

## How body cameras could change police

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Lopez



A police officer wears a camera during an August 30 rally in Ferguson, Missouri, for Michael Brown.  
Aaron P. Bernstein

Following [the August 9 shooting of Michael Brown](#) in Ferguson, Missouri, more people have clamored for police departments to adopt body cameras. [The thinking](#), according to advocates, is that if police officer [Darren Wilson](#) was outfitted with a body camera at the time of Brown's shooting, the footage would have cleared up what happened and whether there was any wrongdoing on Wilson's end. The proposal for outfitting police around the country with body cameras has even been [dubbed](#) "the Michael Brown law."

But there's still a lot of debate about how effective these body cameras are in real police settings. With little available research and no good data on how many departments use the cameras, the concern for both supporters and skeptics is how to protect both the public and police from the potential risks of body cameras, particularly their threats to privacy in public and private spaces. There's also a question of whether these cameras would always be turned on, especially in quickly developing events such as shootings.

Despite the concerns, there is a growing movement in favor of supplying body cameras to local police departments. The Obama administration [recently embraced](#) the technology, and the [New York City Police Department](#) and [Ferguson Police Department](#) are looking into whether to use the cameras and how. The US Border Patrol [said](#) it will test the technology as well.

Here is a breakdown of what's known about body cameras and some of the concerns surrounding the devices.

## 1) What are body cameras?

Body cameras are small devices, usually attached to the head or upper body of a police officer, and they're used to record their day-to-day-work. [Some cameras](#) have enough battery life for a couple hours of recording, while [others](#) can last as long as 12 hours. The cameras generally run between \$200 to \$1,000.



Body cameras. (Left: The Washington Post via Getty Images, right: Craig Walker / Denver Post via Getty Images)

## 2) What's the purpose of body cameras?

The main argument for body cameras is that they could hold police accountable for their actions and also protect cops who are falsely accused of wrongdoing.

The cameras "have the potential to be a win-win situation," said Jay Stanley, a senior policy analyst at the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). "A lot of departments are finding that for every time they're used to record an abusive officer, there are other times where they save an officer from a false accusation of abuse or unprofessional behavior."

New York City Public Advocate Letitia James displays body cameras. (Andrew Burton / Getty Images News)

Stanley argued the devices could pay for themselves. For one, the recordings could be used to fight off false charges that could lead to costly lawsuits or court settlements. The cameras could also encourage police, who would know their actions are being recorded, to behave better.

In New York City, [a report](#) from the city's public advocate found that outfitting the entire police department with body cameras would cost around \$33 million. But in 2013, the city paid \$152 million as a result of claims of police misconduct. If body cameras could reduce those claims by just one-fifth, the devices would pay for themselves.

Ed Mullins, a sergeant in the New York City Police Department (NYPD) and president of [the NYPD sergeants union](#), is skeptical about body cameras, but he agreed the devices could benefit police and local governments in some ways.

"The city settles lawsuits because it's cheaper" than taking them to trial, he said. "There's a value there."

### 3) What are the potential drawbacks of body cameras?

Skeptics and supporters of body cameras acknowledge they could benefit both police and the public, but skeptics are particularly concerned that the policies could be set up in a way that violate the privacy of the public and police officers.

Mullins, for one, said he's worried that recordings from body cameras could harm an officer's day-to-day work. A confidential informant, for example, could be reluctant to talk to a cop who's wearing a body camera. That could make it harder for police to track down a suspect or do other regular work in the line of duty.

Denver Police demonstrate body cameras to media. (Craig Walker / Denver Post via Getty Images)

Another big concern for cops like Mullins is that the cameras could be used to go after police for petty or political problems. For example, an officer could end up getting in trouble for a dirty joke with his partner that was caught on camera. "Police sense of humor is different than what the general public expects," Mullins said. "Do I get chastised for making jokes? Things like that need to be clear, because, in any work place, people joke."

Similar concerns apply for the broader public. A lot of people could take issue with having their every move recorded simply because a police officer is around, even in a public setting. The privacy concerns are further exacerbated if an officer comes into a person's home, where the recording could present a clear violation of someone's right to privacy on private property.

There's also concern the cameras could be used to aid prosecutions of civilians. Under current policy, the NYPD generally avoids charging anyone who knowingly submits a false claim against a police officer, because it could lead to a chilling effect among people who have legitimate complaints. But if cameras empower the public to go after police, Mullins argued it's only fair that the devices are also used as evidence to prosecute people who make false charges against police.

"When we're wrong, we pay the penalty," Mullins said. "What happens when you're wrong? It's a question of fairness."

Stanley, of the ACLU, acknowledged some of the concerns in [a previous report](#) for the ACLU. The proposed rules would require a police officer to disclose to people that they're being recorded, provide some leniency for when a cop needs to record, limit public access to footage when it's directly pertinent to a personal or public issue with police, and prevent footage, particularly recordings impertinent to an investigation, from being held for long periods of time. Stanley also added that some sort of independent body should be able to verify the policies are being enforced correctly.

"We don't want to see video not of any importance to the public being circulated for yucks among police officers or posted on YouTube," Stanley said. "At the same time, video that is of public importance should be released."

### 4) Are there other limitations to body cameras?

A police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, outfitted with a body camera. (Aaron Bernstein / Getty Images News)

Beyond the concerns about policy, there are technological limits that could strain the implementation of body cameras and the effect they have on holding police accountable.

The major concern is battery life. With the battery of some cameras lasting as little as two hours, it's possible that the cameras may not always be usable when police officers need them most. Or to conserve battery life, police might need to charge the cameras in their cars and only turn them on right before they confront a suspect or take some other action. That may not always be feasible in emergency situations.

Todd Morris, CEO of [BrickHouse Security](#), a company that makes body cameras, said it's a concern he hears from police officers around the country. "They have this fear that if they've been mandated to wear a camera and then for

some reason they're unable to push the button or forget to push the button, the absence of video evidence will be used as evidence against them that they did something wrong," he said.

Based on some polls, police officers' concerns have some merit. In [a survey](#) of 526 people conducted by Morris' company, nearly 75 percent of respondents said they would think an officer is hiding something if an outfitted body camera isn't activated.

Stanley, of the ACLU, said this problem could be alleviated by providing police officers with extra batteries. While a problem for now, he said it's also one that likely won't exist once the technology improves. Until then, officers will just need to be somewhat careful with their battery use.

"There's plenty of battery to record most of the serious incidents that any officer is likely to encounter in any shift," Stanley said, "but not necessarily enough to record all of every shift."

## **5) How do body cameras compare to dashboard cameras?**

A dashboard camera on a Russian civilian vehicle. (Yuri Kadobnov / AFP via Getty Images)

Dashboard cameras, as the name implies, are devices that go on a police car dashboard to record whatever is in front of the car and any possible audio. About 61 percent of local police departments used dashboard cameras in 2007, the latest year of available data, according to [the Bureau of Justice Statistics](#).

The arguments for and against body cameras broadly apply to dashboard cameras as well. But a key difference is that dashboard cameras are much more limited in scope, since they only capture visuals in front of the police car and what can be heard from a couple dozen feet of the vehicle.

Like body cameras, dashboard cameras can also be held back by problems with policy and technology as well. Dashboard cameras used by the Cincinnati Police Department, for instance, [failed to capture](#) crashes, shootings, and their aftermaths throughout the past few years, largely because the recordings can malfunction and cops don't always have to leave the cameras on when they make it to the scene of a shooting. Similar problems and limitations have been reported in other cities, including [Seattle](#) and [Houston](#).

Part of the call for body cameras, in fact, comes from the inadequacy of dashboard cameras. In Cincinnati, advocacy group [Friends of Bones](#) has clamored for police to adopt body cameras following the 2011 police shooting of David "Bones" Hebert.

## **6) What does the public think of body cameras?**

Ferguson's local government, led by Mayor James Knowles, [vowed](#) to look into body cameras for its police force after the Michael Brown shooting. (Scott Olson / Getty Images News)

The BrickHouse Security survey found more than 72 percent of respondents support body cameras, which holds up with [other polls](#) around the country.

The respondents to BrickHouse's survey, however, were mixed in how the cameras should be used and turned on. Less than half of respondents said the cameras should always be on as long as the officer is on duty. Nearly 29 percent said the cameras should only be on when an officer is interacting with a civilian, and roughly 5 percent said the cameras should be activated at the officer's discretion. The remaining respondents said officers shouldn't be allowed to wear body cameras.

## 7) Do cops support body cameras?

A police officer shows footage from a body camera. (The Washington Post via Getty Images)

Police departments are traditionally skeptical of the body cameras, but a lot of chiefs and officers have come around to the technology in recent years.

"The departments that I've researched that implemented cameras had an anti-camera atmosphere," said Mullins, of the NYPD. "That subsequently changed over a period of time when officers recognized they were being cleared of allegations that weren't true."

[A 2002 survey of police officers](#) suggested as many as 93 percent of misconduct investigations with dashboard

camera evidence exonerated officers. (The high exoneration rate is based on officers' self-reports, so it could be an overestimate.) Similar results may be possible with body cameras.

Morris, of BrickHouse Security, said he's sold "thousands" of body cameras to police officers are buying with their own money, voluntarily. "Everyone's got a friend on the force who has been accused of saying something inappropriate, touching someone inappropriately, or doing something inappropriate," he said. Police officers "can all identify with it, and they want to avoid it."

**8) How did body cameras affect police departments that adopted them?**

A UK police officer shows off his body camera. (Yui Mok / WPA Pool via Getty Images)

Since so few police departments have adopted the devices up to this point, the evidence surrounding body cameras is still hazy. But some of the early results are promising.

In [a 2014 report](#) for the Department of Justice, Michael White, a professor of criminology at Arizona State University, reviewed the slim evidence on body cameras and the experiences of police departments around the world. White found some major benefits to the devices, but he also outlined a few lingering unanswered questions and concerns.

The report found what seems to be a big early success in Rialto, California. Since 2012, all Rialto cops must wear body cameras. In the first year of the program, use of force by officers dropped 60 percent, and citizen complaints declined by 88 percent.

Similar findings applied to other cities with body cameras. In multiple places, there were drops in citizen complaints. In the Scottish city of Aberdeen, there were fewer assaults on officers. And anecdotal evidence suggested a civilizing effect in Phoenix.

The problem, the report noted, is the studies were so bare in their findings that it's unclear how body cameras led to the decreases in bad behavior. Did citizens behave better because they were on camera? Did cops? A mix of both? The studies don't provide a full answer for the cause-and-effect.

A body camera on a UK police officer. (Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

The research also indicated that body cameras assist in the resolution of citizen complaints against police, and body cameras may reduce the likelihood of false complaints against police. In the UK studies, body cameras appeared to reduce officers' paperwork, improve cops' ability to determine whether a crime occurred, and increased the chances of a case ending in a guilty plea instead of a criminal trial.

In [a separate report](#) by the Justice Department's Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Office, several police chiefs heralded the use of body cameras as a means to collect evidence.

"Oftentimes, we know that the suspect is repeatedly abusing the victim, but either the victim refuses to press charges, or there is simply not enough evidence to go to trial," Daytona Beach Police Chief Michael Chitwood told the COPS Office, which helps train and fund local police departments. "The footage shows first-hand the victim's injuries, demeanor, and immediate reactions.... This means that we can have enough evidence to move forward with the case, even if the victim ultimately declines to prosecute."

Still, White's review of the evidence couldn't address a few questions and concerns. It's unclear whether body cameras exacerbate citizens' concerns about privacy and whether recording citizens in traumatic situations can worsen the trauma of such an event. The research also didn't resolve concerns that body cameras could expose officers to "unsolicited fishing expeditions by supervisors," which could open cops to punishment simply for making a dirty joke while a camera is recording. The studies also failed to establish just how much of an effect body cameras have on litigation against police.

"Independent research on body-worn camera technology is urgently needed," White wrote. "Most of the claims made by advocates and critics of the technology remain untested."

*To learn more about how body cameras could change law enforcement, watch Vox's [three-minute explainer](#) on video evidence:*