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Research update: National Body-Worn Camera Toolkit

Good afternoon. My name is Dr. Michael White and I'm a professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Arizona State University and I'm also co-director of training and technical assistance for the DOJ's body worn camera policy and implementation program.

What I'd like to do over the next 15 minutes or so is just talk about some of the latest findings we have coming from researchers across the U.S. and across the country, and really just talk about five different areas where I think our knowledge has grown considerably. And then after reviewing those five areas, I also want to talk about some areas where I think we need to do some more work.

So the first thing I want to talk about -- the first area of research -- is what we've learned about police officer attitudes regarding body-worn cameras. The evidence tells us that overwhelmingly police officers are supportive of wearing body cameras and there are a couple of different things that we can look at that demonstrate that point. The first is that a lot of people think of body cameras as kind of a post-Ferguson invention. The fact of the matter is that there is a longer term history in the policing profession -- a longer-term interest in this technology. In fact, a couple of police departments in the U.K. started experimenting with body cameras as far back as 2005. Several departments in the U.S., Albuquerque for example and Oakland, started rolling out body cameras in 2009-2010. So there's a longer term interest, as I said, in the technology. The second example of police officers support comes from national leadership organizations. So for example the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) has come out pledging their support for body cameras, as has the Police Executive Research Forum and the Police Foundation. So there's a lot of support for the technology at the national level among leadership organizations. But really I think the best evidence of support comes from police officers themselves. There have been a handful of studies that researchers have conducted where they surveyed police officers. They asked them their attitudes about this technology, about how they think it's going to affect their job whether they think it's a good thing or a bad thing. And the majority of those studies have shown really strong support among officers. We've seen studies in Phoenix, in Mesa, in the LAPD, Spokane, Washington and as I said, the findings are fairly consistent and importantly what we've also seen is some of the studies will ask officers questions both before they start wearing cameras as well as after, and we see increases in support once they start wearing the cameras.

Now all that said, it's clear that officers have their own set of concerns about wearing cameras. In particular they have concerns about privacy, their own privacy that is. They also have concerns about the extent to which supervisors will be able to review their footage. But those kinds of issues can be addressed by department. Early on, you engage with the officers. You bring them in the process at the beginning and you allow the officers to express their concerns and you can you can overcome those issues. So that's the first area: officers' support, the research tells us, is very high.

The second area I wanted to focus on is citizen support. What citizens think of body cameras? And in this area again we see overwhelming support and we can look to a couple of different sources of

information on that. The first is that several citizen groups, advocacy groups like the ACLU, the NAACP have pledged support for body cameras. They certainly have their own ideas about issues related to policy such as activation and privacy. But overall they're very supportive. The second area, there have been a handful of studies that have done general population surveys. Researchers have done nationally representative samples of the population and ask questions about body cameras. These studies tell us that generally speaking the citizens in our country are very supportive of the technology.

And the other area that I want to focus on with citizen support is a particular subgroup that I think is very important to look at. And that's the group of citizens who are actually recorded during their encounters with police. These are individuals who in some cases something bad has happened. They've called the police. The police respond and the police record the interaction. There haven't been nearly as many studies as we need looking at this particular subgroup of folks and getting their opinions about what it's like to be recorded on a body camera and what that means and whether that makes them feel positive or negative. There have only been really three studies that have looked at this. My team has done interviews of citizens both in Tempe, Arizona, as well as Spokane, Washington. We're conducting interviews with citizens within a week or two of their recorded interaction. A colleague of mine, Dr. Aili Malm from Cal State Long Beach and her colleagues at The Urban Institute have also been doing similar work in Anaheim. And the results from all three of these studies are showing pretty strong support even among this subgroup of citizens. So that's the second major area that I think we learned a good deal about: citizen support.

The third area that I want to focus on involves what I call the big ticket items. And these are the outcomes that many people focus on in their studies of body cameras: the impact on citizen complaints, the impact on officer use of force. A number of studies have focused on these outcomes and the majority of the studies have shown that after officers start wearing body cameras, we see declines in these important outcomes. Citizen complaints go down. The use of force goes down. Now this is by no means universal. There have been some studies that have shown either no impact or in some cases a small increase. But I can say that the body of evidence overall is persuasive particularly with regard to citizen complaints. You're going to see some reductions based on the evidence that we have so far and a lot of people point to the first study that came out that looked at this question. It was a study that came out of Rialto, California. In that study we saw really remarkable declines from one year to the next after officers began wearing cameras. We're talking a near 90 percent drop in citizen complaints, a 60 percent drop in use of force. And there was some concern that the Rialto study, because it was unique in a number of ways, that was going to be kind of like lightning in a bottle and we wouldn't be able to replicate that. But that hasn't been the case. We've seen -- not quite as large -- but we've seen significant reductions in complaints in use of force in studies that have been conducted in other places: Mesa, Arizona for example, Spokane, Washington. In Phoenix, for example, the researchers (colleagues of mine here at ASU) concluded that if cameras are implemented as intended, complaints against officers would all but disappear.

There are a couple of important caveats with this area of research on complaints and use of force. The first big one that we should we should focus on is implementation -- implementation failure, in particular. Are officers using the cameras as intended? Are they turning the cameras on or are they notifying citizens? Clearly the benefits of body cameras cannot be realized if the devices are not being used as they're supposed to be used. So for example in one study a researcher out of Cambridge University, Barak Ariel, published a study looking at 10 different departments and what he found was

that the prevalence of use of force was tied to implementation. If officers activated the camera when they were supposed to according to policy, if they notified citizens of the camera, use of force actually declined by about 37 percent. If officers didn't follow policy -- that is they didn't activate it when they were supposed to, they didn't notify citizens -- use of force actually increased by about 70 percent. So implementation obviously is an important key here. And if it's not implemented as intended in policy, you could actually do more harm than good. So that's the third area of research: the impact on use of force and complaints.

The fourth area I wanted to focus on is the evidentiary value. And here we have pretty strong evidence that body cameras provide evidence that is useful in a number of different ways. The first major way is evidence in court. There have been studies in the U.K. and the U.S. that document enhanced outcomes in criminal justice cases when we have body camera evidence. One study in the U.K. found guilty pleas were 70 to 80 percent more likely when you have body camera evidence. A study here in Phoenix as well as one in Essex, England looked at the impact of body camera video on domestic violence cases. Both studies demonstrated that when you have the video and audio evidence from a body camera, you will have enhanced criminal justice outcomes. You will have cases more likely to be prosecuted and more likely that cases will result in guilty plea and/or conviction at trial.

But the other area where cameras are useful in terms of their evidentiary value involves citizen complaints. So we've known for a long time that some portion of complaints that are filed against officers are frivolous. They're citizens upset, angry, and they decided to file a complaint to jam up an officer. Typically those types of situations cannot be resolved because there is no evidence one way or the other it's the officer's word against the citizen's. But now, body cameras provide a way for departments to assess the veracity of citizen complaints. And I can't tell you how many times I've talked to sergeants in departments across the country who will tell more or less the same anecdotal story that someone calls and says they want to file a complaint against Officer Jones. The sergeant says, "well come on in. We've got that on body camera and we can look at it together," and that's the end of the complaint. In fact in Las Vegas the researchers have who are doing a study there have started to document this as an outcome and 70 percent of the officers in Las Vegas Metro Police Department who are wearing cameras have been exonerated from a complaint at least once. Of course the other side of that is that it can also show behavior that actually did occur. So perhaps a citizen alleges the officer did X or Y. The sergeant can look at that and perhaps determine that the officer did engage in that behavior but it was appropriate, or alternatively that the officer engaged in the behavior it was inappropriate. The complaint is sustained and then the officer can be disciplined appropriately.

So the last area of research I wanted to focus on is the limitations because the other thing we've learned about over the last several years based on the research is that body cameras are a tool for police. They're an effective tool but they're not a panacea. They have limitations. There are two areas where these limitations need to be considered. The first is the technology itself. Body cameras have limitations. They're not going to capture everything. Perhaps the officer will see something out of his or her peripheral vision. And if the officer is wearing a chest-mounted camera, the officer is going to turn his or her head and look at something and the camera's not going to catch it. If you've ever watched a body camera video of a foot pursuit or a physical struggle it's unwatchable in terms of the video. The audio still can be useful. So there are limitations to what the technology can do. On occasion they will malfunction. Some departments have just determined that the cost is too great. The cost is prohibitive

so they're not going to start a program. So there are the technological pieces that we need to think about.

But the other source of errors, the other limitation is the human issue, the human error. Are officers turning the camera on like they're supposed to. Perhaps the officer intentionally didn't turn the camera on -- or unintentionally. There certainly is some muscle memory involved here. So the point is this isn't the TV show Cops. We need to be cognizant of the limitations of the cameras and we need to take that into account when we think about the impact.

So those are the five areas of research I wanted to focus on; the areas where I think our knowledge has improved a great deal. The other thing I wanted to mention just briefly is just a few areas where I think we need to continue to do more work -- some unanswered questions with police body cameras. I will say that Cynthia Lum and her colleagues at George Mason University wrote a report that was published in late 2015. The report does a great job of identifying the gaps in research on body cameras. So I don't need to review that report other than to point the listeners to take a look at it but there were a couple of things I did want to focus on.

The first is the impact of body cameras on officers' discretion and officer activity. We have known for a long time now that that discretion is a critical piece of policing. It's a critical piece of effective policing. Officers need to be able to have discretion to make decisions. There are many times when an officer has legal authority to issue a ticket, to write a citation or even to make an arrest but the officer decides not to do that. And that's the right thing to do. There is some concern that when officers begin wearing body cameras, it will inhibit their use of discretion. They will be more likely to write that ticket, make that arrest, when, had they not been wearing a body camera they may have gone for the more informal outcome. So we need to take a look at that. Related to that is officer activity. I've heard of some concerns that officers will become more passive. Now that they are wearing body cameras they'll engage in a form of depolicing is a term that some people are using. So I think we need to look at the impact on officer activity levels. That certainly is an area we should focus on.

The other area I wanted to mention is a cost benefit analysis. We have not yet had a thorough economic assessment of the costs and the benefits. The costs can be enormous. Starting and managing a body-worn camera program is an enormous investment in resources for the department. But alternatively I've talked about a lot of the enormous benefits that can be reached by a body-worn camera program. So what we need are several solid cost benefit analyses that weigh both sides of the issue and then can produce some evidence that departments can look at when they're deciding about this.

There are a final few things I wanted to mention that are not quite as important, but I think still need some examination. We need to take a look at how body cameras are being integrated into departments' performance evaluation systems and disciplinary systems. So how are departments using body camera footage to assess officer performance on the street? Are they being used in early intervention systems? Are cameras being used as a way to document inappropriate behavior and then to discipline officers? And there hasn't been a lot of work in that area. Nor has there been a lot of work in terms of training. And I'm not talking about training officers how to use cameras. I'm talking about body-worn cameras being used as a training tool to help officers learn. Use of force for example. You can use body-worn cameras in a variety of different ways. You can use it in field training where at the end of a day a senior officer sits down with his or her rookie officer and reviews footage and breaks it down. It could even be used in a sentinel events kind of approach where, in a non-punitive setting you're looking at a critical

incident and you're assessing from start to finish the officer's decisions. So I think we need to do more of that as well in terms of training.

Then the final area I'll mention is specialized units. The focus for body cameras to date has been almost exclusively on patrol officers and that makes sense. Patrol officers do have the majority of contacts with citizens. But an increasing number of departments are deploying body-worn cameras to specialized units: K-9 units, gang units, anti-crime units, SWAT, even detectives and criminal investigators. I think our understanding of what it means for officers in those units to wear cameras is not nearly as developed as it needs to be. So those are some areas where I think we've advanced our knowledge quite a bit as well as some areas where we need to do some additional work.

That's all I have for you. Thank you for your time.