

NEWSLETTER

The Morning

A Disappointing Policing Change

Police-worn body cameras have not lived up to expectations.



By German Lopez

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In 2017, New York City police officers killed Miguel Richards in his own apartment. They claimed that the killing was justified because Richards was holding a knife and what looked like a gun.

The officers' cameras recorded the incident. But for years, no one outside of the New York Police Department could view the full footage. In 2019, a judge ordered the release of the videos. They showed no sign that Richards was holding a firearm, and revealed that the officers didn't take basic steps to de-escalate the situation and did not administer immediate aid after shooting him.

The N.Y.P.D. has not disciplined the officers for the shooting.

The story demonstrates the mixed results of police-worn body cameras: Many people hoped they would help hold police officers accountable for wrongful shootings. But there has been a basic problem, as Eric Umansky found in an investigation for The Times Magazine and ProPublica: Police departments have often prevented the public from seeing the footage and failed to act when it showed wrongdoing.

The promise of cameras



Michael Brown Sr., center, attends a memorial service for his son, Michael Brown Jr. Whitney Curtis for The New York Times

Over the past decade, police departments have equipped their officers with body-worn cameras. The policies came largely in response to public backlash to police killings, particularly the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. The idea was straightforward: Cameras would help hold police officers accountable. If they did anything wrong, the cameras would catch it. And officers would be deterred from doing anything wrong because they would know they were on video.

That logic has not held up in many cases, such as Richards's. The key problem is that police departments largely control the footage. They can decide what to release, as well as when to do so. So they will often show only videos or parts of videos that corroborate an officer's story or help justify a shooting.

"We just said to police departments, 'Here's this tool. Figure out how you would like to use it,'" Seth Stoughton, a former police officer who's now a law professor at the University of South Carolina, told Eric. "It shouldn't be a surprise that they're going to use it in a way that most benefits them."

Consider the N.Y.P.D.'s policy. In 2013, a federal judge ordered New York officers to start piloting the use of cameras. Surveys indicated that the public supported the idea. But when the N.Y.P.D. established the policy, it decided that no video would automatically become public. To obtain footage, people would have to submit a request through an opaque and slow process.

The N.Y.P.D. would decide what to release.

Refusal to release



An officer turning off his body camera in New York last year. Bryan R. Smith/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Some places make it easier to obtain police videos, or at least use them to hold officers accountable. In Chicago, the civilian oversight board has direct access to police camera footage and can release it publicly. The board has cited such videos in the firing of several officers for misconduct.

But that is not the norm. In June 2022, 79 police killings were captured by police cameras nationwide. In the year and a half since, the police has released video in only 42 percent of those incidents.

Police departments can refuse to release videos for longer, if ever. Five years after an officer in Montgomery, Ala., sicced his dog on a burglary suspect and killed him, the department still has not released the footage, citing the potential for “civil unrest.”

And three years before Derek Chauvin killed George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020 by kneeling on his neck, police cameras recorded Chauvin using the same tactic. But officials did not release that video until six years later, after Floyd's death. "Chauvin should have been fired in 2017," said Robert Bennett, a lawyer who represented previous victims. The widely seen video of Floyd's killing came from a bystander, not a police camera.

Read Eric's full investigation, which includes more examples and thoughts from experts about how to improve the situation.

THE LATEST NEWS

Economy

- The Federal Reserve signaled it would cut interest rates next year as its effort to reduce inflation shows signs of success.
- Stocks surged after the Fed announcement, and the Dow Jones industrial average reached a new high (though it was somewhat higher last year after adjusting for inflation).

Business

- Tesla recalled nearly all cars it has manufactured in the U.S. since 2012. Regulators have urged the company to make sure drivers remain attentive while using its Autopilot system.
- Roofing is dangerous work, and federal law bars anyone under 18 from doing it. Yet migrant children perform the job across the U.S., a Times investigation found.