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Body cameras put all on best behavior

By Jim Nowlan

Recent high-profile police shootings have put local law enforcement across the country under scrutiny. Will body cameras on police provide, as some experts think, a high-tech tool to improve behavior by both police and suspects, and thus de-escalate tensions over time?

The Economist, a highly respected United Kingdom weekly, offers trenchant analysis of American society by thoughtful outsiders. In December, the magazine excoriated U.S. policing for excessive use of force.

The publication noted that police in the U.S. shot and killed at least 458 people last year. In contrast, English “bobbies” felled no one in the period.

The Economist admitted that many American police operate in a violent world. Forty-six policemen were shot dead in the past year, and 52,000 were assaulted.

Policing has changed dramatically since I was a youngster in the 1950s.

In my rural county of Stark, for example, we then had simply a sheriff and his deputy; the deputy lived in the jail, and his wife cooked for the inmates.

We did not even have a policeman in my hometown. Instead, there was a one-armed night watchman who rattled the doors on businesses each late evening to see if any had been tampered with. [(I recall his holster; it carried not a gun but his eating utensil for use at the local cafe, which had a knife on one end and a fork on the opposite.)]

Times were simpler then.

Today, though the population of my county is one-quarter less (about 6,000), the sheriff has nine deputies (several are part-time) plus a similar number of dispatchers for the communications center.

Technology has also transformed policing.

About 10-15 years ago, most police departments installed “dash cams” (cameras) and accompanying audio transmitters. The video dash cams are mounted on the dashboards of squad cars, aimed forward over the hood of the vehicle, and the police officer wears a small, wireless microphone on his shirt.

“Dash cams have caught people shooting officers, fighting with them, and tearing up tickets in front of them, which they of course claim later they never received,” says John Schlaf, the retired police chief of Galesburg.

“On the other hand, the cameras have also captured excessive use of force by officers,” he adds. “Overall, the dash cams have been a positive thing for police.”

The latest technological wrinkle is the “body cam,” which is simply a small video camera worn on the chest or above the ear of the officer.

The best-known illustration of the use of body cams by police comes from Rialto, CA, a suburb of about 100,000 east of Los Angeles.

Rialto found that in 2013, when body cams were part of the uniform, officers’ use of force dropped 60 percent from the previous year and complaints against officers plunged 88 percent.

Everybody behaves better when they know they are on camera. It is as simple as that.

The cameras can also resolve “he said, she said” disputes and provide additional evidence for police investigations. In sum, body cameras represent good use of technology.

From my check with officers in several departments in Illinois, I sense that most departments are in a wait-and-see mode.

“At the moment we are sitting back, observing and learning,” said Jason Foy, deputy police chief for Rock Island. “We want to make sure we are doing the right thing.”

Tiny Hampton, IL (1,900), just north of Rock Island, has implemented body cameras for its four full-time officers in the past six months.

“The fact that we are wearing them leads to a de-escalation of aggressiveness,” says Hampton chief Terry Engle. “Everybody is on his best behavior.”

A bill that would direct the Illinois State Police to create model guidelines for the use of body cameras languishes in the state legislature. It should be moved along.

Cost is a factor, of course, as the cameras cost from \$200-\$1,000, and there are additional costs for video storage and management of the system.

Body cams are also being used by people outside law enforcement—security guards, real estate agents, plumbers, just about anyone who comes in contact with the public, and whose actions might be challenged.

The next step will likely be something close to universal adoption of body cameras, as in Google glasses. With cameras beaming video to a remote repository, individuals with criminal intent might be dissuaded from doing harm to wearers.

We are sure a long way from one-armed night watchmen.