



The Need for Nuanced Research on the Uses and Misuses of Body-Worn Police Cameras

Ian T. Adams, University of Utah

Following the death of Michael Brown at the hands of police in 2014, Ferguson, Missouri, took center stage in the ongoing debate about the use of force by U.S. police departments. Protests and riots threatened to tear the city apart, and the police department's response was denounced by many as inept and overly militarized. President Barack Obama soon promised \$75 million to help local police departments purchase body-worn cameras.

By 2015, many U.S. police departments began adopting body-worn cameras, and these efforts continue today. Current estimates indicate that about 90% of large police departments in the country are already equipped with this technology, or will be soon. The adoption of body-worn cameras was usually predicated on the belief that the cameras could significantly curtail the use of force by police and also reduce the number of serious complaints lodged by community members against police officers.

How have things worked out? Amazingly, the first peer-reviewed "Rialto study" by the Police Foundation showed up to 87% reductions in use of force. Based on the study findings, the 2015 final report of President Obama's Taskforce on 21st Century Policing recommended that all police departments adopt body-worn cameras as a technological reform with the potential to rebuild trust between police and the communities they serve. However, the major effects found in the Rialto study have not yet been replicated. Subsequent, more extensive studies (including some by the same research team) find that body-worn cameras do not affect police use of force. In some cases, researchers even find dangerous, counter-productive effects, such as significant increases in assaults on officers.

As advocates, policymakers, and community members push for further research to understand the effects of this new technology better, attention should also be paid to the unintended consequences such widespread implementation could have on police departments and the communities they serve.

Unintended Effects for Police and the Public

Technology has its most substantial impacts on the people who live with it day-to-day, and often those effects are unforeseen – even if they are not entirely unforeseeable. The research literature is largely silent on the individual experiences of officers and citizens with body-worn cameras.

My co-author, Sharon Mastracci, and I have worked to identify and understand the effects of body-worn cameras on both police and the victims of domestic and sexual assault.

We find that officers equipped with the cameras report higher levels of burnout compared to officers without them. Burnout, or emotional exhaustion, is already experienced at very high levels within police forces and is
November 2, 2018 <https://scholars.org>

linked to increases in suicides, substance abuse, and family stress. Our findings should inform policymakers and administrators as they balance calls for rapid adoption of this technology with the equally essential considerations about the well-being of police employees.

Our research also highlights the specific concerns that victims of sexual and domestic assault may have about body-worn cameras. Criminal justice practice has evolved in recent decades as scholars and practitioners developed evidence-based practices for investigating and prosecuting crimes of domestic and sexual assault while supporting the victim. In certain ways, body-worn cameras threaten some of those best practices. For example, previous work has identified privacy concerns as the number one reason women opt not to contact police following incidents of domestic abuse. Body-worn cameras may lead citizens to at least worry that their privacy could be compromised. The needs and preferences of victims of assault should be considered as policymakers attempt to craft policies about the use of body-worn cameras.

New Research and Pathways Forward

Because police departments have adopted body-worn cameras before the scientific community was able to explore many of the technology's possible effects – or even firmly establish the predicted benefits – further research needs to proceed rapidly and cover many aspects. Police departments have an interest in making sure these expensive technologies capture all incidents of use of force – especially police shootings, which can undermine trust or, in the most extreme cases, spur widespread rioting. What is more, this technology is also already being tested in new contexts, well beyond police departments, such as in mental crisis wards in Great Britain and firefighting units in the United States.

My current research examines the perceived intensity of monitoring associated with body-worn cameras. I ask how the officials who are charged with wearing the cameras experience their effects on their professional discretion. I also look into how the public views and interacts with officers who wear these cameras, and explore what strikes stakeholders as “fair” distribution of the resulting footage. Understanding such experiences and views should help scholars and policymakers alike in crafting camera policies that fairly balance community expectations for transparency with genuine needs for privacy in some circumstances of police work. Furthermore, by better understanding the experiences of police officers, leaders can head off unrealistic fears while building protections against things that, realistically, may go wrong.

Current policy debates about body-worn cameras mostly focus on issues of when officers should turn them on or off. Most scholars working on these issues recognize the importance of privacy, particularly for vulnerable populations and in specific investigations where witnesses and victims may not wish to be recorded. No reasonable rules are likely to require every police activity is recorded. Moreover, no policies are likely to provide perfect guidance for actions taken during the kinds of chaotic realities confronting police officers, nor address all the technical glitches that can occur with recording equipment. However, body-worn cameras are spreading rapidly, and are not going away. Researchers, police officials, and citizen advocates must team up to learn how best to use this new technology to optimal effect in varied circumstances.

Read more In Ian Adams and Sharon Mastracci, “Police Body-Worn Cameras: Effects on Officers’ Burnout and Perceived Organizational Support” *Police Quarterly*, 2018; Ian Adams and Sharon

Mastracci, “Privacy is a Trap: The Ethics of Police Body-Worn Cameras and Control” *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 2018

