings that she produces, but also that members of the public, whether they themselves have been incarcerated or whether they know people that are incarcerated or whether they don't know anything about it, that they can actually take advantage of this research and learn something from it too, to demand some sort of policy change.

Ashley Nickels:

Right, exactly. And thinking about kind of the applied implications of the research that they're doing. And one of the things I just want to point out before I kind of introduce our guest and read her bio is one of the things that comes out in the episode that I thought was really interesting, especially for this series is to think about what that accessibility looks like, right? And so, one of the ways that academics can make their work kind of more broadly publicly accessible is through things like op-eds or white papers, so kind of writing more policy directed papers based on their research. But we still have this, for lack of a better term, gold standard of peer review in op-eds and white papers are typically not peer reviewed. And so thinking about how we can target journals that have open access, I think is a really powerful way to think about making your work accessible to a broader public, and it's one of the things that our guest kind of was really proud of in terms of thinking about publishing the findings from the research in these publicly available specifically, there's no paywall the research findings in a journal like that.

Casey Boyd-Swan:

Yeah, absolutely. So today I think you're going to jump in now and introduce our-

Ashley Nickels:

Yeah.

Casey Boyd-Swan:

... second time guest.

Ashley Nickels:

Yeah, so today we have with us Dr. Meghan Novisky. So Meghan Novisky is an assistant professor of criminology at Cleveland State University. She's an interdisciplinary, multi-method scholar with research interests in incarceration as a social determinant of health, conditions of confinement and criminal justice policy. Her research has been published in journals, including Criminology, Criminal Justice and Behavior, the British Journal of Criminology and the International Journal Victims & Offenders, which is the publicly available journal that her research is published in, so welcome.

Casey Boyd-Swan:

So joining us today is Dr. Meghan Novisky, And I know that, Dr. Novisky, that Ashley just read your bio, but it's always more interesting for folks to tell us about themselves and their journey. So would you mind telling us a little bit about yourself?

Dr. Meghan Novisky:

Sure. First of all, thank you so much for having me, I'm really happy to participate today. And my research really focuses on the health related consequences of incarceration, as well as conditions of confinement. My first experiences with the criminal justice system started when I actually did volunteer work at a rape crisis center as an undergraduate student, and then I eventually worked in that position full time going through college, and so that work really put me on a trajectory to conduct policy driven research. When I got to graduate school, I really started working on incarceration related projects because a faculty member brought me in and pulled me in on some of those projects, one of which was to visit several different prisons and to assess how well those prisons were doing their evidence based policies or implementing evidence based policies. And while I was there in the prisons, I was noticing a lot of older people incarcerated, a lot of people who appeared to be very ill who needed assistance walking around, and that motivated me to learn more about the correctional healthcare system. So that's a little bit about my research background. In addition to my research, I teach classes on incarceration, criminological theory, and criminal justice policy.

Ashley Nickels:

That's fascinating to kind of hear the trajectory of your research. So you've been on the podcast before, I just want to give an important shout out. Dr. Novisky was one of the first episodes that we had when we were talking about Governing During Pandemic, but this series is specific to work that you did in association with the Scholar Strategy Network of Northeast Ohio, and you were a grant recipient for one of their Amplify & Apply Grants last year. Can you tell us a little bit about that research project, and how you came to that research project?

Dr. Meghan Novisky:

Yes, absolutely. So this project was inspired early on in the pandemic, and when we started hearing reports about COVID-19, early in 2020, we were hearing about how quickly it was spreading, people were speculating on how quickly it was going to come to the US, how many cases we would have, et cetera, et cetera. One of my first thoughts was immediately the prison system, and this is because prisons are high risk sites for the spread of infectious disease in general. So I was really worried about what was going to happen to this entire population of people that are typically disregarded by society. And so I decided at that point to do what I could to kind of stay updated about the risks of infection in

correctional facilities, to keep up with how many cases there were and things of that nature, raise awareness about the problem.

And so the first thing I really did was I wrote an op-ed back in early March just kind of outlining some of the risks that were inevitably going to surface in correctional facilities, and this project through the help of the grant, kind of materialized after that. So I collaborated with a couple of colleagues, Dr. Chelsey Narvey at Sam Houston State University, and Dan Semenza at Rutgers. And we just talked through how, what might we be able to document the state of the pandemic through the lens of corrections at that point in time, so what were correctional facilities doing to grapple with these risks in the prison and how did that look across the US? So you know by state. So that's a little bit about the project.

Casey Boyd-Swan:

So now this series in particular is kind of focusing on demystifying policy relevant research. I mean, you just mentioned policy right now about five different times. So I would think that you do see your work, I mean, I see it as political, but how do you see your work on correctional policy as political in nature?

Dr. Meghan Novisky:

It is political in part because people have very strong opinions about punishment and how punishment should be-

Casey Boyd-Swan:

And it's a stigmatized population, right?

Dr. Meghan Novisky:

Right, yeah. So it starts with people feeling very strongly one way or another about what punishment should look like, but also the population of people who come in front of the criminal justice system tend to be stigmatized, and that's for a lot of reasons, one of which is society tends to think that if you commit a crime that you should have to pay some kind of serious penalty, you should have to suffer in some kind of way. We don't often approach it from a rehabilitative lens here in the US. And punishment is also very much levied against people of color and the poor in a way here in the US, and so for all those reasons, it's pretty political.

Casey Boyd-Swan:

Now I'm curious because, I mean, you've studied obviously the incarcerated population and incarceration and how the criminal justice system operates it for a while. Was there anything new that you learned during the course of this project that kind of, I don't know, took you by surprise?

Dr. Meghan Novisky:

Well, one of the things that I learned that I think is really important is that it is possible for correctional agencies to be more transparent in their policies and practice, so a lot of times there's not data dashboards in Department of Corrections websites, and one of the findings of our study was that all across the country and all 51 jurisdictions we looked at, there was some type of implementation of a data dashboard related to COVID-19 where the public could go to the DOC website and look at how many infections they had at the time among their correctional population, some went as far as to also list how many infections there were among staff, how many hospitalizations, how many deaths, things like that. And so I saw that as an effort that Department of Corrections were making to be more

transparent and showed us in real time that they are capable of being more transparent with what's going on in these facilities- they're often quite hidden from public view.

Ashley Nickels:

Yeah. And so that really to me begs the question, if you could kind of get this information in front of policy makers, where would you want to bring this information? And how do you see yourself as going about taking this evidence that you've collected through research and providing it to the policy makers that are kind of setting the policy for what this looks like?

Dr. Meghan Novisky:

Well, I think that this work would be very relevant and important to policymakers such as National Institute of Corrections, the National Institutes of Health, really any policy driven organization that is invested in the health of the public. Something that I think isn't emphasized enough or maybe understood well enough is that the health of our correctional facilities or the health risks that are in place in our correctional facilities are very much tied to the health of society at large. This is because more than 90% of people who are incarcerated will eventually return home to communities, and there's hundreds of thousands of correctional staff filtering in and out of these facilities every day, so whatever people are exposed to in prisons or jails is inevitably going to carry over to communities. So I would say any policy makers that are invested in healthy communities would find this work to be interesting and important.

Casey Boyd-Swan:

Now I'm curious, so you're an expert in correctional health policy, where do you turn for reliable, meaningful information about this topic, especially in order to develop that expertise. Obviously you were, you weren't born just an expert here, so what is it that you see as kind of characteristics of reliable, meaningful information?

Dr. Meghan Novisky:

For one, I do read a lot of peer reviewed publications. Now that was pretty hard early on in the pandemic because we were dealing with a real time crisis and anyone who's familiar with the peer review process is it is not a quick process often. You're looking at when an article is published, the research was conducted probably a year or two before that, and then under peer review for months, if not years; however, I was reading some publications that were trickling through. Peer reviewed articles are great to read because they have gone through a panel of experts and have received feedback along the way, and so there's some additional like safeguards in that information. But I also look at other pieces of information such as government websites and data from, I mentioned State Department of Corrections they were posting a lot of data on their dashboards, information from the National Institutes of Health, from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, so any government websites that are posting data are helpful. And then just trying to look at various sources of information too. So if you're wanting to look at research, making sure you're looking at not only quantitative research articles, but also qualitative and multi-methods, that you're looking at multiple subject experts. So I just try to vary the sources and read as much as I can.

Casey Boyd-Swan:

I think for a lot of people one of the things that's a bit mystifying is how to find data, how to find good data that is, I don't know, something that's actually reliable and from a legitimate source and that can be

analyzed. So how do you go about collecting and analyzing the data, especially for this project where it's about a pandemic where this is being collected in 50 different ways across the 50 different states?

Dr. Meghan Novisky:

Yeah, so first of all, if you're going to collect data like this, you have to have kind of a plan in mind, and I talked with my two colleagues and we divided up the labor, but we set different parameters for how we were going to gather the data and go- So, all of the information we collected was from the State Department of Corrections action website specifically, so we weren't going on like Google or Wikipedia or something like that, we were making sure everything we were tracking was coming straight from the DOC website, and so that was one way to make sure that the data were kind of uniform across all the different sources we were looking at, and we could say that something the data had in common is that the State Department of Corrections were choosing to place this information as their public facing information. So that's kind of one thing we did. If people are interested in gathering data, there's a lot of public access data sites available, you just have to kind of know where to look.

Ashley Nickels:

Yeah, for sure. We always have, in my research methods class I have my students go on a data scavenger hunt.

Dr. Meghan Novisky:

Oh yeah, I bet that's interesting.

Ashley Nickels:

So to that point, a lot of what we've been talking about is thinking about what the data look like, whether that's qualitative data or statistical data, thinking about how we go about collecting it, evaluating it and analyzing it for a kind of broader consumption, but in that process, oftentimes we are either working in spaces that are using a ton of jargon or technical language in either academia or in specific policy spaces. But I also know that for many of us, whether that's people on the podcast or this people in academics that are associated with the Scholar Strategy Network, we're also trying to kind of make this accessible to a broader audience. So how do you go about kind of translating this jargon filled materials and this technical language to a broader audience?

Dr. Meghan Novisky:

I think that's a great question. It's something that I try to be mindful of even in my teaching so that I'm not losing my students and getting the glazed over looks. So I try in general to avoid using a lot of technical terms or jargon when I'm communicating the information about research and findings. If I do use a technical term, I'll often provide an example of what I mean or explain it so that I'm not just dropping these terms that a lot of people may not know what I mean. I will say getting in the practice of writing op-eds, where you only have a few hundred words to convey your key points has helped me a lot with this goal, but then I also just ask myself why does this research matter to the average person? And I try to think about breaking it down in that way, and that's why I try to emphasize things like what's going on with health and risk in prisons is relevant to society in general, because people who are incarcerated today are going to be our neighbors eventually, or maybe the correctional officer who works in the prison is living on our block or goes to our same grocery store. So just trying to break down the findings a little bit in a way that matters to the average person, I think also helps me.

Casey Boyd-Swan:

Now, the next question, I guess, I feel a sense of affinity with your status as a researcher here, although I do childcare not incarcerated individuals, little different populations, but I feel as though from my perspective as a childcare researcher, it's kind of difficult to have this expertise in my area, but also go into childcare centers and talk with people that have been doing this for 10, 15, 20 years and have just this kind of expertise that I couldn't ever have, right? So how do you kind of juggle that attempt where you're confident in your expertise and what you know in your research findings, but also still kind of staying in this space where you're willing to listen, you're willing to learn and appreciate these other forms of expertise that don't look exactly like yours.

Dr. Meghan Novisky:

Yeah, I think that's so important. So it starts for me with a core belief that I have, and that is that I will forever be a lifelong learner. I expect to continue to learn for the rest of my life, so I read as much as I can, I talk to people who have multiple types of experiences in the criminal justice system, I don't ever assume that I know it all. And regarding my research, I try to conduct research in a way where my projects incorporate different experiences. So whereas some of my research has done interviews with incarcerated people for example, I've also conducted research with family members of incarcerated people to get a familiar perspective and I've done research where I'm interviewing correctional staff, people working in the prisons to see what their perspective is and what their experiences are. What is really cool is when you start to see themes coming up across multiple experiences and across people who have diverse viewpoints, so that's when I really kind of feel confident in a particular finding that it's meaningful is when the family members, when the incarcerated population, when the staff are all kind of hitting on the same kind of idea. I guess, I'll add too that I try to bring in diverse groups of people into my projects too. So I try to work with a lot of other people versus just relying on myself.

Ashley Nickels:

And are you collaborating with... I know the project you were talking about earlier was collaborating with people at other academic institutions, have you done work in collaboration with kind of community partners or kind of other institutional partners? And what does that look like?

Dr. Meghan Novisky:

I have. So for the last 10 years or so, I have worked with the University of Cincinnati's Corrections Institute, and that's what their work is focused on is you work with community partners, so different prisons, different jails, probation and parole offices, and they essentially hire the corrections institute to come in and look at their programming and what they're implementing and make suggestions for how to make their interventions more effective. And so I love doing that work, I think it helps keep me grounded and helps keep me mindful that these people have difficult jobs, and oftentimes it's easy for me as a researcher to give them a laundry list of all the things that they need to do and that are going wrong. So working with them reminds me like, well, this is really hard, and these are a lot of the barriers that come up. So I really like doing at work, and so I try to be mindful in that work to approach it constructively because they do have difficult jobs.

Ashley Nickels:

So as an academic who's doing applied research as well as research with applied implications, do you see your work as part of your civic identity? And if so, how so?

Dr. Meghan Novisky:

I do. So doing research with applied implications in my mind keeps me accountable and active in a way, because I'm really committed to disseminating research in a way that addresses social problems. To me, that's why I do research is to help chip away and provide another puzzle piece to help with social problems. So this goes back to the time I mentioned when I was at the Rape Crisis Center and we were having problems there with mandatory arrest laws, and those laws on the surface were really well intended policies to help combat domestic violence but what we were seeing on the ground was that survivors were losing motivation essentially to contact law enforcement because they became fearful that contacting law enforcement was just going to escalate things and make things worse. So I've never really forgotten that it, it keeps me centered in the work that I'm doing, and so for me, it's one thing to conduct a research study and write up the results, but it's another step or a bit further to think through not only policy implications, but practical policy implications.

Casey Boyd-Swan:

And I see your work as that if I'm a community member, especially a community member that's been kind of confronted with or face to face with how incarcerated individuals experience incarceration, that your research would be really important and I think something that I would want to kind of follow. But how challenging is it to find policy makers that are really invested in learning more about the criminal justice system, specifically the incarceration process can be improved?

Dr. Meghan Novisky:

Yeah. Well, thank you first of all, and second it is challenging. I think it's getting better. I think a decade ago, a lot of politicians didn't want to touch criminal justice reform with a 10 foot pole, I mean, it was just approached very differently, I think, years ago. But we're having more and more conversations at local and national levels about the importance and necessity of criminal justice reform, and that includes in my mind, these issues of correctional health policy and the health related implications of incarceration. It's difficult, but I think it's getting better. There's more grant applications becoming available, there are more agendas being set about addressing criminal justice reform at the national level, so I see those all as positive signs.

Casey Boyd-Swan:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, the grant applications in and of themselves is a nice signal of we want to fund this research, right?

Dr. Meghan Novisky:

Yeah. Yeah.

Casey Boyd-Swan:

All right, any final words of wisdom for our listeners after listening to this, what should they take away from this if they could take away one thing about maybe what they should know about incarceration in the criminal justice system, or anything else?

Dr. Meghan Novisky:

I think one thing listeners should take away is that conditions of confinement and the health risks associated with incarceration are intimately linked to our health here in the community. So if we want to have healthier communities, we need to take a critical look at the health of correctional facilities.

Casey Boyd-Swan:

Thank you so much.

Ashley Nickels:

Thank you so much.

Dr. Meghan Novisky:

You're welcome.

Casey Boyd-Swan:

Thanks for listening to the Growing Democracy Podcast. I'm Casey Boyd-Swan, and with me as always is my co-host Ashley Nickels. Our podcast is edited by Jeremy Demery at Golden Ox Studio right here in Cleveland, Ohio. This series is supported by the Northeast Ohio Chapter of Scholar Strategy Network. If you like our show and want to know more, check out our website, growingdemocracyoh.org. If you want to support the podcast, as well as get access to behind the scenes content, live chat and swag, featuring designs by Donuts and Coffee, head over to patreon.com/growingdemocracyoh. Join us next time when we continue this conversation about Demystifying Policy Relevant Research.