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The Blue Line on Thin Ice: Police Use of Force in the Era of Cameraphones and YouTube

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INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Across liberal democracies the extraordinary enlargement in the field of the socially visible has emerged as a defining characteristic of contemporary Western society. In the context of the public-police relationship, three techno-social developments have enabled a pronounced intensification in the public's exposure to performances of policing. These are: i) the ubiquity of cameraphones; ii) the entrenchment of an awareness of the capacity to engage in, and the effectiveness of, citizen journalism across much of the population; and iii) the proliferation of new media and concomitant online interactivity—which allows the public to submit substantive contributions to post-event narratives and deliberations and to access an unprecedented volume of information from a multiplicity of sources. As a result, the historical invisibility of policing's operational activities in the field has been supplanted by a 'new visibility' (Brighenti 2010; Thompson 2005) of front-line police work (Goldsmith 2010).

STUDY AIMS

This study inquired into how (and to what extent) today's highly-visible front-line officers are impacted by the capabilities of the public to document police conduct and to directly disseminate video-recorded accounts through instantaneous and potentially unedited social communications to online audiences. The project investigated the influence of these contemporary techno-social realities on officer's perceptions, decision-making processes, and use of force actions in the field.

METHODS

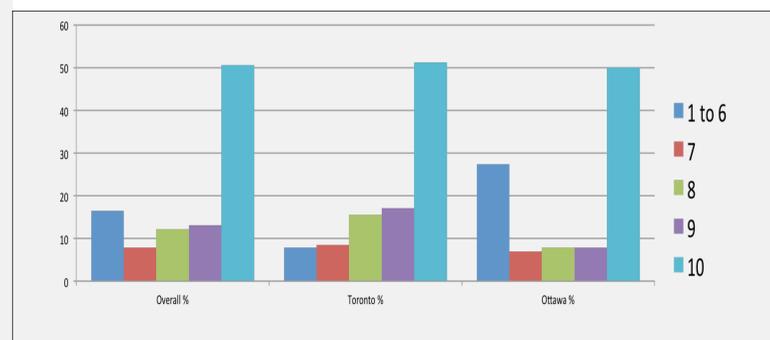
A mixed methods two-site case study was undertaken to quantitatively ascertain the existence, if any, of reaction to the 'new visibility' phenomena among the research population (rank-and-file police officers) and then, if necessary, to qualitatively explore any identified outcomes in greater depth. First, nonprobability convenience sampling was used to survey 231 front-line veteran officers with Toronto Police and Ottawa Police. Semi-structured anonymous interviews were then conducted with a random selection of participating front-line officers (N=20). Also interviewed were civilian political leadership, police labour organization leadership, chiefs of police, and officers in charge of use-of-force training in both cities. The 'complementarity' of mixed-methods data (Hesse-Biber 2010) allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the implications of today's visibility for a range of policing considerations and specifically in relation to police use of force.

RESULTS

This research study found that today's visibility of police actions in the field has impacted operational policing in two particularly significant aspects: i) through entrenchment of a pervasive disciplining influence in the consciousness of most front-line officers; and ii) through substantial moderations in when, and how, a majority of this study's research participants use force – resulting from the internalisation of prevailing deterrent considerations.

i) As depicted in the figure below, participating rank-and-file officers were asked to rate their individual level of awareness/concern on a scale from 1 to 10 – with the value 1 representing it never entering the officer's mind and the value 10 representing something that is always present in their consciousness. Just over half of the 231 officers (50.6%) reported the *maximum* level of awareness/concern (10 out of 10). For 117 of the study's front-line participants the awareness and concern that their actions could be video-recorded by a citizen was something that was *always present* in their consciousness. Only 16.4% of respondents reported a level of concern/awareness less than 7 of 10.

ii) As depicted in the table below, 55% of participating front-line officers reported that they had altered use-of-force practices because of the potential for documentation by the public through citizen journalism. In terms of the degree of force applied, half of the total sample (49.8%) now use *less* physical force and, in terms of the frequency with which officers use force, slightly less than half (47.6%) now use force *less often* than they otherwise would if video-recording of the event by the public was not a possibility.



	Overall % (n)	Toronto % (n)	Ottawa % (n)
No Change in Use of Force Practices	44.6% (103)	44.2% (57)	45.1% (46)
Change in Use of Force Practices	55.4% (128)	55.8% (72)	54.9% (56)
Now Use Less Physical Force	49.8% (115)	48.1% (62)	52.0% (53)
Now Use Force Less Often	47.6% (110)	47.3% (61)	48.0% (49)

DISCUSSION

'Policing's new visibility' presents significant challenges for policing – not only in terms of policy implications but more significantly as relates to on-the-ground police work. Front-line officers now face unprecedented societal scrutiny and audio-visual documentation of their actions through citizen journalism. Clearly, this situation is the source of considerable concern for many officers and has impacted on their behaviours in many different aspects, including mitigation in their use of force. The disciplining effect of 'policing's new visibility' can be considered a beneficial development for the contemporary public-police relationship. In deterring inappropriate use of force prior to an officer initiating that action no victim suffers harm, no misconduct requires sanctioning, and policing's legitimacy (and the public's trust in their police) are not diminished. However, the intrusion of optics and scrutiny considerations into the thought processes of officers during dynamic violent encounters can present as officer (and public) safety risks.

CONCLUSIONS

An August 2014 *USA Today* national poll reported that 61% of Americans feel their police do 'a poor' or 'only a fair' job in using appropriate force and we have witnessed the controversy that has accompanied the deaths of Eric Garner in Staten Island, NY (a 'visible' occurrence) and Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO (an 'invisible' occurrence). Issues around visibility, scrutiny, and criticism are highly topical in today's policing – particularly as relate to use of force. Body-worn cameras and risk averse policing responses are two aspects of these developments that merit further investigation (the focus of my PhD dissertation).

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