

U.S.

# Body Cameras Have Little Effect on Police Behavior, Study Says

By AMANDA RIPLEY and TIMOTHY WILLIAMS   OCT. 20, 2017

After a series of high-profile police shootings, police departments across the nation turned to body cameras, hoping they would curb abuses. But a rigorous study released Friday shows that they have almost no effect on officer behavior.

The 18-month study of more than 2,000 police officers in Washington found that officers equipped with cameras used force and prompted civilian complaints at about the same rate as those who did not have them.

Advocates for body cameras — including police officers, lawmakers and citizens in high-crime neighborhoods — have long argued that requiring officers to wear the devices would have a “civilizing effect” on both officers and the civilians

who encounter them. After the 2014 fatal police shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed African-American man, in Ferguson, Mo., calls for their use became more widespread.

By 2015, 95 percent of large police departments reported they were using body cameras or had committed to doing so in the near future, according to a national survey. The federal government has given police departments more than \$40 million to invest in body cameras, and state and local authorities have spent many millions more.

But, the authors of the new study cautioned, “these results suggest we should recalibrate our expectations” for body cameras to lead to “large-scale behavioral change in policing, particularly in contexts similar to Washington, D.C.”

Chief Peter Newsham of the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington said the results were surprising. “I thought it would have a difference on police and civilian behavior,” he said. “Particularly for officers — and this is the exception — who might be more inclined to misbehave.”

But Chief Newsham said the cameras had a number of benefits that could not be easily measured: more accurate investigations, better training and at least one case in which the footage exonerated an officer accused of shooting an unarmed suspect (who was indeed armed). Most important, he said, they bolstered the trust of the community.

“You have to be legitimate and trusted,” he said. “You can’t underestimate the value these cameras bring to that.”

Behavior modification has never been the sole argument for body cameras. Their most important function may be to create an independent record of police shootings and other encounters with the public. But in some of those areas, too, videos have proved ambiguous: In the courtroom, for example, they have repeatedly failed to persuade juries.

Though body cameras are now in greater use, their purpose is often left undefined, raising thorny questions about surveillance, privacy and other issues. “Police departments have been rushing to body cameras without sufficiently

deciding what the goal is,” said Seth Stoughton, a former officer and a law professor at the University of South Carolina, who has studied the devices extensively. “When no one is sure what it is supposed to do, no one knows if it is working.”

In the Washington study, which was conducted by David Yokum at the Lab @ DC, a team of scientists embedded in local government, and Anita Ravishankar of the Metropolitan Police Department, more than 1,000 police officers were randomly assigned cameras, and another 1,000 were not.

Each officer was tracked for seven months, with the researchers recording use-of-force incidents, civilian complaints, charging decisions by prosecutors, and other outcomes to see if the cameras changed behavior. On every metric, the effects were too small to be statistically significant.

“The results call into question whether police departments should even be adopting body-worn cameras, especially given their high cost,” said Harlan Yu, from Upturn, a Washington nonprofit consulting company that studies how technology affects social issues. It was not directly involved in the research.

Mr. Yu said the cameras raised significant privacy issues, particularly in low-income, minority neighborhoods, and that vendors were beginning to experiment with incorporating facial recognition software. “As an evidentiary tool, they will likely get stronger over time,” he said. “But the original purpose of cameras — transparency and accountability — could ultimately get swept under the rug.”

Criminologists said there were several possible explanations for the cameras’ apparent lack of impact. The Metropolitan Police Department has a reputation for being better-than-average in terms of both training and supervision, so whether officers wear cameras or not may have made little difference in their behavior.

The department has already had to confront excessive-force problems. After a Washington Post series in 1998 revealed that the city’s officers had shot and killed more people per resident in the 1990s than any other police force in a large American city, the Department of Justice entered into a memorandum of agreement with the city to reform its policing.

“We went through a transformation with regard to use of force when Justice came in here,” Chief Newsham said.

Under this theory, cities that have not had such reviews and calls for accountability may find that cameras have a greater effect.

Criminologists also suggested that the effect of the body cameras diminished over time, and that officers began to behave as they had before they started to wear the devices. Although if that were true the researchers would have found a greater gulf between those with and without cameras at the beginning of the study, which they did not. Or, the effects of the cameras may have spilled over to officers who did not wear them, just because they knew their colleagues did.

“This area of police practice is under-researched, so we really don’t know a lot,” said David A. Harris, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law who studies police accountability. “In this police department, cameras had a certain effect, but you cannot extend that to other police departments.”

Until now, the most commonly cited study on police body cameras had suggested that they did indeed have a calming effect. That experiment took place in 2012, in Rialto, Calif., where officers were randomly assigned cameras based on their shifts. Over a period of one year, shifts that included cameras yielded half as many use-of-force incidents (including the use of a police baton, Taser or gun) as shifts without cameras did. The number of complaints filed by civilians against officers also declined — by 90 percent compared with the previous year.

The Rialto study had a big impact in policing. Axon (formerly known as Taser International) has sold more than 300,000 police cameras worldwide and cites the Rialto study on its website. A federal judge also cited the study in 2013 when she ordered the New York City Police Department to conduct a yearlong pilot program using body cameras. (The department has outfitted 927 officers with cameras and will compare their performance with officers without; results are due out this spring.)

But the Rialto experiment included just 54 officers, compared with over 2,000 in Washington.

In another new study that will be published in the November issue of the journal *Policing*, researchers led by Michael White of Arizona State University interviewed 249 people who had recent encounters with officers wearing cameras. Those who were aware of the cameras perceived the encounters as more “just” than those who were not.

Monica Hopkins-Maxwell, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of the District of Columbia, said cameras were “not a panacea” and that only more emphasis on initiatives like community policing, data collection and better training would help build good will.

“I don’t think body cameras in any way, shape or form by themselves increase trust,” she said. “The way you increase trust is through relationships and how communities are treated by police officers.”

Professor Harris, of the University of Pittsburgh, said that the impact of body cameras will remain a disappointment to many people given the hype surrounding them once video footage of police behavior — good and bad — went viral on the internet.

“We were sold on the idea that these cameras were going to bring a brand-new accountability to policing, and that isn’t entirely what has happened,” he said.

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