

## PHONY SOLUTIONS AND REAL ACCOUNTABILITY: Gadgets vs. Accountability Systems



After release of a much vaunted study out of Rialto, CA<sup>1</sup> about the efficacy of body cameras in decreasing police officer use of force, talk of implementing them across the country has been all the rage. However, the study was co-authored by the Rialto police chief as part of his master's thesis. The size and length of the study and local conditions unique to the city in which it was conducted make it questionable whether the results can be generalized to larger communities such as Minneapolis.

One problem with body cams is **what they capture and what they don't**. These cameras sit on the chest or shoulder or are mounted on glasses worn by the officer and are pointed at the community member. They don't actually capture the officer's actions, only the community member's responses to those actions. Hearing the interaction may be beneficial or it may not. Due to their location and angle, chest and shoulder-mounted models may also

give the appearance that the community member is larger and more menacing to the officer.

More important than the cameras themselves are the policies put into place around the use of these devices. If police officers are allowed to **turn them on and off** at will, if the **video is not preserved** in ways that prevent its destruction or alteration or if the **footage is not available** through public data requests, then these devices are **useless as a tool for police accountability**. Bear in mind that one of the two officers who killed James Boyd, a mentally ill homeless man sleeping in the hills near Albuquerque, NM, turned off his body cam right before shooting Boyd, yet was never disciplined. Without good policies and serious consequences for violating them, the city's proposal is little more than a financial boon for TASER International and the rest of the corporations peddling these body cams as the miracle cure for police brutality.

Finally, as St. Louis University law professor Justin Hansford aptly points out<sup>2</sup>, even with video evidence such as in the Eric Garner case, the laws are heavily stacked against ever holding police accountable.

### **Gadgets vs. Accountability**

The problem is clear—police abuse of authority, the oppression that underpins it, and the lack of accountability that encourages it. The solution is equally clear—and it is not buying more expensive gadgets that will do nothing to reign in bad policing. Here are solutions that will actually work:

- Requiring police officers to carry their own professional liability insurance so that they have financial consequences for engaging in misconduct (and a financial incentive not to).
- Restoring a true civilian review authority with subpoena power and power to enforce discipline.
- Community oversight of police policies, with the community setting standards of acceptable conduct.
- Independent investigation (by an independent panel, not another police department) and prosecution of police officers who engage in serious incidents such as theft, sexual assault, brutality or who kill members of the community.
- Termination of police officers when lawsuits for brutality are successful. No cop that costs taxpayers huge amounts of money should be working for us.
- Demilitarization of police—removing tanks, grenade launchers, and other military weapons from our local police forces.

There are many other proposals worth considering—and they will do far more to solve the problem than wasting money on gadgets the cops control.

Information provided by **COMMUNITIES UNITED AGAINST POLICE BRUTALITY**. Join us! We meet every Saturday at 1:30 at 4200 Cedar Avenue South in Minneapolis. For more information or for help with a police brutality incident, call our 24-hour hotline: **612-874-STOP** or see our website at **www.CUAPB.org**.

<sup>1</sup> Self-Awareness To Being Watched And Socially-Desirable Behavior: A Field Experiment On The Effect Of Body-Worn Cameras On Police Use-Of-Force. (<http://www.policefoundation.org/sites/g/files/g798246f/201303/The%20Effect%20of%20Body-Worn%20Cameras%20on%20Police%20Use-of-Force.pdf>)

<sup>2</sup> Body cameras won't stop police brutality. Eric Garner is only one of several reasons why. Justin Hansford. December 4, 2014. Washington Post.