What happens when officers wear body cameras

By Christopher Mims, Wall Street Journal

Sometimes, like the moments leading up to when a police officer decides to shoot someone, transparency is an unalloyed good. And especially lately, technology has progressed to a point that it makes this kind of transparency not just possible, but routine.

So it is in Rialto, where the entire Southern California police force is wearing so-called body-mounted cameras, no bigger than pagers, that record everything that transpires between officers and citizens. In the first year after the cameras' introduction, the use of force by officers declined 60 percent, and citizen complaints against police fell 88 percent.

It isn't known how many police departments are making regular use of cameras, though it is being considered as a way of perhaps altering the course of events in places such as Ferguson, Mo., where an officer shot and killed an unarmed black teenager.

What happens when police wear cameras isn't simply that tamper-proof recording devices provide an objective record of an encounter—though some of the reduction in complaints is apparently because of citizens declining to contest video evidence of their behavior—but a modification of the psychology of everyone involved.

The effect of third-party observers on behavior has long been known: Thomas Jefferson once advised that "whenever you do a thing, act as if all the world were watching." Psychologists have confirmed this intuition, showing that something as primitive as a poster with a pair of glaring eyes can make

test subjects behave better, and even reduce theft in an area.

One problem with the cameras, however, has been cost. Fortunately, fierce competition between the two most prominent vendors of the devices, Vievu LLC and Taser International Inc., which makes the cameras used by Rialto police, has driven the price of individual cameras down to between $300 and $400. Unfortunately, one place where expenses can mount is in the storage and management of the data they generate.

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