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The Effects of Citizen Monitoring on the Police: An Examination of Citizen Monitoring and Police Use of Justified Force

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INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

The most powerful weapons against police misconduct have rapidly become the cell phone and other hand held photography and videography devices. The practice of recording police conducting their work and subsequently uploading the footage onto the internet has had marked effects on police officers. Officers acting inappropriately have been suspended, dismissed, and exposed to intense public scrutiny as a result of citizen monitoring. Recent anecdotal information suggests officers, particularly new recruits, are profoundly impacted by impromptu monitoring.

Due to the increasing visibility of police, it is important to consider the role this monitoring has on officers and how it plays out in terms of society's reaction to crime. This reaction is an imperative component in the perpetuation and intensification of criminality and delinquency.

STUDY AIMS

The present study examines the impact civilian surveillance has on police officers' use of justified force. The study aims to determine whether officers are less likely to use necessary and legitimate force when faced with the possibility of being subject to citizen monitoring. Surveillance and monitoring are known to impact individuals and their resulting actions (Campbell and Carlson, 2002; Snyder, 1974); however, the impact of surveillance on the police population had not been given adequate academic attention prior to this study.

METHODS

The present research project employed a qualitative methods approach and in-depth, semi-structured interviews were the primary method of data collection. In person interviews lasting approximately 1.5 hours were conducted with each participant. Although each interview was recorded with the participants' consent, they were assured that the recordings themselves would be kept confidential. Informed, oral consent was gained from each participant prior to the interview process.

Participants were recruited using opportunity sampling. The study included fourteen participants: thirteen police officers, and the former Attorney General of British Columbia—Wally Oppal—who requested that his identity be revealed. Of the study participants (N=14), thirteen are presently employed or are recently retired officers working or having worked for various police departments in the Lower Mainland. Members from six distinct police departments were interviewed. The participants worked in municipalities including Vancouver, Port Moody, Burnaby, Surrey, Delta, New Westminster.

RESULTS

First, the study found that the officers interviewed felt that they had not received adequate training to cope with citizen monitoring. Several participants suggested that new recruits might have a romanticized view of policing, and thus, may not be aware of new concerns regarding accountability and liability. Those interviewed also spoke of the discrepancies that exist between policing legislation and the reality of police work. The laws governing police officers were described as largely "black and white", while in reality, police work was said to be "grey".

Second, inherent in policing is the need to make split second decisions while under an extreme amount of physical and mental pressure. Because of policing's "new visibility", participants suggest that the pressures officers face today are far more intense than they may have been twenty years ago. Additionally, officers felt that the public's negative perception of policing has been bolstered by the introduction of citizen monitoring. As a result, it has further engrained the "us versus them" sentiment that exists between citizens and the police.

Third, the study examined the phenomenon of citizen monitoring, and found that it does, indeed, have a profound impact on officers—particularly junior level officers. While several of the senior officers interviewed suggested that they themselves do not feel impacted by citizen monitoring, they each noted how they have either seen or expect the phenomenon to impact younger, less experienced officers. The study found that the impacts of citizen monitoring on officers are threefold:

1. *Citizen monitoring contributes to officers using less justified force than is both required and necessary in a given situation.*
2. *Citizen monitoring contributes to the "hesitation factor", which purports that officers hesitate when they should act.* This hesitation contributes directly to an unsafe situation for the officers, for the suspect, and for the individuals within the vicinity of the incident.
3. *Citizen monitoring contributes to officers embodying the FIDO effect.* Essentially, officers feel a level of concern regarding citizen monitoring and the impact it can have on both their personal and professional lives. This concern can lead to officers failing to engage in situations where their job description states they must.

Lastly, the study questioned the utility of body worn cameras, and found that the officers interviewed stood divided on their views of the technology. Some officers suggested that if citizens have the ability to film them and to intentionally or unintentionally misrepresent the footage, police departments should be proactive and therefore should film everything. Others stated that they felt a level of discomfort with the idea of having a working camera on them at all times. All participants expressed the need for effective policy to be in place before the technology's widespread adoption.

DISCUSSION

The present study sought to determine whether or not citizen monitoring had an impact on operational police work. The findings indicate that that citizen monitoring does, indeed, influence and impact police work. Given the now confirmed existence of this influence it is important that the phenomenon be given further study. Additionally, the study emphasizes that while body worn cameras may mitigate citizen monitoring, policies must be considered before their widespread adoption. The prevailing sentiment among the police officers interviewed was that of the increasing challenges associated with their line of work. There are several ways this phenomenon could be explored in more detail, including conducting a comparative study examining the phenomenon in both the United States and in Canada, and by determining its impact based on the assignment of officer duty.

CONCLUSIONS

Police are awarded certain powers and authorities that go beyond those in most professions. They are able to take a child away from its parents, and they can forcibly remove people from their place of residence. They have the ability and the right to legally take someone's life if the situation permits it. Each of these can be a difficult task, but police are expected to fulfil them when necessary. The knowledge that citizen monitoring can prevent officers from effectively completing tasks that are expected of police in democratic societies, is concerning. As a result, steps should be taken immediately to educate officers to deal with this ubiquitous phenomenon and to inform the public of the numerous challenges police face.

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