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Cops and cameras: Officer perceptions of the use of body-worn cameras in law enforcement

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: There has been a recent surge in the adoption of and media attention to the use of body-worn cameras in law enforcement. Despite this increase in use and media attention, there is little to no research on officer perceptions of body-worn cameras.
Methods: This study relies on baseline data of officer perceptions toward body-worn cameras collected from surveys administered to Orlando Police officers who are participants in a randomized experiment evaluating the impact of body-worn cameras (Taser AXON Flex) in law enforcement.
Results: Results suggest that police officers are, by and large, open to and supportive of the use of body-worn cameras in policing, they would feel comfortable wearing them, and that they perceive a potential for benefits of body-worn cameras in improving citizen behavior, their own behavior, and the behavior of their fellow officers.
Conclusions: Officers are generally supportive of body-worn cameras, and they hold perceptions that these devices can be beneficial in positively affecting relevant outcomes. Study limitations and implications are also discussed.

Introduction

Policing has been witness to a significant amount of problematic issues (Blackwell & Vaughn, 2003; Kowalski & Lundman, 2007; McElvain & Kposowa, 2004; Phillips & Varano, 2008; Weir, Stewart, & Morris, 2012; Weitzer, 2002; Zhao, Ren, & Lovrich, 2010) as well as innovation and change in recent years (Culver, 2004; Zhao, Lovrich, & Robinson, 2001). For example, regarding the latter, technology is transforming modern policing; it is enhancing crime fighting capabilities, police accountability, and police-community relationships. And, according to the Executive Director of the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF, 2012: iii), the transformation will continue: "we expect to see a new Age of Technology in policing over the next 10 to 20 years, as the technologies that we currently are testing really take hold, and new technologies that we aren't even aware of yet become available." Current police technologies include advanced crime analysis, artificial intelligence, GPS to track suspects and police vehicles, license plate readers, and the use of social media to receive or disseminate information, to name a few. Cameras, too, are becoming an important part of policing. These include stationary cameras to provide street surveillance, cameras mounted inside police automobiles ("in-car cameras") and, most recently cameras mounted on police uniforms ("body-worn cameras"). All forms of cameras are thought to be valuable for producing documentary evidence, but the in-car cameras and body-worn cameras are purported to have another key advantage: to improve the behavior of both police officer and community member in an encounter. In-car cameras were the first to take hold in the profession, but the greatly expanded record produced by cameras worn on officers (versus automobiles) are leading to their increased popularity as evidenced in the wake of recent events in New York and Ferguson. The judge that found stop and frisk activities were being implemented in an unconstitutional manner by New York Police Department officers, recommended body-worn cameras as one intervention (*Floyd et al. v. City of New York et al.*, 2013). Similarly, the tragic shooting death of Michael Brown, a Ferguson, Missouri teenager, brought the discussion of body-worn cameras to the immediate forefront of policing. Police departments across the United States are being pressured by their communities to adopt body-worn cameras and the Ferguson Police Department implemented body-worn cameras within one month of the shooting.

As body-worn cameras proliferate, there is important research that is needed. Research is also needed, however, on aspects of implementation. If body-worn cameras are as valuable as some claim, it is important that the process of adoption within police departments be as effective and efficient as possible. Relevant to this objective is understanding to what extent officers are open to agency adoption of body-worn cameras and their views of the positive and negative aspects of them. The purpose of this study is to provide some of the first ever evidence of this information through a study of officers involved in a randomized experiment evaluating the impact of body-worn cameras in law enforcement.

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Literature review

Over the past decade, video recording equipment has helped monitor and record police officers' and subjects' behavior. As above, in-car cameras were the first to be adopted by police in the United States. Literature on in-car cameras has pointed toward substantial benefits for police agencies (IACP, 2003, 2004). For instance, results suggest that in-car cameras enhance officer safety, improve agency accountability, simplify incident review, and reduce agency liability (IACP, 2004). Similarly, closed circuit television (CCTV) cameras have produced increased surveillance opportunities for police officers (Menichelli, 2014; Ratcliffe, Taniguchi, & Taylor, 2009; Surette, 2005; Welsh & Farrington, 2011).

Novel in their application, body-worn cameras provide a unique opportunity to examine the full range of police officer/community interactions. Proponents of these devices claim that they can improve the behaviors of both officer and citizen, increase officer safety, reduce use of force and external complaints, and increase internal complaints (and thus officer accountability) (Farrar & Ariel, 2013; MPD, 2013; White, 2014). In the United States, three research studies (none as of yet published as journal articles) have been completed examining the effects of body-worn cameras on police-citizen interactions according to a recent review (White, 2014). From February 2012 to July 2013, a Cambridge University study examined the effects of "wearable" video cameras on patrol officers' compliance rates in Rialto, California. In this particular study, police officers (N = 54) were randomly assigned to wear a body-worn camera (or not) based on the officer's work shift. Over a 12-month study period, Rialto Police Department officers exhibited a 59% reduction in the use of force incidents and an 87.5% reduction in citizen complaints when compared to department estimates for all officers prior to implementation of body-worn cameras (Farrar & Ariel, 2013). Additionally, significant treatment effects (body-worn camera shifts vs. control shifts) were achieved for use of force outcomes in which there were nearly 50% less incidents for body-worn camera shifts (Farrar & Ariel, 2013).

Building upon this research, the Mesa (Arizona) Police Department conducted a program evaluation of "on-officer" body-worn cameras from October 2012 to September 2013. In this study, 50 police officers equipped with body-worn cameras were compared to 50 demographically similar officers who did not wear body-worn cameras. The one-year pilot study yielded a 40% decrease in complaints and a 75% decrease in use of force incidents across study officers (Mesa Police Department, 2013).

Starting in April 2013, the Phoenix (Arizona) Police Department (PPD) equipped 56 officers with body-worn cameras and compared them to 50 control officers for one year. The study examined the effects of body-worn cameras on police officer complaints, as well as their impact on citizen-officer interactions (Rosenbaum, Schuck, Costello, Hawkins, & Ring, 2005; White, 2014). According to preliminary results, self-reported data indicated that most officers were comfortable wearing body-worn cameras, yet did not believe they should be adopted for all frontline personnel in the department (White, 201, 2014; Katz & Kurtenbach, 2014). Also, self-reported police officer productivity increased for officers wearing body-worn cameras, while self-reported complaints against officers decreased by 60% during the study period; official records also indicated a 44% decrease in complaints against officers (Katz & Kurtenbach, 2014; White, 2013, 2014).

While our knowledge of the impact of body-worn cameras is increasing, little to nothing is still known about the perceptions of police officers on the subject. It is important to understand this perspective, because officer buy-in can be important for effectuating the desirable outcomes. Officers who have negative views of body-worn cameras may subvert efforts by their agencies to acquire them or undermine effective implementation in the agencies that do adopt them. Conversely, officers who are supportive of body-worn cameras can produce an effective implementation that may even enhance the value of the body-worn cameras. Understanding officers' preconceived notions about the positive and negative aspects of body-worn cameras can be useful for education campaigns within departments to increase officers' openness to the technology.

Some previous studies have surveyed officers about their perceptions of in-car or body-worn cameras; some solicited attitudes and perceptions *before* the cameras were placed in the field and some obtained the information *after* the officers had some experience with cameras. The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP, 2003) surveyed officers about their perceptions of *in-car* cameras *after* they had experience with them. One-third of the officers reported that they felt safer as a result of the in-car cameras. Most of the officers (70%) reported that the in-car cameras had little or no impact on their behavior and higher percentages reported that the in-car cameras had no effect on how they handled incidents (86%) and their decisions to use force (89%).

Comparatively, much of the information reported on police officer perceptions of *body-worn cameras* is anecdotal in nature (White, 2014). Exceptions include the survey results associated with the two Arizona studies described above. Four in five (77%) of the Mesa officers surveyed prior to implementation believed the body-worn cameras would cause them to behave more professionally; only 23% indicated that the department should adopt body-worn cameras for all officers (White, 2014). The Phoenix (Arizona) police officers indicated "ambivalent or negative" attitudes about the potential impact of body-worn cameras prior to wearing body-worn cameras (White, 2013, 2014). Despite this preliminary evidence, information that can be gleaned from these studies is limited.

Body-worn cameras require significant financial commitments from police departments both in up-front costs and in the costs to maintain and update this technology over time. Recognizing these considerable costs coupled with the recent surge in media attention and academic discourse on the utility of body-worn cameras in policing, it is important to gain an understanding of officers' perceptions toward the devices. This information can be used to produce information campaigns that might increase officer openness to the technology and thereby produce more successful implementation and more positive outcomes. This study will contribute to the literature by providing one of the first studies ever to examine officer attitudes toward body-worn cameras by gauging the impressions of officers in an agency before body-worn cameras were placed in the field and *prior to* high profile incidents such as what occurred in Ferguson, Missouri.

Data and methods

The current study examines police officer perceptions of body-worn cameras through data collected from officers within the Orlando, (FL) Police Department (OPD). OPD employs over 700 sworn personnel and over 100 non-sworn personnel. The department has jurisdiction of roughly 110 square miles, and services a population of over 270,000 citizens.

Participants

The data come from a larger research project examining the impact of police officer body-worn cameras, in which patrol officers were randomly assigned to one of two groups: Body-Worn Cameras and No Body-Worn Cameras. The Body-Worn Camera group was equipped with Taser AXON Flex body-worn cameras (http://www.taser.com/products/on-officer-video/axon-flex-on-officer-video). Study participation was voluntary, and 95 patrol officers out of the nearly 400 eligible patrol officers agreed to participate in the research project.

Baseline survey

Data analyzed in the current study were collected through baseline surveys distributed to the patrol officers (n = 95), who consented to participate in the study, *before* cameras were placed in the field. Baseline