

# Study: NYPD body cameras decrease citizen complaints and arrests

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Police body worn cameras have become a controversial element in the larger debate about policing and the relationship between police and citizens in the United States.

Thanks to a court-mandated department-wide rollout of these cameras involving 35,000 New York Police Department officers, starting in 2018, a large volume of publicly available data has been made available to study their effects, detailing the universe of NYPD stops from January 2017 to December 2019.

Forthcoming research in the *Journal of Law, Economics & Organization* from Brad Greenwood, an associate professor of information systems and [operations management](#) at the George Mason University's School of Business, co-authored with Mitchell Zamoff of the University of Minnesota and Gordon Burtch of Boston University, represents the most extensive analysis of the impact of the cameras in a major American city.

"We looked at all NYPD stops, as well as arrest records and civilian complaints before, during, and after the body cam rollout," said Greenwood.

The results showed three clear patterns. First, fears that body-worn cameras would deter police from interacting with the public appeared unfounded. In fact, the number of investigative stops increased by nearly 17% after police were equipped with the cameras.

"We saw no de-policing effect," Greenwood said. "Some people feared that having cameras rolling during encounters with the public would deter officers from interacting with citizens, but we don't observe any evidence of that."

Second, [citizen](#) complaints against police decreased by roughly 20%. "Abuse of authority" complaints, which comprise allegations of mistreatment or intimidation and may comprise improperly stopping, threatening, or seizing property from citizens, dropped the most. Of all the types of complaints cataloged by NYC's Citizen Complaint Review

Board, abuse of authority is the most common.

"Because complaints are going down at the same time stops were going up, we can reasonably conclude that BWCs are driving an increase in legitimate stops, as opposed to questionable or superfluous ones," said Greenwood.

Third, after adoption of body-worn cameras, the likelihood that a stop resulted in arrest went down by 16%.

"We can't really say whether these changes are due to positive changes in police behavior, the behavior of the public, or a bit of both. All we can say—which is really all we set out to determine—is that BWCs appears to have had a beneficial effect on interactions between police and citizens in New York City," Greenwood said.

The cameras are not a cure-all, Greenwood cautioned. Citizen complaints alleging improper use of force, for example, remained flat. And smaller police departments with more modest budgets face legitimate resource constraints, ranging from difficulty in paying for cameras, challenges when training officers to use them properly, and infrastructure issues in preserving the vast archives of video evidence. Greenwood's data-driven analysis may help these smaller municipalities weigh the costs and benefits of adopting the technology.

In addition, Greenwood believes this research is relevant to recent controversy surrounding automated workplace surveillance. "Monitoring employees is nothing new; we've always had productivity metrics," he said. "The difference is, today what we can track is much more detailed. If you overplay the hand, people become mistrustful. However, if you underutilize surveillance, there may be moral hazard issues."

For both [police](#) departments and businesses mulling enhanced

surveillance, there is no universal right answer. Following the data is the only way for each entity to manage its individual risks, Greenwood says.

"We have reached a point in society, regrettably in my opinion, where people are taking positions on what will be good or bad before the word 'go.'" It is only going to be through careful and rigorous study of what is happening on the ground that we are going to be able to give actionable information to decision makers so they can make thoughtful determinations about how to capture the benefits of emerging technologies and avoid the potential problems."

Provided by George Mason University

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