



Why Police Body Cameras are Just a First Step

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Media coverage of numerous deaths of unarmed citizens at the hands of law enforcement officers – including the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and of Freddie Grey in Baltimore, Maryland – has prompted renewed debate about police accountability in the United States. Public opinion has shifted, too, with a 2015 Gallup poll finding public confidence in police at the lowest level in 22 years.

Among many responses to deteriorating public trust and the increased political pressure, police departments across the country are outfitting officers with cameras worn on their bodies. The adoption of body camera policies coincides with another recent trend, an uptick in violent crime. Indeed, in the course of my research I found that across 150 cities between 2012 and 2016 reported violent crimes increased, even as body cameras were introduced to improve policing practices.

Although many departments are equipping police officers with body cameras, little is known about whether these cameras will have an effect on policing practices more generally – or whether these cameras can directly or indirectly contribute to crime reduction. Preliminary evidence suggests body cameras influence public perceptions of police but do not necessarily lead to the reduction of crime, a core goal of police duties. More time and research will be needed to see whether cameras help to reduce police officers' resort to deadly force. Meanwhile, my research suggests that rapid adoption of technologies in the absence of more comprehensive police reforms could ultimately corrode the legitimacy of police departments.

Public Perception of Body Worn Cameras

Body worn camera technology represents a shift in policing practices and influences the way police officers are perceived by citizens. In my research to date, I ask two essential questions related to the use of body worn camera technology:

- How do citizens perceive the use of body cameras?
- How do body worn cameras influence reported crime rates?

To learn more, over the course of six months I interviewed 40 citizens in Washington D.C. about their experiences with police and body cameras.

Interview Findings

What do these interviews tell us about people's perceptions of police? My findings suggest some important tendencies:

- *Citizens believe body cameras will improve police behavior and increase the legitimacy of the police force.* In the interviews, four-fifths of the respondents indicated that body cameras should improve police behavior and help legitimize the police presence. As one respondent put it, "officers wearing body cameras will be more cognizant of their behavior and interaction with the public. If you know someone is watching you, you are less likely to do things that are considered [wrong] by your department than if no one is watching!"
- *But none of the respondents thought body cameras would improve overall relations between police and the community.* As one explained: "I don't think they help build trust, it's kind of the opposite. If they are keeping an eye on you it sorts of relates to me who can be sneakier. I know for sure that the body camera won't build trust." Alternatively, respondents indicated that building trust required officers

actively engaging with the community outside of their normal duties.

The Need for Comprehensive Police Reforms

Although more remains to be learned about their effects on police behavior and police-community dynamics, body-worn cameras are clearly not a catch-all solution to law enforcement problems. They are intended as – and may turn out to be – a partial response to specific kinds of abuse of authority by front-line officers. But, of course, my research suggests, violent crime can persist alongside the introduction of body worn cameras. In the end, reducing violent crime is the core goal of good policing – and such reductions are almost certainly the key to building trust with the community as well. Therefore, policymakers need to continue to pursue more comprehensive reforms. The design and implementation of body worn camera policies are critically important, but must be coupled with other changes in police routines and outreach.

Comprehensive police reforms should proceed at two levels: improving community-police relations and crime reduction practices.

- To create meaningful opportunities for community involvement, policymakers can incorporate citizen input via town halls, forums, online tools, and in-person feedback.
- Building on the examples of citizen review boards used in other aspects of policing, police departments should consider establishing body camera boards comprised mainly of citizens from the community being served. This would bolster community buy-in and offer useful feedback on the uses of cameras and their images as adjustments are made during implementation.
- To reduce crimes and protect victims, police agencies, particularly in high-crime neighborhoods, need to be vigilant in the community. This should entail not just arresting more people but regular engagement -- not only in formal settings but also in daily interactions during street patrols and police visits to events such as picnics, school assemblies, and community improvement projects. Citizens will trust and work with police when they see them as integral members of their neighborhoods. In many communities there are well established nonprofits and community-based organizations. Police can partner with them to develop an understanding of local tensions and needs, building trust while they gather the information they need to more effectively fight serious crimes.

Read more in James E. Wright II and Andrea Headley, “A Test of Representative Bureaucracy Theory: Race and Police Use of Force” (working paper, 2018).