

SME RESEARCH BRIEF

Research Review – Body-Worn Cameras

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The difference with body-worn cameras is that they offer a viewing angle of police interactions that is virtually unprecedented: a subjective vantage point from the police officer's perspective and not from that of the citizen. Body-worn cameras were introduced as a means of improving 1) police response, 2) transparency of police services, and 3) the quality of the evidence presented as well as the functioning of the judicial process.

Improving Police Response

While they have been used by police agencies since at least 2005, body-worn cameras have received increased attention following the release of the results of the 2013 Rialto Experiment in California. The data revealed that, during the trial period, the use of force by police officers was two times less frequent among officers equipped with body-worn cameras and that there was an 87% decrease in the number of public complaints. In addition, a four-year follow-up study concluded that these reductions were maintained over time, which obviously makes the experiment a colossal success. Needless to say, body-worn camera manufacturers often refer to these results to promote their products. As a result, the Rialto Experiment was deemed to be a huge success due to its impact on the "Big Three": use of force, citizen resistance, and complaints about police officers.

It is expected that all parties involved, including police officers as well as citizens, will adopt behaviours that are in keeping with social standards and expectations when they are being filmed. Globally, however, research into the impact of body-worn cameras as a deterrent is ambiguous. The majority of the studies conducted did not find a statistically significant impact in the short-term. However, it is important to note that, often, 1) the basic level of the indicators drawn from police statistics is very low, and 2) the public satisfaction levels tend to be very high from the start. In other words, unless you identify an obvious behavioural issue you are trying to address from the beginning, introducing body-worn cameras as a means to change behaviour is, at best, a poor bet.

Improving the transparency of police services

In the realm of public and political opinion, body-worn cameras are considered to be a viable solution to address transparency issues, allegations of racism, and unfair treatment of the public in general. In fact, the large majority of the population appears to support the implementation of body-worn cameras as a means to achieve reform. Video has a reputation for providing a neutral point of view when it comes to an interaction and it has the power to easily solve contentious cases; we will come back to this topic in the next section.

The main concern stems from the fact that video recordings may not be released immediately if, for example, they are used as evidence in an active case. Concerns also arise because the activation of the recording function is generally a manual process, not an automatic one. While there may be a number of reasons for choosing to use the camera or not, reasons ranging from the availability or not of appropriate technology to the protection of a person's rights to privacy, the majority of negative comments appear to revolve around one key assumption: the officer chooses what they wish to record. As a result, the officer has the power not to record those incidents that are "not pretty" or could incriminate him/her. We appear to forget that written guidelines are available, that strict standards are in place for the activation of the recording function, and that activation appears to primarily be linked to the characteristics of a given situation rather than the characteristics of the individuals involved.

Improving the functioning of the judicial process

It's easy to forget but, body-worn cameras were originally implemented because they allow us to capture and record potentially controversial interactions between the police and citizens. However, the management of digital evidence has clearly become an argument in favour of the purchase of cameras over the past few years because they offer a virtually unprecedented evidence tool that could prove to be very useful. Few studies have focused on this aspect, but those that have are encouraging. For example, a study published in 2016 demonstrated that cases of intimate partner violence for which digital video evidence was available increased the probability of an arrest, charge and conviction of the aggressor, compared to those cases without video evidence.

There are very few studies focused on the impact of body-worn cameras on the functioning of the judicial process. This is why it is difficult to draw any clear conclusions. In addition, available research tended to focus on the potential bias linked to the use of body-worn cameras, results that manufacturers are not apt to share proactively with the public. In the world of cinema, it has been a well-known fact for decades, that images can be used to manipulate the opinion and emotions of the viewer, which leads to the crucial requirement for us to plan for mechanisms that can reduce their undesirable effects as much as possible.

Implications for practice

Body-worn cameras are not miraculous tools. Their use is associated with concerns that should be addressed but also with plausible promises. To this day, the most studied facet of body-worn cameras has, by far, been the behaviour of individuals being recorded. The cameras are introduced as a means of increasing the risk associated with certain behaviours, thereby reducing the incidence of these actions. However, results are ambiguous: effects may be positive or not, which makes it difficult to provide strong conclusions about the deterrent effect of body-worn cameras. Body-worn cameras are generally supported by the public and politicians in part because they may improve the transparency of police services, but video footage might not be of the expected quality and/or released as quickly as wanted. Finally, there are promising results that suggest that body-worn cameras might help improve the functioning of the judicial process. However, there are concerns that footage from body-worn cameras might influence the perception of police work and, consequently, that video footage should not be considered completely neutral.

Key references

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