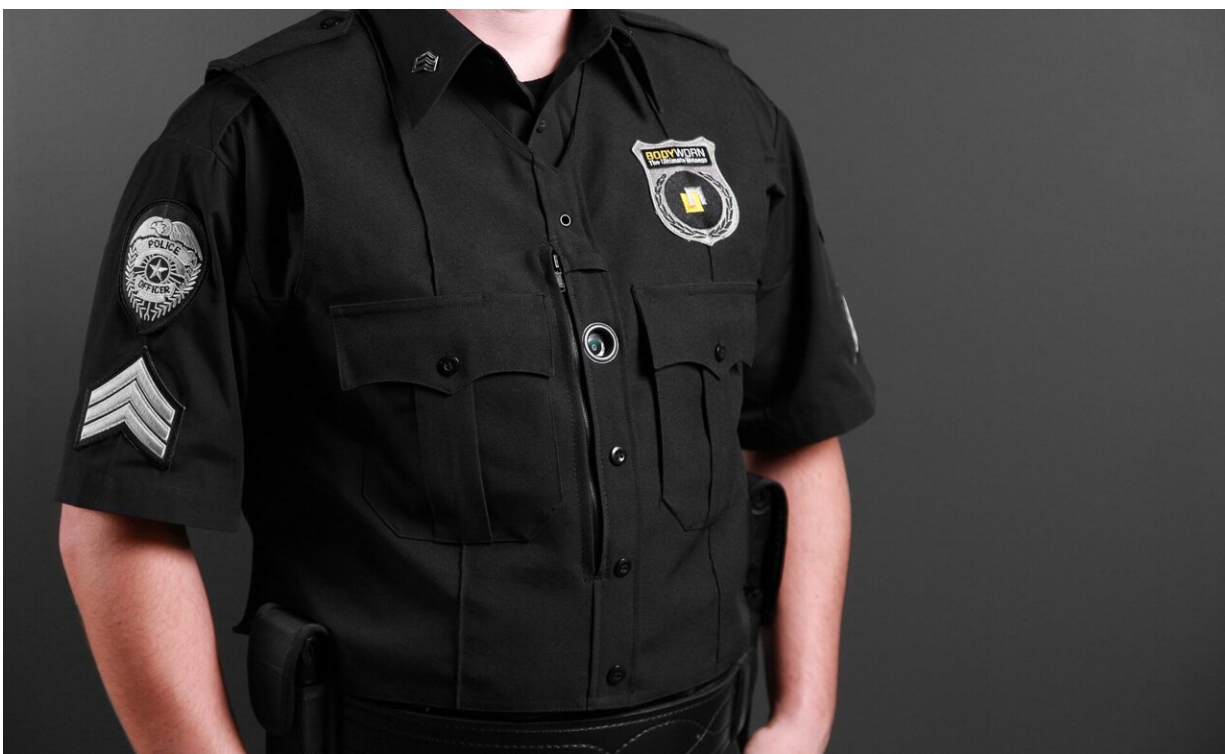


Body-worn cameras are supposed to deter police brutality. Why didn't that happen in Memphis?

January 30 2023, by Tanner Stening



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

There is wide consensus about the need to equip police officers with body cameras. Beyond simply documenting officers' interactions with citizens, the technology can improve trust between the police and the

communities they serve, [a 2018 Northeastern study](#) showed.

Still, as the world reacts to the body cam footage of the traffic stop that led to the death of 29-year-old Tyre Nichols, a Black man who authorities say was murdered by five police officers in Memphis, Tennessee, questions arise about the role the cameras play in deterring police misconduct.

While body-worn cameras have become an important tool in forging better community relations, the technology by itself isn't enough to prevent officers from committing such egregious acts, says Ermus St. Louis, assistant professor of criminology and criminal justice.

"We know those officers of course are wearing body-worn cameras, and I think that speaks to the lack of power of body-worn cameras as part of this hope that we have that they will change police behavior," St. Louis says. "But we see that police culture is stronger than whatever deterrent effect that body-worn cameras are supposed to have."

The five officers, who can be seen kicking, punching and using a baton to beat a defenseless Nichols, then pepper-spraying him and failing to administer aid, have since been charged with second-degree murder in connection with the Jan. 7 traffic stop. Nichols suffered "extensive bleeding" and was hospitalized in critical condition; he died on Jan. 10.

"While each of the five individuals played a different role in the incident in question, the actions of all of them resulted in the death of Tyre Nichols, and they are all responsible," Shelby County District Attorney Steve Mulroy said this week.

Memphis Police Chief Cerelyn Davis said the footage showed "acts that defy humanity," that the officers showed a "disregard for life."

"We can see from that video that cameras have been a hugely important accountability measure in policing today," says Jack McDevitt, emeritus professor of the practice of criminology and criminal justice at Northeastern. "Unfortunately, the culture of policing in this country trumps everything else."

"That said, that video is probably the most disgusting and depressing [video](#) I have seen in my 45 years of studying police," McDevitt adds.

As far as how [police officers](#) view the equipment, St. Louis, who's studied cop's attitudes toward body-worn cameras, says it varies. Many officers believe that the cameras can provide evidence to protect them against false and frivolous complaints. Others are aware of the increased scrutiny they place on officers' actions.

"Generally, the literature shows that officers are receptive to body-worn cameras—and that's consistent with my research as well," St. Louis, affiliate assistant professor of Africana Studies, says.

While a doctoral student, St. Louis conducted a study of police attitudes in parts of the Midwest. Officers had expressed concern that the cameras might be used to unfairly target them for discipline.

"This concern was more prevalent among minority officers, particularly Black officers," St. Louis says. "They felt less entitled than white cops, leading them to believe that they are more likely to be punished—and punished harsher—for policy infractions than white officers."

Minority officers, including female officers, by and large supported the cameras because they viewed them as a safeguard against biased treatment within the department, he says.

Officers from busy or high-crime districts were more in favor of the

cameras, feeling they could exercise more discretion since they believed the department lacked the resources and manpower to review so many hours of footage to find infractions, St. Louis says.

Additionally, storing all that footage is costly, McDevitt says. State [police](#) departments that have successfully implemented force-wide body-worn [camera](#) programs report annual contract costs into the tens of millions.

"The financing of these cameras has been somewhat of a barrier," McDevitt says.

Provided by Northeastern University

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