Brazil's Ongoing Struggle with Police Violence: Can Body-Worn Cameras Turn the Tide?

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Brazil stands as one of the world's most violent countries, with up to 50,000 homicides each year. The persistent security crisis is exacerbated by issues within law enforcement agencies, which are notoriously aggressive and corrupt. In 2022, police were implicated in 6,429 deaths, constituting 13.5% of total homicides. Alarmingly, less than 10% of officers involved in violent incidents ever face legal consequences, perpetuating a cycle of extrajudicial killings which disproportionately affects black youth in impoverished peripheries.

To address this challenge, law enforcement has turned to body-worn cameras (BWCs) to foster citizens' trust in the police and improve accountability. While the interest in BWCs in Brazil dates back to 2013, it only gained traction in 2021 when military police in São Paulo – Brazil's most populous state and the country's economic powerhouse – rolled out its BWC project. Since then, Brazil's Supreme Court has mandated that some states adopt BWCs, and human rights organizations have endorsed their use as an effective way of tackling police violence. Presently, out of the 26 Brazilian states (plus its Federal District), 11 have implemented BWCs and 14 others are testing the equipment. The Ministry of Justice and Public Security has also created a working group to devise national directives for their implementation.

Despite receiving strong public support (90% in a recent survey), the adoption of BWCs has faced resistance, mainly from police officers and conservative politicians. Concerns range from budget limitations and competing police priorities to potential 'de-policing' effects – the hypothesis that officers, fearing unfair accusations, might refrain from enforcing the law, potentially leading to an increase in crime. There are also dissenting voices from progressive groups: local activists express concerns about privacy issues and argue that cameras have been used to corroborate police narratives. Instead of controlling police actions and confirming reports of torture, some activists believe that the cameras could contribute to punitive approaches.

Body-worn cameras shown at the press conference announcing the adoption of this technology by the State of São Paulo, July 22, 2020. (Credit: Governo do Estado de São Paulo, Flickr)

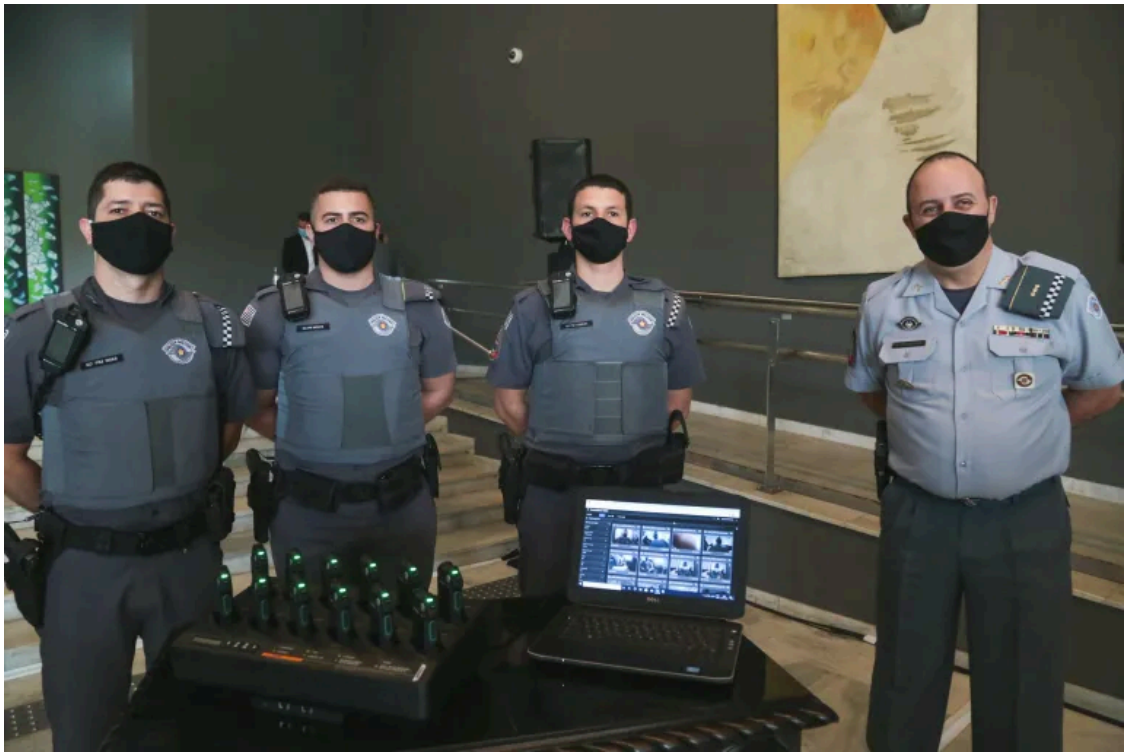
But what do we know about the impact of BWCs? Police are generally wary of scholars who aim to evaluate their practices, but the implementation of BWCs has been a positive exception, with many police departments agreeing to participate in studies on the efficacy of this equipment. In fact, there have been so many studies that it is actually challenging to follow results and make sense of competing findings (Ariel et al., 2015; Braga et al., 2018; St. Louis et al., 2019; Lum et al., 2020; White & Malm, 2020; Williams et al., 2021). Unfortunately, most studies focus on the United States rather than on other contexts, including Brazil. Additionally, there are at least three issues that impact the results of existing studies and our ability to draw larger conclusions from them:

(1) Police departments deploy BWCs as a result of different processes. In São Paulo, for instance, the BWCs resulted from years of experimentation and only gained scale once the police command was convinced of their contribution. Conversely, in Rio de Janeiro, the police were forced to rapidly adopt the equipment after a top-down Supreme Court decision. As a result, the institutional commitment to the project differs greatly.

(2) The operationalization and usage of BWCs varies across contexts, stemming from diverse plans and purposes, but also from poor implementation. For example, BWCs may record the whole police shift or only what officers choose to report. BWCs may be implemented in every police unit or only in those

responsible for traffic or special operations. Depending on the protocol, the impact will change.

(3) The very research design impacts many of the existing findings. Ideally, scholars would be able to run randomized control trials to assess the impact of BWCs in different precincts, access the footage to evaluate court decisions, and carry out surveys with the police to better understand their perceptions and qualms. However, detailed research demands long-term commitment by law enforcement agencies, which is seldom the case. Commitment from law enforcement agencies is often short-term and it rarely allows for complex operations such as randomized control trials.



Military Police officers showing body-worn cameras at the press conference announcing the adoption of this technology by the State of São Paulo, July 22, 2020. (Credit: Governo do Estado de São Paulo, Flickr)

In Brazil, researchers have been especially interested in two dimensions of BWCs: their impact on police actions, including the use of force, and the controversies about disputable interpretations of videos, especially the opposing narratives that may arise from the footage.

Regarding the impact on police actions, the main hypothesis supporting investments in BWCs is that the equipment dissuades officers and citizens from violent interactions. Research with Santa Catarina's police has found that cameras actually de-escalate tensions (Barbosa et al., 2021), diminishing the need for violent approaches by the police and increasing procedural justice. There is evidence that the cameras improved police operations in São Paulo, too. During a 14-month period, Monteiro et al. (2022) assessed the impact of

BWCs according to several indicators, including the use of force (police killings and aggression) and arrests. What they found was that BWCs were directly responsible for a 57% reduction in police killings and a 63% reduction in cases of police aggression. Moreover, the research found no evidence of 'de-policing,' but the opposite. Police officers who wore cameras registered more crimes, including theft and domestic violence. The authors indicate that instead of deterring the police impetus, the cameras induced them to act and record criminal occurrences that were previously neglected.

However, when it comes to the use of footage in the criminal justice system, results are more controversial. Analysing how prosecutors, defence attorneys, and judges manipulate footage in São Paulo, Jesus et al. (2023) found that BWCs were rarely used in custody hearings, where judges assess the legality of the arrest and evaluate whether the suspect's rights have been respected (including whether they were tortured in police custody). Research indicates that defence lawyers rarely request video records of police abuses for fear that the footage may also implicate their clients. There is also evidence that the police hinder access to footage that might contradict their reports. Judges complain about delays, video manipulation, or the lack of access to entire footage (i.e., the police might only submit videos from one camera, excluding evidence recorded by other officers who were present at the crime scene). As a result, more often than not, videos from BWCs are often summoned at trial to provide evidence supporting police testimonies only.

This is particularly concerning due to the constraints of the video perspective. An experiment conducted by Seth Stoughton, a law professor at the University of Southern California, compared videos captured with BWCs to those filmed by bystanders. He asked actors to recreate routine encounters between police officers and suspects and asked people to analyse the perceived level of threat to the officer based on the two different sets of videos. What he found was that BWCs induce a 'deceptive intensity' or a perspective bias that tends to amplify perceptions of risk. In other words, bodycams may not necessarily provide accurate representations of events but rather limited depictions of them. Therefore, if we use those videos uncritically in courts, we might inadvertently reinforce existing punitive approaches (Taylor & Lee, 2019; Newell, 2021). As Stoughton concludes, whether BWCs will reduce police violence and provide informational benefits to courts 'depends on the practical limitations of the technology and our ability to interpret the resulting video footage.'

Current research suggests that BWCs are not silver bullets for addressing security challenges and rectifying unfair justice systems. While they may contribute to increased transparency of police actions and a reduction in the use of force—particularly when complemented by other institutional reforms aimed at professionalizing the police and altering police cultures—positive outcomes hinge on multiple variables. These include operational protocols, how footage is utilized

in courts, and the acceptance of BWCs by the police. Without a critical assessment of the root causes of police violence and discrimination, BWCs risk becoming another 'techno-fix'— a naïve attempt to circumvent deep social problems with quick engineering solutions.

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