Review of

Michael D. White and Aili Malm,

Cops, Cameras, and Crisis: The Potential and the Perils of Policy Body-Worn Cameras,

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Police body-worn cameras (BWCs) have proliferated rapidly throughout the U.S. since 2014, when several controversial police killings of Black citizens sparked demand for police reform. BWCs featured prominently among the recommendations made by President Obama's Task Force on 21st Century Policing and have since been touted as a tool that can increase police transparency, accountability, and legitimacy; improve police-citizen interactions; and aid in criminal investigations. With such potential, it is no wonder that BWCs have received support from "a diverse range of sectors that are often at odds with each other," (White & Malm, 2020: 7) including police leadership organizations, civil rights groups, police unions, and citizens.

Fast forward to 2020. Billions of dollars have been invested in BWCs. The Department of Justice has made training, technical assistance, and other resources available to agencies seeking to adopt BWCs. Thousands of police agencies now equip their officers with BWCs, and all signs point to continued diffusion of the technology in the years ahead. Dozens of scientific studies – including many experiments and quasi-experiments – have evaluated the effects of BWCs on policing. So, the pressing question is: have BWCs realized their potential? The answer: it's complicated.

In *Cops, Cameras, and Crisis*, Michael White and Aili Malm get down to brass tacks. Following a brief overview of the lineage of BWCs in policing, they boil upwards of fifty studies (completed in the US and abroad) down to five easy-to-digest tables. Five studies assessed the effect of BWCs on citizens' perceptions of procedural justice, with three indicating they cause significant improvements. Twenty-five studies tested whether BWCs reduce complaints against officers, with nine showing significant reductions. Nineteen studies considered whether BWCs

reduce use of force incidents, with seven revealing significant reductions. Seven studies explored the evidentiary benefits of BWCs on crime detection, arrests, and case outcomes. Just one suggested a significant benefit: in Essex, domestic violence investigations with BWC footage were more likely to result in criminal charges being filed. Finally, 12 studies measured the effect of BWCs on officer activity (i.e., stops, citations, arrests, and/or proactivity). Five showed a significant decline in arrests, whereas one showed a significant increase. Two revealed a significant increase in proactivity. One found a significant increase in citations, and another found a significant decline in "arrests + citations" (p. 73).

White and Malm "take a decidedly optimistic view about the research," but acknowledge that "mixed findings may also lead to varying assessments of the strength of the evidence" (p. 135). Indeed. A recent meta-analysis of thirty experimental and quasi-experimental evaluation studies concluded: "[o]verall, the way BWCs are currently being used may not substantially affect most officer or citizen behaviors" (Lum et al., 2020:2). So not only have dozens of studies yielded mixed (and sometimes conflicting) findings, but leading experts have published systematic reviews of this literature and arrived at very different conclusions. My earlier characterization of the evidence as "complicated" may have been an understatement.

Yet, these mixed results should surprise no one, given the fragmented and localized nature of policing. In the United States, there are approximately 18,000 law enforcement agencies. Some serve large and diverse metropolitan areas; others serve small communities with largely homogenous populations. Some have had their relationship with their community marred by scandals or controversial police shootings; others have not. In fact, some agencies like the Ferguson Police Department adopted BWCs *in response to* community outrage, while others like the Spokane Police Department proactively implemented BWCs to enhance their

relationship with their community. White and Malm thoughtfully point out that such pre-BWC context likely explains some of the variation in research findings: some agencies simply have more room for improvement than others. Likewise, they argue agencies vary in terms of how much planning is done prior to implementing BWCs (e.g., countering resistance from unions and line-level officers, anticipating problems with technology integration), and evaluation studies vary in terms of scientific rigor (e.g., sample size, rating on the Maryland Scale of Scientific Methods, amount of treatment contamination).

One reason BWCs have not achieved some of their anticipated benefits is the result of one peril associated with the technology: unreasonable expectations. Consider police use of force. The nature of policing in America guarantees that some police-citizen interactions will involve the use of force. Fortunately, officers resort to it very rarely. In Spokane, for example, White and colleagues (2018:72) noted that both BWC and non-BWC officers "averaged about one use of force per month per 1,000 calls." There just is not much room for BWCs to reduce meaningfully such a rare phenomenon, let alone detect it via null hypothesis significance testing. To believe BWCs will cause substantial reductions in officer use of force in every agency that adopts BWCs is misguided. That they have not achieved this lofty expectation does not mean they are a failure or a waste of money.

A more reasonable expectation of BWCs is that they will provide a neutral account of what transpires during police-citizen interactions, which should increase transparency and accountability. No longer are we forced to rely solely on the subjective accounts of the officer(s) and citizen(s) involved – provided the BWC was activated and captures relevant video/audio footage. The presence of video footage should minimize outright fabrication by officers or citizens and get us closer to the truth about what happened (e.g., consider how the Walter Scott

shooting might have been adjudicated in the absence of footage). In this way, BWC footage can also save local governments a lot of money. Braga et al. (2017), for instance, estimated that BWCs saved the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department more than $4 million per year, mostly because they reduced time and resources spent investigating citizen complaints.

Yet, with such potential comes great peril. Mishandling of BWC footage can undermine transparency and reduce police legitimacy – particularly in the wake of a critical incident such as an officer-involved shooting. Though there are legitimate reasons to withhold certain footage from the public (e.g., protect victims or their families, preserve evidence, and/or minimize the impact on potential jurors), citizens may not accept such a decision. In today's fast-moving world, where news can go viral in mere minutes, it is critical for agencies not to appear as though they are hiding something from an increasingly cynical public who demand to see BWC footage. The longer it takes for BWC footage to be released, the greater the risk an agency will lose legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

All told, BWCs *can* improve policing *if* implemented properly and expectations are managed. In White and Malm's words:

> [BWCs] are just a tool. They cannot single-handedly repair decades of tension between police and citizens. They cannot eliminate bad policing (p. 132).

Cops, Cameras, and Crisis is an invaluable contribution to the scientific literature concerning policing, and not just for scholars. This book should be read by anyone – including academics, legislators, police leaders, and activists – who advocates for the improvement of policing through evidence-informed policies and practices.

References

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