

Do the Benefits of Police Body Cameras Outweigh Their Harm?: A Review of the Literature

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ABSTRACT

This paper points out the benefits of the use of body cameras in police departments. The personal, hands-on experience of police officers will be addressed with statistics supporting the evidence. The harms of body cameras will be pointed out and refuted. The estimated cost of body cameras will be brought to the attention of the public and will prove to be worth their cost. Some cities have adopted experimental cameras to see the results. Further in the paper, these results are brought up and are positive. The cameras that have been implemented as experiments have given ample proof to why they should prosper. All these reasons will conclude that body cameras should be put to use no matter the disagreement.

Do the Benefits of Police Body Cameras Outweigh The Harms?

Police body cameras are a relatively new idea in order to keep police officers in line. States should make them mandatory throughout their police departments. Trust is not the issue here; police officers deserve the public's trust. The cameras are a viable solution if an incident arises where there is only one witness, the victim. Police officers are divided about this topic. The cameras are a newer idea, so, of course, some trial and error can be expected. Cost is a factor and will be a slight setback. Nonetheless, after the cameras are up and going, the technology will be worth the money it took. The benefits of the cameras still outweigh the harms. This paper considers whether body cameras should be mandatory for police officers by responding to the following questions:

1. How do police officers feel about body cameras?
2. Is cost the main reason people are hesitant about their use?
3. Who would body cameras be helping?

Police officers and civilians may be skeptical at first about body cameras, but a review of the prevailing literature will help both skeptical parties.

How Do Police Officers Feel about Body Cameras?

Local police officers are naturally going to be defensive at first to this intrusive technology; no one wants to be monitored at all times while working. It has nothing to do with guilt; it is basic human nature that people do not like to be filmed while doing their jobs. Deputy Trout of Kitsap Sheriff's office said that he agrees with the idea of body cameras because he has nothing to hide while doing his job. Trout explained how the Dash Cam has saved him from wrongful accusations. For instance, when Trout used to write a speeding ticket, he could later receive complaints on his yelling and being rude. Since being equipped with the surveillance equipment, his chief could review his camera and mic. In the new scenario, however, the mic reveals that he was nice and courteous, so he does not get in trouble. For Trout, the cameras are no big deal because he does his job correctly. Similarly, Officer Dotson of the Auburn School District said, "People are just paranoid; no one likes to be watched unless you're an actor." Officer Dotson's view on body cameras is more factual than subjective. He pointed out that it is not against the law to film anyone in a public place. Therefore, if body cameras are installed widely, there is nothing anyone can do about it. It is important to note, however, that body cameras' footage would only be used for law enforcement purposes only.

Officers Trout and Dotson both share similar stories where dash cameras have saved their colleagues or them in tense situations. Dotson gives an example of how he has seen the cameras work well. When his friend stopped a woman for a traffic stop, it ended up that she had an outstanding warrant, so the officer was going to arrest her. She happened to be someone whose father was somewhat important in the community. She was not being compliant whatsoever with the arresting officer. Moreover, her dad came down to the traffic stop where he proceeded to exacerbate the already stressful situation even further. She was disagreeable, as was her father. After the incident of her getting arrested, the family wanted to pursue a lawsuit. The Chief of Police reviewed the video, however, and determined that the cop followed procedure by the book and kept his cool the whole time. Trout went on to explain the camera was the deciding factor: "I think it's a good idea, but not the ultimate answer."

A study was conducted of a police department's adopting these cameras for a short time. The results showed "two in three officers who wore the cameras said they would want to continue wearing them in the future[;] a majority also said the agency should adopt body cameras for all front-line officers" (Wing, 2015, p.1). Eric Adams, former New York Chief of Police, voices his opinion, saying, "Police departments have no choice but to embrace the notion not only that scrutiny is inevitable, but also that it will lead to better policing... include[ing] the adoption of body cameras" (Adams, 2015, p.2). Joe Fiumara, Captain of Lake Havasu in Arizona, said that he really believes this could be a game changer and the next big thing that officers will see in community policing (Kingdom, 2012, p.1). Despite high-profile endorsements such as these testimonials, some cops remain unconvinced.

Is Cost the Reason People Are Hesitant?

It is natural for people not to agree with change. The *Salt Lake Tribune* agrees: "[W]hen a near-universal consensus emerges around any new idea, some skepticism is usually in order" (Bloomberg, 2014, p.1). Everyone gets so comfortable with how things are that they are afraid to accept anything different. No matter what it is, people will boycott change at first until otherwise proven wrong. Bullet-proof vests are an excellent example. Nowadays, a uniformed officer would not be caught on duty without a vest. Back in the 1970s, Officer Johnson's life was saved by the vest. Back then, they had the same arguments over vests that swirl around body cameras: They are expensive, and cops did not like that they were mandatory. The cameras are similar because they will be expensive and mandatory. People will not agree with body cameras until they are put into effect and proven to be an asset. It is no doubt that technology is expensive. Noelle Phillips of the *Denver Post* states: "The department estimates it would cost from \$500,000 to \$1 million to provide the cameras for the remaining officers and an additional \$330,000 to maintain the cameras for non-patrol officers who work off duty" (2015, p.1). Clearly, law enforcement is choosing to calculate cost differently: "Despite a hefty price tag, more than 1,000 out of 18,000 U.S. police departments across the country, including New York City, are starting to wear body cams, according to data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics and a recent NBC report" (Williams, 2014, p. 2). Body cameras will have a rough roll out because of the costs. Small towns may not be able to absorb such exorbitant costs (Gehrke, 2015, p. 2), but with time and grants, the cameras can become standard issue.

The fear of being videotaped is a factor in the decision of making body cameras mandatory. Mayor Bowser of the District of Columbia proposes that the footage shot in private areas will not be shown to the public; footage that was captured in a public place will not have the same regulations (Bos, 2015, p.2). Police Chief Mark Magaw believes the money would be well spent if body cameras were to be put into use. Magnew maintains that with the help of federal funding, his department will be outfitted with the body cameras in about a year (Bui, 2015, p. 2). Time will tell whether the technology is worth the financial investment.

Whom Would Body Cameras Be Helping?

The footage of a body camera could be used to the officer's advantage in case an altercation includes merely the officer and the witness, who may also be the victim. The cameras will take out the "he said/she said" dilemma and provide solid, admissible evidence. True, corrupt people operate in any profession, even law enforcement. Therefore, when the judge takes the officer's word over a civilian's word, problems may arise. This arrangement also can go both ways. The body cameras will eliminate false accusations toward the officers. Dana Liebelson of the *Huffington Post* noted: "Police reform advocates and law enforcement officials say such cameras can deter cops from using unnecessary force and protect them from false abuse complaints" (2015, p. 1). According to Garrett Keating of the *Oakland Tribune*, "93 percent of the police misconduct cases where video was available were exonerated and 50 percent of complaints were immediately withdrawn when the complainant learned of the existence of video evidence" (2014, p. 1). Christopher McFarland suggested that "officers should embrace body-worn cameras as another tool that can help them gather more evidence, give the legal fact finder a new vantage point from which to make decisions, and aid in the successful prosecution of cases" (2015, p. 2).

Recently, police officers have been featured in the media for cases of noted brutality. Through repeating these stories to fill a news cycle, the media may inadvertently show just one side of the issue: the civilian's point of view. Egberto Willies, news reporter of the *Daily Kos*, noted, "[I]n distorting that reality, it willfully stereotypes and divides society" (2015, p. 2). Willies's statement is powerful; he contends that news media outlets purposely divide society. That view seems extreme. However, one must concede that the effect of publicized brutality has been the creation of an unfortunate stereotype: that every police officer is racist and violent. We need objective cameras to show the officer's point of view and correct these misconceptions.

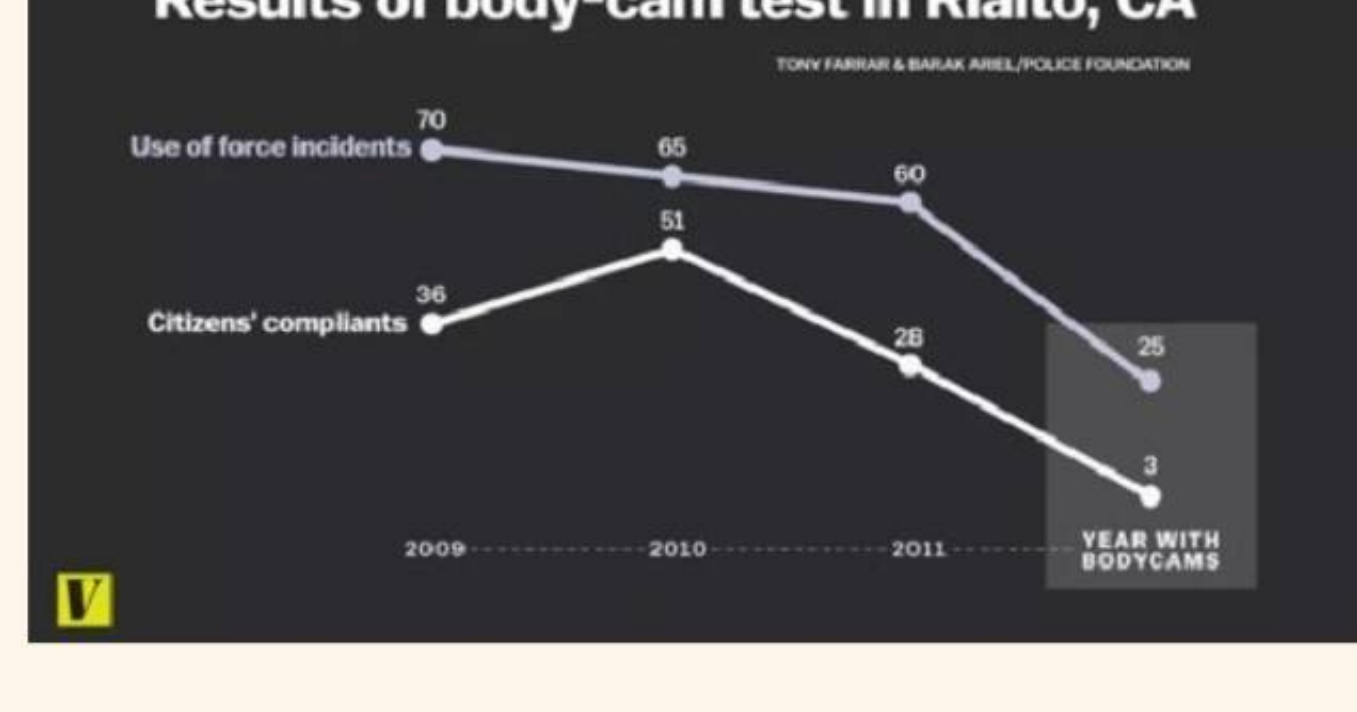


Figure 2: A chart explaining incidents using force and citizens' complaints dropped drastically when cameras were put into effect (Lopez, 2015, p. 3).

As shown in Figure 2, the use of body cameras has drastically dropped complaints and force incidents. This reduction should rebut citizens' views that police forces are filled with corrupt officers. This perspective will also help the courts because the fewer complaints, the better. In San Diego, "a 2015 report based on preliminary statistics showed that body cameras helped reduce 'personal body' force by officers by 46.5%" (Kelsh, 2015, p. 1). Body camera activists agree with the cameras because "they help prosecutors close cases faster, reduce use-of-force incidents and make allegations of misconduct against officers easier to probe. Both sides in a video-taped encounter behave better, they say, leading to fewer complaints and legal settlements" (Bokst, 2015, p.1). To de-escalate heightened tensions, the public deserves access to policing in ways that show hard-working law enforcement officers doing their jobs and protecting the rights of citizens while doing so.

No matter the difficulties in the initial phase, body camera usage should be enforced. The cameras will help with the safety and wellbeing of everyone. Our officers need to realize that the public's interest in their day-to-day job functioning has nothing to do with trust; it is a precaution that will help them in the long run. Like former New York Chief of Police Adams states: "New technologies like body cameras need to be part of a forward-thinking mindset that encourages cooperation and puts safety first, for the police and the community alike. The era of darkness is over" (Adams, 2015, p. 2). Crime already makes society dim; body cameras will help shed light on the often criticized role that police officers play in keeping their municipalities safe.

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