

Consequences of Body-worn Cameras on the Court System: Evidence from State District and Circuit Court Data

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Abstract: In less than a decade, body-worn cameras rose from rarity to standard amongst local law enforcement in the U.S. In addition to monitoring policing, this tool generates large quantities of new data for criminal courts: footage of criminal defendants. These data can provide evidence pertinent to criminal cases, but do so at a cost of attorney time. To investigate whether body-worn camera adoption changes policing and court outcomes, I use rich criminal charge data from Virginia state courts from 2006-2020 and a new, self-collected body-worn camera data set. Leveraging the staggered adoption of body-worn cameras by local law enforcement through a difference-in-differences estimation strategy, I find evidence that body-worn cameras affect a subset of police interactions for which body-worn cameras may be most salient. In this subset of cases I find an approximately ten percent reduction in new case filings after police begin using body-worn cameras. Although this subset of cases may be particularly likely to show behavioral effects of body-worn cameras, the cameras generate evidence toward a broader base of cases. Using a set of case disposition, sentencing, and timing outcomes to test for evidentiary and attorney time use effects, I find that this influx of data generated by body-worn camera footage does not generate changes in case outcomes or court processes on average.