

## OPINION

## Body cameras are not an answer to systemic police violence – they undermine the push for defunding

**JOSHUA SEALY-HARRINGTON**  
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL  
PUBLISHED 11 HOURS AGO

 2 COMMENTS  SHARE



*Joshua Sealy-Harrington is a lawyer at Power Law and a doctoral student at Columbia Law School.*

With the recent protests across the world after the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, Canadian politicians – including Prime Minister Justin Trudeau – are considering making police body cameras mandatory. Body cameras can help in individual cases. But, as a systemic reform, they should be rejected.

First, the call for body cameras conflicts with defunding police – that is, divesting from reactive police budgets, investing in pro-active social services and developing non-police solutions to the problems police have long failed to solve, despite repeated attempts at reform. Body camera distribution is both practically and philosophically in tension with the #DefundThePolice movement.

The practical tension between body cameras and police defunding is money: Body cameras are expensive. For example, a pilot project to equip just 78 Montreal officers for a year cost \$3.4-million. So defunding the police and funding body cameras invariably conflict.

The philosophical tension between body cameras and police defunding is vision: Whereas body cameras seek to repair police in their current role, defunding rethinks that role. Body cameras often entail maintaining police in their current form, just on film – keeping the stained shirt but ironing out the creases. In contrast, police defunding entails reimagining justice – a whole new wardrobe.

Police forces have been expanded at the cost of social services. For example, Toronto’s police budget is \$1.076-billion a year, which is more than the city spends on firefighters, paramedics, libraries and public housing combined. Viewed in this context, body cameras are a Band-Aid solution. Indeed, they can actively undermine the need for defunding police by serving a “counterinsurgent function” after the recent protests demanding systemic change – a pressing concern of activists who have witnessed an unrelenting cycle of incremental, and ineffective, police reforms. As Desmond Cole notes, body cameras are “a kind of liberal panacea” for those who “are not interested in decreasing the police’s power.”

Second, regardless of one's position on defunding police, body cameras fail to respond to the need for institutional reform. The typical argument supporting body cameras is threefold: that they deter police brutality, promote police accountability and enhance public trust. But do they? A 2019 review of 70 empirical studies on body cameras concluded that they “have not had statistically significant or consistent effects on most measures of officer and citizen behavior or citizens' views of police.”

And those studies reflect what many already see. The police know they are routinely being filmed while suppressing protests across the United States, and yet there are countless videos of persisting police brutality. More to the point, body cameras – as well as multiple live observers – did not deter Derek Chauvin from killing Mr. Floyd in broad daylight, nor did the video recording of Eric Garner's killing hold Daniel Pantaleo accountable, who was not even charged, let alone convicted.

How could body cameras not promote police accountability? It seems straightforward: The more evidence of police violence we have, the more able we are to monitor and sanction it. But the practical implementation of body cameras raises concerns about their reliability and harms.

In terms of reliability, there are several limitations. Plainclothes officers – who, according to one study, account for a third of fatal police shootings in New York – cannot wear body cameras. Uniformed officers can turn theirs off. Also, body cameras, like all technology, have malfunctioned, compromising their utility. They have been tampered with, which exacerbates, rather than improves, the deterrence, accountability and public trust they are meant to promote.

And setting aside all the above concerns, perfect footage of police brutality still feeds into an imperfect system of police accountability (where, for example, many provinces still lack basic civilian oversight). Again, Mr. Cole's analysis is apt: “If you don't fix these broken mechanisms of accountability, it doesn't matter what a camera catches.”

In terms of harms, leading police scholar Alex Vitale lists several: officers using the footage to tailor their evidence; the privacy of those who are filmed without consent; and how widespread distribution of body cameras can expand state surveillance, especially when coupled with emerging technologies such as geocoding and facial recognition.

To be fair, the reliability and harms depend on how body cameras are specifically implemented. But the point remains: Viewed in light of the difficulties surrounding their implementation, and their significant cost, body cameras are not an effective response to the systemic issues underlying police violence.

In just the past month, a Canadian police officer killed Chantel Moore during a wellness check, and officers were the only ones in the room at Regis Korchinski-Paquet's death during a mental-health crisis. Neither tragedy had body cameras present. On one hand, body cameras could have provided critical information. But on the other hand, not having police officers attend such calls in the first place is an initial – and more fundamental – change in mindset that would better protect, and empower, our communities.

Ultimately, we need fewer police officers and more social services. And if police are defunded, we must carefully consider whether body cameras are the best investment for promoting racial justice with respect to the few remaining actors who are still permitted to use force. I am sympathetic to some Canadians' instinctive support for body cameras. Footage of police can assist prosecutions and catalyze public outrage, as we have seen recently with the RCMP's indefensibly violent arrest of Athabasca Chipewyan Chief Allan Adam, the killing of Rayshard Brooks by Atlanta police and the egregious neglect resulting in Layleen Polanco's preventable death at Rikers Island. But viewing body cameras as a solution to police violence will undermine the push for defunding police – a cost we cannot afford.

If I suffered police violence, I would want it to be filmed. But I would rather police violence no longer exist. We must resist individual impulses that overlook the need for systemic transformation.

*Keep your Opinions sharp and informed. Get the Opinion newsletter. Sign up today.*

## More From The Globe and Mail

### OPINION

The RCMP cannot continue front-line policing if it isn't responsive to the communities it serves

IAN SCOTT AND KENT ROACH



Number of times Mounties used force has risen since 2017, according to RCMP data



Trudeau said Indigenous people disproportionately targeted by police, vows reforms



Toronto mayor calls for expanded mental-health teams, more anti-racism training in police force



Morning Update: The Globe investigates how flaws in workers' comp fan the flames of the opioid crisis



Nova Scotia families propose lawsuit against RCMP for failing to protect community in mass shooting



