



Justice Insights Series: Research Briefs for Policy and Practice

Cameras on Jail Deputies Reduce Uses of Force

Key Takeaways

- When deputies wore body-worn cameras, use-of-force incidents dropped by about 40 percent compared to periods when those deputies did not wear the cameras.
- When deputies wore cameras, they used hands-on physical force 37 percent less often, and incarcerated people actively resisted 52 percent less often.
- This rigorous study is the first to test whether body-worn cameras reduce use of force in a correctional setting.

Why This Matters

Jails and prisons nationwide are quickly adopting body-worn cameras, expecting that the devices will improve the relations and behaviors between officers and incarcerated people. However, little research has tested whether body-worn cameras actually deliver those results in correctional settings. In addition, little data are available on how often force is used in jails and prisons, which makes it difficult for administrators to determine what works.

The evidence on whether body-worn cameras can actually reduce use of force has been thin and unsettled—in both policing and corrections. Research on body-worn cameras in policing has produced mixed results. A large review of 26 police studies found only a small drop in use of force among camera-wearing officers, and that drop was not statistically meaningful. Only one prior study had tested a strategy for reducing correctional officers' use of force before the current study: introducing nonlethal weapons in an Arizona jail. The intervention did not lower how often force was used but did reduce injuries to officers and incarcerated people. Earlier work on body-worn cameras in corrections looked only at officers' opinions of the devices, and not whether the cameras changed their behavior.

This study fills that gap by directly testing, through a randomized controlled experiment, whether body-worn cameras change how often uses of force occur, resistance levels by incarcerated people, and how forcefully jail deputies respond to that resistance.

How the Study Worked

The researchers ran a one-year study at the Loudoun County (Virginia) Adult Detention Center from November 2020 through October 2021. The jail records these events as "response to resistance," situations in which an incarcerated person resists and a deputy responds, rather than as "use of force." There were 97 such events during the year. For each event, the jail recorded how much the incarcerated person resisted (passive, active, or aggressive) and what control methods the deputy used: hands-on physical controls, restraints such as handcuffs or a restraint chair, or weapons such as pepper spray or a taser.

The study was a randomized controlled trial in which jail units were randomly assigned to either wear body-worn cameras or not wear them so the two groups could be compared fairly. Each month, 6 of the jail's 12 units were randomly assigned to wear cameras while the other 6 did not, and the assignments were reshuffled every month for the full year. The researchers

then compared unit months with cameras against unit months without cameras, adjusting for each unit's security level, the sexes of its residents, and how long deputies had been using cameras. The jail followed the assignment plan closely, with cameras being incorrectly deployed on only 3 percent of all unit days.

What Was Learned

- **Fewer use-of-force incidents with body-worn cameras.** Response-to-resistance events dropped about 40 percent in unit months with cameras, about 0.55 events per unit month with cameras versus 0.92 without cameras.
- **Less hands-on force by deputies.** Deputies used physical controls—hands-on tactics such as takedowns and strikes—37 percent less often when they wore cameras.
- **Less active resistance from incarcerated people.** Active resistance by incarcerated people fell 52 percent in unit months with cameras, suggesting that the body-worn cameras affected the behavior of incarcerated people, not just deputy behavior.
- **No change for the rarer, most serious events.** Weapon use by deputies and aggressive resistance by incarcerated people were uncommon and showed no difference when body-worn cameras were used. Restraint use and passive resistance were lower with cameras but not by a statistically meaningful amount.

What This Means in Practice

The clearest message is that body-worn cameras appear to limit the use of force in a jail setting. Both deputy force and resistance by incarcerated people dropped when cameras were used. The authors suggest the cameras may act as a constant reminder that deputies are being held accountable and may also have a “civilizing effect” on incarcerated people—who, in a jail, are especially likely to know when a camera is recording and that the recording could lead to disciplinary reports.

The researchers caution that these results come from a single county jail, so they may not hold true in other facilities. Use-of-force events were rare to begin with, and the study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which lowered the jail's population and reduced contact between staff and incarcerated people. The jail also changed how it recorded these incidents just before the study began. For these reasons, the researchers call for more research before drawing firm conclusions about body-worn cameras in corrections.

Source article

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