

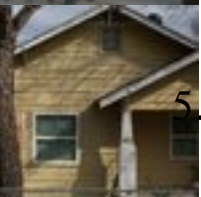













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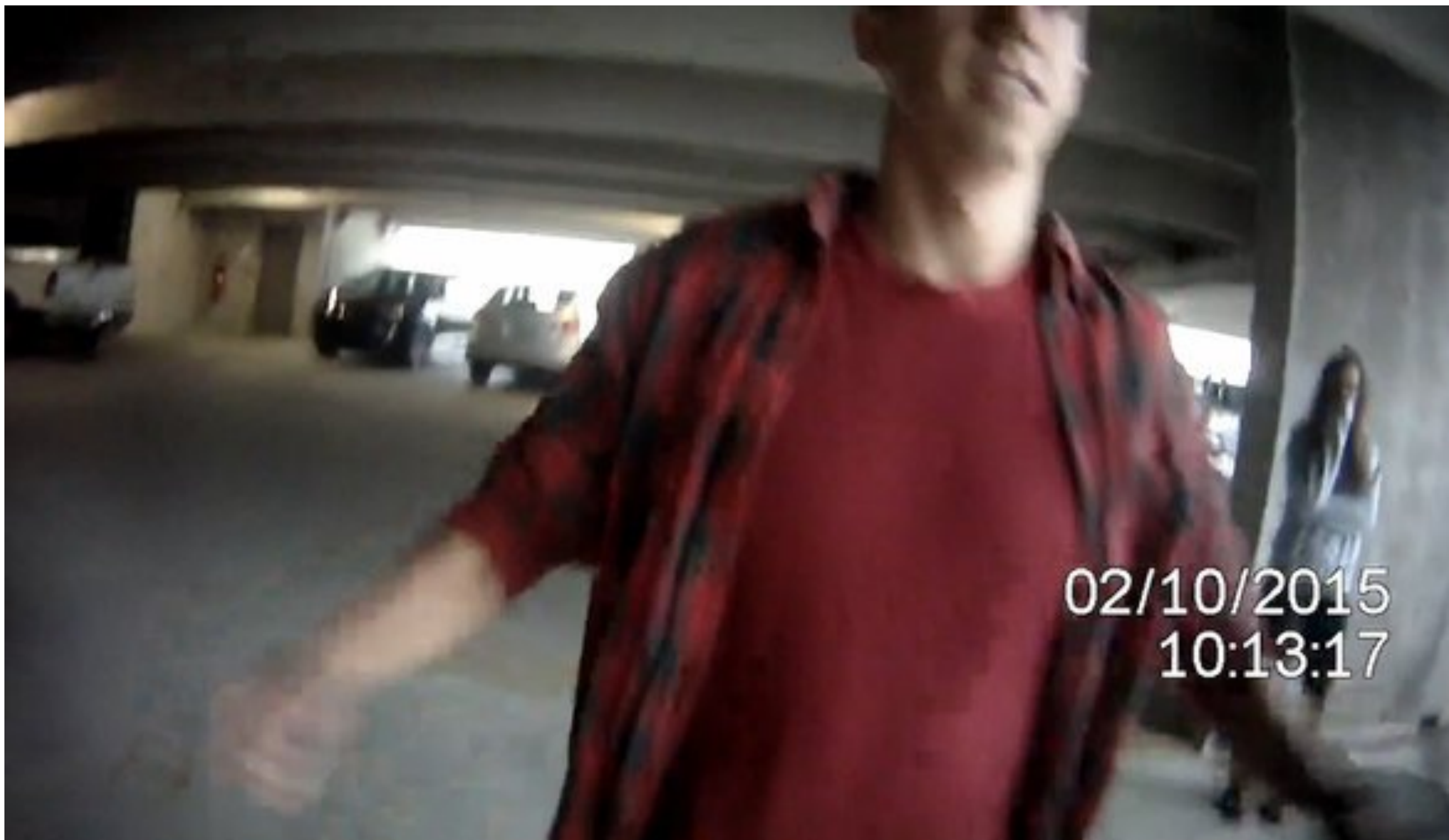


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# Police Body Cameras: What Do You See?

By [TIMOTHY WILLIAMS](#), JAMES THOMAS, SAMUEL JACOBY and [DAMIEN CAVE](#) UPDATED April 1, 2016





Public frustration with policing has led to calls nationwide for more cameras worn by officers. But what do those cameras actually reveal?

Below, you'll answer questions about three videos of simulated interactions involving police officers. This is not a scientific survey, answer the best you can. To get started, tell us a little about your views.

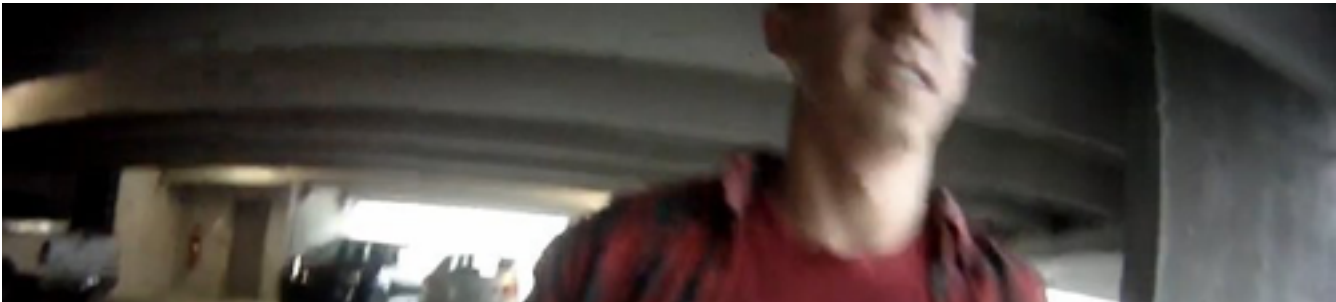
**How do you feel about the police?**

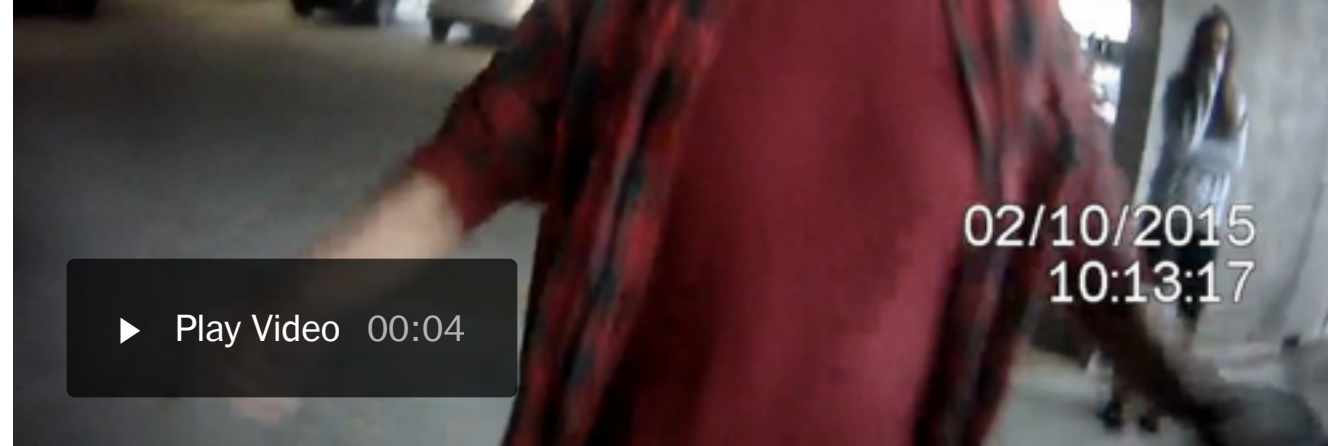
- I strongly trust the police
- I tend to trust the police
- I tend to distrust the police
- I strongly distrust the police

---

**Up Close**

Now watch the first video (with no sound) taken from a chest-mounted body camera, like those worn by thousands of police officers nationwide:





**How threatening was the situation the officer faced?**

Very threatening

Somewhat threatening

A little threatening

Not threatening

**How confident are you in your answer?**

Very confident

Somewhat confident

Mildly uncertain

Very uncertain

Seth W. Stoughton, a law professor at the University of South Carolina — and the producer of these videos — said most people usually agree that the officer faced a serious threat to his safety and quite possibly, his life. A former police officer, Professor Stoughton is one of many who supports efforts requiring officers to wear cameras like the one used here. He believes they will increase accountability and better educate people about police work.

But, he added, they have their limits. Look at the same interaction from a different point of view.







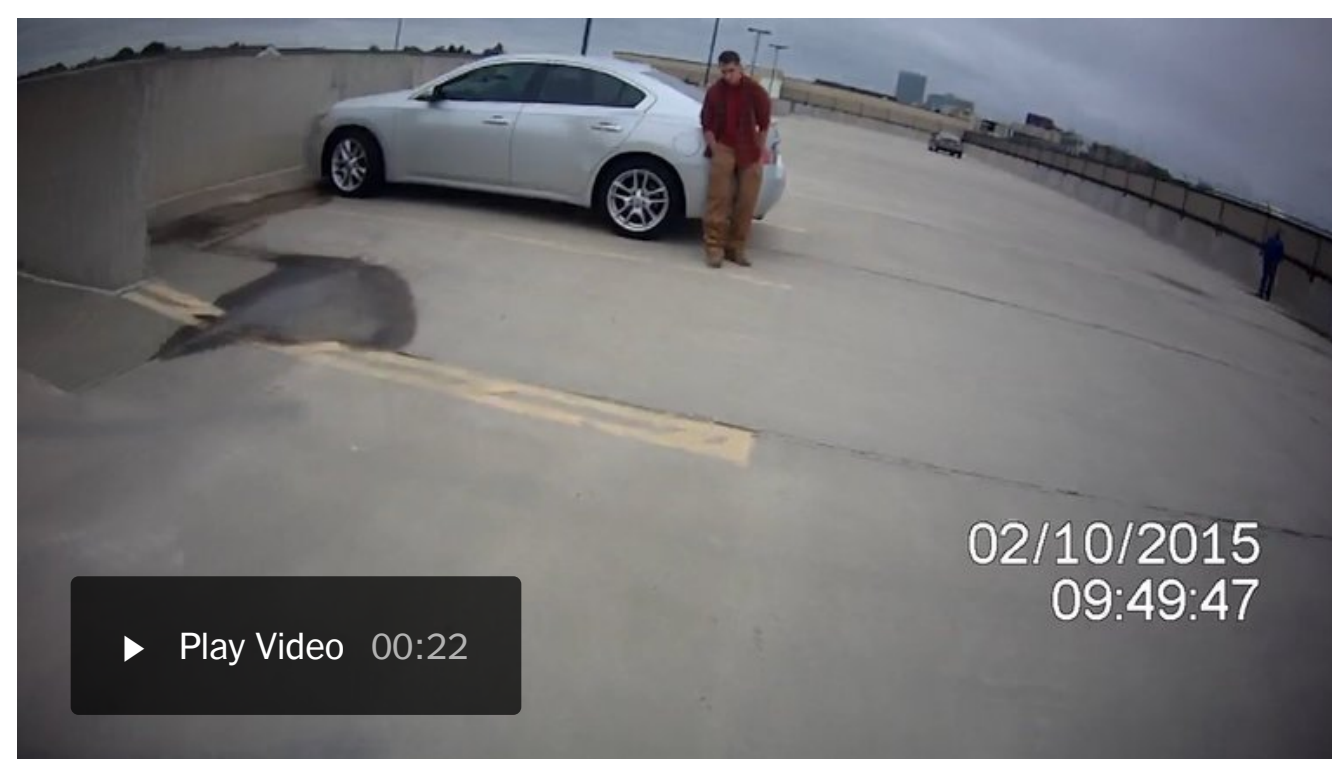
Not exactly a fight, is it? We silenced the pounding dance music, but you get the idea.

The first video, from a police body camera, reflects what Professor Stoughton calls “deceptive intensity.” In this case, the “struggle” appears to be far more involved than it actually is because the camera is mounted on the officer’s chest, producing herky-jerky movements that exaggerate what’s going on. Even if the camera was on the officer’s glasses or hat, the up-close footage would be confusing — proof that perspective matters.

---

## Foot Pursuit

Now let’s move on to the next video, covering a common and contentious issue: suspects fleeing officers. Professor Stoughton said that in many cases, foot pursuits are particularly prone to competing interpretations. That led him to create the simulation below. Watch and listen to the clip (this one has sound) then try to determine what happened:



### Why did the suspect run?

He did something illegal and tried to flee

The officer did something to frighten him

It doesn’t matter; running from the police is never justified

It doesn’t matter; the officer was too aggressive

### Why did the suspect fall?

He tripped

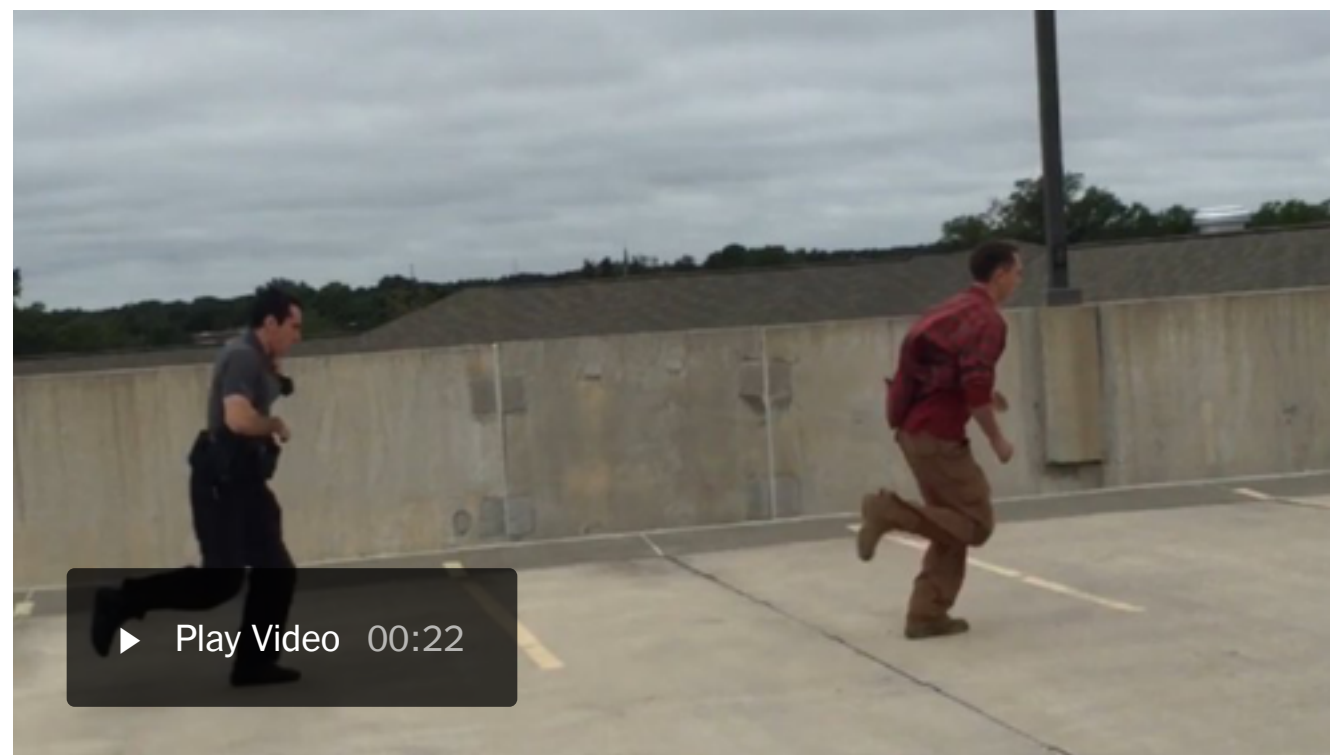
The officer caused him to fall

### Is the suspect reaching for the officer's gun?

Yes

No

Now watch the same scenario filmed by a bystander with a smartphone. (Warning: There is some profanity.)



### Is the suspect reaching for the officer's gun?

Yes

No

Professor Stoughton, who plays the officer in all these videos, said that neither clip actually shows whether the suspect was reaching for the gun.

Some of you probably noticed that and wished we had an answer along those lines, but that lack of certainty is part of the point. Sometimes police video footage cannot answer the most pressing questions.

The bystander video did clarify some other dilemmas, though.

- It showed that the suspect ran when he saw the officer touch his gun.
- It showed that the suspect fell because the officer shot him with a taser.

These details were not captured by the police body camera, though, revealing another important point: Body cameras prioritize the officer's point of view.

“When video allows us to look through someone's eyes, we tend to adopt an interpretation that favors that person,” Professor Stoughton said, explaining a psychological phenomenon known as “camera perspective bias.”



Narration can affect conclusions, too. The bystander and the officer provide vastly different takes on what happened during the chase above.

In court, “the question in those cases won’t be whether the officer was correct,” Professor Stoughton said. Rather, the focus will be on whether the officer’s conclusions and actions were reasonable.

Do you think the officer's response was reasonable?

Yes

No

Here is how some readers have explained their thinking

*“I felt the officer's response was reasonable. First, he needs to touch his gun to know it's where it's supposed to be, and perhaps that the safety is off. Second, you never, never run from a clearly identified police officer.”*

—Hydraulic Engineer Seattle

Next →

Traffic Stop

Now to the final video, which focuses on a fairly common responsibility for state and local police: scrutinizing vehicles and drivers at traffic stops or in neighborhoods.

These encounters can quickly turn dangerous. Last year, an officer in Georgia was dragged along the side of a car by a driver trying to flee (the series of events was captured by his [body camera](#)).

But officers in [Missouri](#) and [Texas](#), [New Jersey](#) and states in between have also been criticized in recent months for treating black drivers aggressively during traffic stops.



How threatening was the situation the officer faced?

Very threatening

Somewhat threatening

A little threatening

Not threatening

**How did the officer end up on the ground?**

He was pushed by the suspect

He fell

He was knocked down by the door

I can't tell

**How confident are you in your answer?**

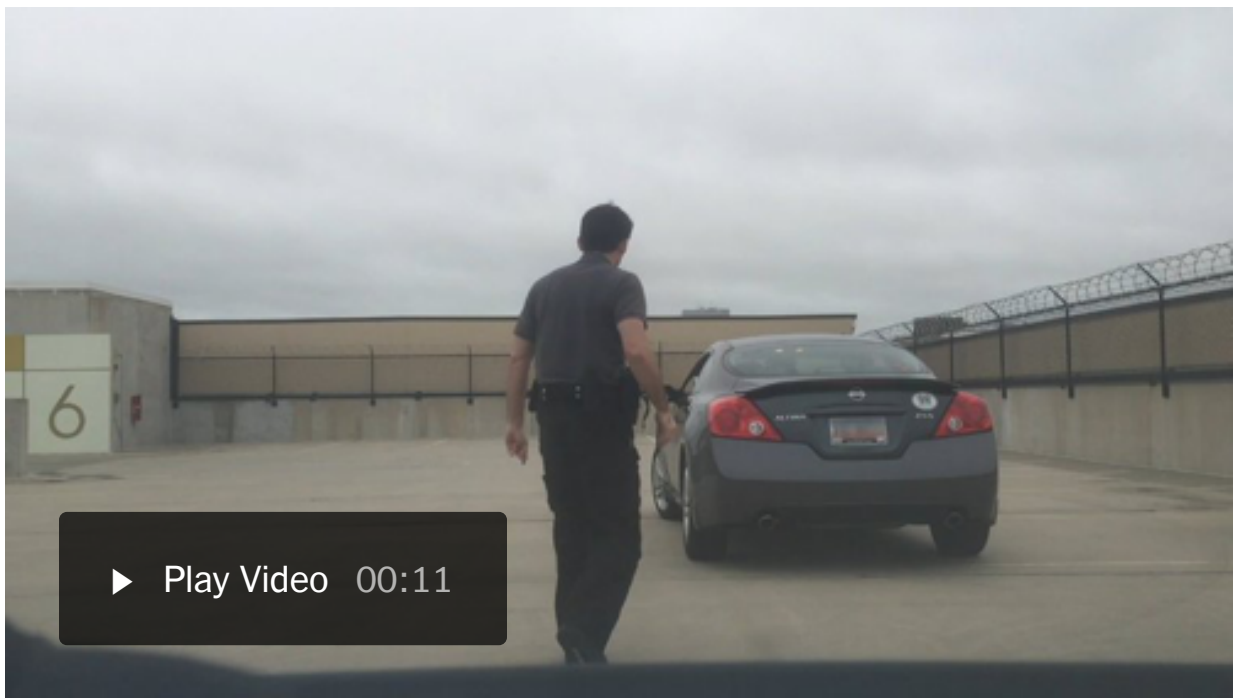
Very confident

Somewhat confident

Mildly uncertain

Very uncertain

Now watch the same encounter filmed from the police car's dash camera.



That didn't add much clarity, did it?

Professor Stoughton said that after watching both videos, most people usually say: "It looked like he pushed the officer, or he fell because he was going to get hit by the door."

Why? Here's a hint: Of those who said they trusted the police at the beginning of this quiz, 19.6% said the officer was knocked down by the driver or the door. Of those who said they tend to distrust or strongly distrust the police, 15.1% said the officer was knocked down by either of those. (These results are updated every few minutes based on quiz responses.)

Now here is the same incident, from a bystander's smartphone. Watch and listen.





So here’s what really happened: The man jumped out because he was trying to get away from a bee inside his car. All that flailing had nothing to do with the officer. It was all about the fear of getting stung.

The video also shows that the officer was not knocked down by the man in the car, or the door — he was too far away.

Why might some of us have missed these details?

Let’s take a deeper look at the responses.

Readers who said at the start that they had a high level of trust in the police or tended to trust the police were more likely to believe that the officer faced a very threatening, or somewhat threatening, situation, according to our updated results. For those who said they distrusted the police, or tended to, the interaction looked less dangerous for the officer.

People who generally trust the police

28%

Saw a serious threat

People who generally distrust the police

19%

Saw a serious threat

This confirms what Professor Stoughton has found in his own presentations with judges, lawyers and students: What we see in police video footage tends to be shaped by what we already believe.

“Our interpretation of video is just as subject to [cognitive biases](#) as our interpretation of things we see live,” Professor Stoughton said. “People disagree about policing and will continue to disagree about exactly what a video shows.”



Race can also play a role. While Professor Stoughton’s work did not seek to determine how the race of the driver affected viewers’ conclusions, numerous studies have shown that some sort of conscious or [unconscious bias](#) is present in all of us, including law enforcement.

Body cameras can have a positive impact. In San Diego, complaints about officers fell 40.5 percent and use of “personal body” force by officers dropped by 46.5 percent after officers adopted body cameras, according to a 2015 [report](#) from the city’s police department.

But Professor Stoughton said that as such videos become more commonly used in court to either bolster or dispute the accounts of police officers, people must be careful how they interpret the footage, keeping in mind the cameras’ limits and viewers’ biases.

“People are expecting more of body cameras than the technology will deliver,” Professor Stoughton said. “They expect it to be a broad solution for the problem of police-community relations, when in fact it’s just a tool, and like any tool, there’s a limited value to what it can do.”

Here is how some readers have responded

*“There will never be a substitute for proper training and physical/mental discipline. But if body cameras can be one small plank in a bridge between officers and their communities, and perhaps check or reform the few bad apples on the force, then I fully support their widespread use.”*

—Chris DC

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Additional production by Josh Keller and Rumsey Taylor

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