

Research: Body cameras close the racial gap in police misconduct investigations

July 21 2021, by Jennifer French Giarratano



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Video footage captured by police-worn body cameras is closing racial gaps in police misconduct investigations according to research by criminologists and economists at Georgia State, American and Stockton

universities.

"Police bodycams—when they're turned on—even the playing field by introducing objective evidence into the investigation of complaints about [police](#) behavior," Georgia State University professor Volkan Topalli said. "This technology now helps eliminate ambiguities and conflicting accounts among Black and Hispanic complainants more often than whites, narrowing proven disparities among racial lines."

Topalli and his co-authors studied citizen complaint data from the Chicago Police Department (PD) and Civilian Office of Police Accountability filed between 2012 and 2020. Chicago PD, the second largest municipal law enforcement agency in the U.S., staggered bodycam deployment among its 22 police districts over the period. The authors examined this deployment to determine whether evidence from bodycam technology altered the outcomes of misconduct complaints and whether it led to different outcomes based on the race of the complainants.

Before the adoption of police bodycams, evidence suggests the Chicago PD citizen complaint investigations process produced biased outcomes. Of the more than 111,000 civilian complaints against Chicago PD officers between January 2000 and June 2015, only 2.1 percent were "sustained," meaning the complainant's allegation was supported by evidence indicating the incident occurred and the officer's conduct was improper. From 2010-2015, only 1.6 percent of Black residents' complaints were sustained versus an overall rate of 2.6 percent, suggesting an imbalance of outcomes along racial lines.

The deployment of bodycams during this period was associated with a 9.9-percentage-point increase in the likelihood of a sustained finding, nearly two-thirds more frequently than the mean for non-bodycam incidents.

Bodycam deployment also led to a 16.2 percent decrease in the dismissal of investigations due to insufficient evidence (not sustained) and a significant increase in disciplinary actions against police officers with sufficient evidence to sanction their misconduct. The racial disparities in not sustained findings largely disappeared.

"Police bodycams provide information that changes the outcome of [complaint](#) investigations," Topalli said. "Although cultural acceptance of this technology as 'business as usual' may take some time and effort, its adoption helps establish an important accountability process for law enforcement and can improve citizen trust in the police, particularly in communities that have experienced biased oversight."

Suat Cubukeu and Erdal Tekin at American University and Nusret M. Sahin at Stockton University are co-authors of the study, "Body-Worn Cameras and Adjudication of Citizen Complaints of Police Misconduct," published as National Bureau of Economics Research (NBER) Working Paper No. 29019.

More information: Suat Çubukçu et al, Body-Worn Cameras and Adjudication of Citizen Complaints of Police Misconduct, *National Bureau of Economics Research (NBER)* (2021). [DOI: 10.3386/w29019](https://doi.org/10.3386/w29019)

Provided by Georgia State University

Citation: Research: Body cameras close the racial gap in police misconduct investigations (2021, July 21) retrieved 1 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-07-body-cameras-racial-gap-police.html>

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