

## Libertarian group pushes for police body cams

St. John Barned-Smith

October 28, 2015

The Cato Institute has added its voice to a growing chorus calling for police around the country to be equipped with body cameras.

A study released Tuesday by the libertarian-leaning think tank examined body-camera best practices and warned of potential privacy abuses of everyday citizens if smart policies are not put in place by law enforcement.

"By themselves, body cameras are not a police misconduct panacea," the 25-page report noted. "Police misconduct can only be adequately addressed by implementing significant reforms to police practices and training. Still, body cameras can serve as an important component of police reform."

Law enforcement agencies across Texas have begun grappling with instituting body cameras among their rank-and-file. The Houston Police Department recently presented a draft of its proposed body camera policy to Houston's City Council.

However, the department came under fire for failing to detail how much the program would really cost, how it would manage the massive amount of data associated with a body camera system, and how it would determine which footage to keep or delete.

The Harris County Sheriff's Office is likewise working on a program to equip its patrol deputies with cameras, as Harris County officials have noted

Tuesday's report from the Cato Institute stressed the importance of transparent policies made at the local level, that take officer safety into account.

A few findings:

"In order for police body cameras to increase police accountability, officers should be required to have their body cameras on when they are responding to a 911 call; performing an arrest, search, detention, or traffic stop; and any time when they reasonably suspect that they will soon be conducting an arrest, search, traffic stop, or detention," the report said.

The report also called for "a feasible police body camera policy that accounts for the privacy and cost issues ... while also providing the much needed increase in law enforcement accountability."

Finally, the report criticized policies that allow officers to view footage before filing use-of-force reports.

"If an officer is allowed to view body camera footage before making an initial report, no one will ever know for sure what the officer's actual recollection of the incident was," the report's author wrote. "This is especially important because the legality of a use-of-force incident depends in part on what the officer thought was happening at the time. Such policies could further undermine public confidence in police accounts of use-of-force incidents, since the public may come to doubt all police statements relating to such incidents, believing them to be attempts by the police to absolve themselves of blame."