

---

# Study may reform police training methods

---

A VCU doctoral candidate has designed a study that could help improve training of police officers in their interactions with citizens. The study by Shana Mell seeks to show how body worn cameras can be used for observation and subsequent training.

---



**WRITTEN BY**  
Joe Johnson

**TAGS**  
body worn cameras, hawthorne effect, police training

**PUBLISHED**  
Nov. 1, 2016

A VCU doctoral candidate has designed a study that could help improve training of police officers in their interactions with citizens – a focus of concern among activists in the Black Lives Matter movement.

Nearly every citizen has the capability to record video on their cell phone and instantaneously upload footage to the internet. Numerous police departments have begun issuing officers body worn cameras, or BWCs, in an effort to be more transparent. Many people have called

Mell was able to see the big picture during police interactions by viewing video recorded by the officers' body worn cameras.

for increased transparency after the recent shootings of black males by police officers.

Various studies have examined how effective BWCs are in the field. The study by Shana Mell, who is pursuing a Ph.D. in Public Policy and Administration at VCU, seeks to show how BWCs can be used for observation and subsequent training.

"This is not a body worn camera study," Mell said. "There's people out there who are looking right now, because it's such a big trend, to see if body worn cameras are working."

For Mell's research, BWCs were used as an important tool for candid observation. Mell was able to see the big picture during police interactions by viewing video recorded by the officers' BWCs.

"If you can just think of it as a vehicle to understand police behavior, that's what [this study] is," Mell said. "It was using the body worn cameras as my tool to observe officers. So that's never been done, and this is the first study that I'm aware of."

Observing police behavior in the field is not a new concept, Mell explained. However, in previous studies, the researcher was usually physically present while watching the police-citizen interaction.

Mell said limiting the physical presence of the researcher during observation is important. Using BWC may be the key to helping prevent a phenomenon known as the Hawthorne effect.

"You tend to impact people's behavior when you're watching them," Mell said. "This study attempts to reduce the Hawthorne effect."

'It gives me the opportunity to be on [the police] call in their interactions with citizens without actually being there,' Mell says.

BWCs allow for better data collection since the subjects are less likely to alter their behavior due to outside observation. Mell explained that this is why her study is so innovative.

"It gives me the opportunity to be on [the police] call in their interactions with citizens without actually being there," Mell said.

In her study, Mell used 500 samples of BWC content and viewed thousands of hours of video footage. The study included 70 police officers each with different backgrounds and years of experience.

The study site included only VCU police department officers.

Mell's procedure mixed several demographic variables with situational and outcome variables. In effect, this method turned qualitative information into a quantitative study, yielding metrics that can be analyzed.

For both the police officer and the citizen in an interaction, Mell logged demographic variables such as race, age and gender. The length of service and rank of the officer were also noted.

After organizing the variables, Mell interpreted the nature of the police-citizen interaction. Understanding the nature of these interactions may help police departments train officers to better follow the four pillars of procedural justice: participation, neutrality, dignity/respect and trustworthiness.

Mell said procedural justice is the idea that treating people fairly can impact your interaction with them. There is evidence that procedural justice provides a means for police legitimacy, in turn allowing police to effectively perform their jobs.



'It gives me the opportunity to be on [the police] call in their interactions with citizens without actually being there,' Mell says.

---

“The idea is that if I’m a police officer and I treat you with respect ... then the outcome of our interaction will be more positive,” Mell said.

She acknowledged that her study has a few limitations. Future research may explore those limitations.

“There’s a few different variables I would adjust,” Mell said. “I think the protocol could be enhanced. I’d really like to be able to better measure the incident type,” such as whether it was a traffic stop, a misdemeanor crime report or a call for service.

That may allow researchers to determine if one of the four pillars is particularly important during a specific incident type.

Mell believes her study introduces a way for a police department to evaluate officer performance. She hopes the research will allow officers to better understand police-citizen interactions. •