

Police attitudes about body cameras suggest cops may see benefits to being monitored

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The majority of U.S. law enforcement agencies have either committed to or already implemented body cameras for their police officers. But officers' concerns about a loss of on-the-job autonomy are balanced out

when they can access their own body camera footage, according to research from the McCombs School of Business at The University of Texas at Austin.

In the study forthcoming and online in advance in *Organization Science*, Shefali Patil, assistant professor of management at Texas McCombs, along with Ethan S. Bernstein of Harvard Business School, finds that police believe cameras "show the truth from the officers' perspective" and "protect officers" accused of misconduct.

"What is traditionally conceived as top-down monitoring is perceived as far more egalitarian when everybody can access the footage," Patil said. "Officers, for the first time, have a way to show their side of the story. That can shrink the divide some officers feel exists between themselves and the people who monitor their job performance."

For the first part of the study, researchers asked police about their perceptions of ability to make on-the-job decisions and polarization with the general public.

Three months after being outfitted with the cameras, officers felt they had less autonomy—but also felt less polarized from the public they serve.

Next, police agencies provided five randomly selected videos from the body cameras of each participating officer—for 820 videos in total—that exemplified officers' psychological states, such as autonomy or polarization. The researchers asked independent experts to code and rate police behaviors caught on [camera](#). The officers then rated their own performance and feeling in each situation.

"We asked about police behaviors in several ways," Patil said. "The first was their interpersonal interaction with citizens: "How respectful are

[police](#) towards the people when they're working a scene?" The other is how they're portraying a favorable image of law enforcement in general."

The researchers found officers were more respectful in situations where they reported lessened feelings of polarization—situations like officers going out of their way to explain procedures, such as why somebody was stopped, rather than just proceeding without explanation. They were trying to build a mutual understanding or explaining what the [police officers](#) saw as a potential risk.

Patil said the findings differ from past research about the downsides of monitoring because of officers' newfound access to body camera footage.

"It's not just symbolic access," she said. "That's a lesson for any organization. Monitored workers need to know they can review footage of their job performance at any time and especially when their actions are questioned."

More information: Shefali V. Patil et al. Uncovering the Mitigating Psychological Response to Monitoring Technologies: Police Body Cameras Not Only Constrain but Also Depolarize, *Organization Science* (2021). [DOI: 10.1287/orsc.2021.1452](https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2021.1452)

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