



Who polices the police? Body-worn cameras do work after all

By Pedro Souza

‘To protect and to serve’ is a familiar motto adopted by police forces in the United States and across the world. Some mottoes go further: Minnesotan police aspire ‘To Protect with Courage, To Serve with Compassion!’, and officers in New York are ‘Faithful unto Death’ (*Fidelis ad mortem*). Across the Atlantic, law enforcement is relatively more circumspect, for example, ‘Working together for a safer London’.

These unabashed aspirations often clash with the reality of police and community relationships, which are regularly characterised by a lack of trust between the police and citizens and are sometimes plagued by claims of excessive use of force and racial discrimination. The riots that erupted in the wake of the killing of George Floyd in Minnesota, and growing calls to defund or abolish the police, highlight the importance of improving the relations between the police and the community they serve. In this context, adoption of police body worn cameras (BWC) have been over and over again proposed as a way to prevent excessive use of force, build trust and promote a sense of accountability. As Travis Easter from the San Diego Police Department stated, ‘If officers and citizens are being watched, we are both more liable to do the right thing’ (Siegel, 2020).

Existing work on BWC mostly suggests that they have limited or no effect on police behaviour. We provide experimental evidence – from Santa Catarina in Brazil – that BWC in fact trigger a significant change in officer and citizen interactions. Our findings suggest that the lack of high-quality evidence on the effectiveness of BWC from the many existing studies may be due to the research design, not due to an absence of a treatment effect.

In collaboration with the state Military Police – which is responsible for day-to-day policing activities and is highly visible to the public – we randomised 150 officers to receive the camera as part of their standard equipment and 303 officers were consigned to the control group, who were not allowed to use the camera. Using administrative data, we tracked the outcomes of the universe of the 9,259 dispatches they attended to, covering five police precincts over a three-month period starting in September 2018.

We find statistically and economically sizable results which strongly suggest that accountability through the recording of interactions between the police and citizens de-escalate situations in which conflict or violence could otherwise occur. Our initial set of results focuses on the actual use of the camera. Using the data from the camera logs, we find that the cameras were indeed used among the police apparatus: on average, one quarter of the dispatches in the treatment group were recorded. The internal protocol for camera use mandated that cameras should only be activated if there was an interaction with the citizen, which does not occur in all dispatches.

We then focus on comparing dispatch reports with and without BWC present. We find that dispatches in the treatment group were more diligently recorded: they are 13% more likely to generate a formal referral to the Civil Police (the branch of the police responsible for conducting investigations), prepare criminal reports and eventually push charges through the judiciary. We also find that those reports are 26% more likely to include a victim. We interpret these effects as ensuing from the accountability of the actions of the police and citizens’ alike, promoted by the video recordings. What is more, the proclivity to report on cases of domestic violence increased substantially by 66% comparing the treated with controlled dispatches.

We next consider margins that specifically signal a negative interaction between the police and citizens: We measure the incidence of any discharge of lethal or non-lethal weapons, if handcuffs were deployed or arrests took place, and whether the dispatch resulted in charges of disobedience or contempt towards the police officers. These latter charges may have been used both for legitimate purposes or to justify unwarranted use of force by the police.

On average, we find strong reductions in the use of force. The discharge of lethal and non-lethal weapons is reduced by 56%, the use of handcuffs by 12%, and contempt charges by 48% (while only the latter is statistically significant). The effects seem much stronger among cases that were internally classed as low risk prior to dispatch. In those cases, the use of force is driven close to zero, and contempt falls by close to 70%. No effects are detected among more serious cases that have already escalated prior to dispatch, where the presence of a camera itself may not affect the situational dynamic. Taken together, these results suggest that cameras indeed serve as way to de-escalate conflicts, diffuse tensions, and ensure a better co-operative environment on both sides.

We further estimate that officers learn about the use of the camera and adjust their behaviour even when a camera is no longer being used. To draw out this insight, we leveraged on a second feature of our experiment: we surprised the officers with some randomly selected days in which no camera would be available, even for those in the treatment group. In this way, we can compare the behaviour of treated officers across days in which cameras are being used and days when they are not. We detect no behavioural change beyond the mechanical absence of the recordings themselves. This is a central distinguishing feature of our study from numerous other BWC studies that typically assign cameras to be used randomly across whole shifts. As officers typically rotate across shifts this implies that officers that were subject to a BWC treatment may also appear in control group shifts. We also find that most gains are observed when just a single camera is present, implying that the positive effects are observed even if only a subset of officers has BWC. Overall, these findings suggest that even low-resourced police forces are likely to be able to draw on the positive aspects of BWC by allocating devices in such a way that most, if not all, officers are exposed to their use.

Lastly, we aim to shed some light on the question of accountability and monitoring. While we cannot fully disentangle the implicit monitoring effect of the

police vis-à-vis behavioural changes by the citizens themselves, we find that the composition of the dispatch groups substantially matters. Effects are more pronounced for policing groups formed by heterogenous types, e.g. low- and high-ranked officials. This suggests a third channel for monitoring.

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The cameras might not just be a way to promote the accountability of the police to the wider public, or to bring citizens' actions to light and justice, but also for effective monitoring of police officers by other fellow police officers.

Until now, existing empirical evidence of the use of BWC in select localities in the United States or the United Kingdom were not wholly supportive of their merits (Lum, 2019). Our experiment in Santa Catarina, Brazil – a much more challenging setting than previous studies, and in a developing country – shows strong behavioural

responses in accountability and monitoring when BWC are used. They do work, after all. ◀

About the author

Pedro Souza is Assistant Professor of Economics at the University of Warwick and a CAGE Associate.

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