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2015: The Year Of "Cops On Camera"

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During this time of year it's not uncommon to see commentators and journalists publishing "Top 10" lists, issuing pronouncements about "lessons learned" from the last year, or making predictions for the next. For instance, at the end of last year *Slate*'s John Dickerson asked whether Jeb Bush could "survive his own party" (the answer seems to be "no") and *The Atlantic* published an article with the headline "Lessons From an Outbreak: How Ebola Shaped 2014." The end of 2014 was also when The Associated Press' annual poll revealed that American editors and news directors considered police killings of unarmed blacks to be 2014's top news story, beating the rise of the Islamic State (IS) and the Ebola outbreak.

While the IS did top this year's Associated Press poll, police killings continued to make headlines in 2015, with the deaths of Walter Scott, Samuel DuBose, Freddie Gray, and others sparking protests, debates, and the significant growth of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. These deaths also inspired widespread discussion about the use of police body cameras, and in the coming years 2015 may well come to be known as the year of "cops on camera."

Of course, police officers have been on camera for decades. Dash cameras and civilian footage of incidents, whether captured by cell phones or more traditional camcorders, have been available for some time. Even in a time of body cameras, Rodney King's beating at the hands of LAPD officers in 1991 remains one of the most well known incidents of police brutality caught on film.

It's also worth noting that civil libertarians at organizations such as the ACLU, Reason magazine, and the Cato Institute were discussing the right of civilians to film police officers long before 2015.

Yet 2015 was the year that police officers filming themselves became a major talking point at all levels of government. Before 2015 only four states had specific body camera legislation in place. In 2015 lawmakers in the vast majority of states introduced body camera legislation and federal legislators and officials proposed body camera bills and awarded funds for the devices.

The Department of Justice began awarding body camera funds to police departments earlier this year, despite the fact that the recipients did not have consistent accountability policies in place. On Capitol Hill senators and congressmen from both parties backed legislation that would fund police body camera pilot studies.

At the local and state level policymakers and law enforcement officials approved body camera policies, ranging from the comparatively good (Washington, D.C.) to the very poor (Los Angeles).

On the presidential nomination circuit candidates from both major parties have discussed their support for body cameras. Democratic hopeful Hillary Clinton backed mandatory body cameras in April. The maverick Bernie Sanders, Clinton's foremost competitor in the Democratic nomination race, wants the federal government to fund body cameras, a position he shares with Donald Trump. Trump isn't the only Republican presidential nominee to back body cameras. Chris Christie, Carly Fiorina, Rand Paul, and John Kasich have come out in support of body cameras. Ben Carson expressed support for body cameras back in 2014.

It's not surprising that politicians across the political spectrum at all levels of government have backed police body cameras. After all, outfitting police officers with body cameras is supported by an overwhelming majority of Americans regardless of political affiliation.

This support is well founded. Police body cameras proved very important in some of the best-known police misconduct incidents of 2015 such as Ray Tensing's killing of Samuel DuBose. When Hamilton County, Ohio prosecutor Joe Deters announced the murder and voluntary manslaughter charges against Tensing earlier this year he described the body camera footage as "invaluable."

But it's not only body camera footage that has proven crucial in highlighting examples of police misconduct. It was a bystander with a cell phone, not a body camera, which captured then-North Charleston, South Carolina police officer Michael Slager killing Walter Scott by shooting him in the back last April. It was also cell phone footage that showed a McKinney, Texas police officer pointing a gun at unarmed bystanders after throwing a 14-year-old girl to the ground while dealing with a complaint about a pool party in June.

The widespread coverage of police misconduct videos in 2015 was accompanied by an increase in the number of police officers being charged in connection to fatal shootings. *The Washington Post*, which this year kept track of police shootings, found "Although charges are rarely filed in fatal police shootings, indictments of police officers tripled in 2015, compared with previous years."

While this might sound reassuring it is worth remembering that in 2015 only 18 officers were charged in a fatal shooting case. In 2015 there were almost 1,000 police shootings in the United States. *The Guardian*, which this year kept track of all police killings (not just shootings), found that as of December 27th 1,126 people were killed by police in 2015.

Increased coverage of police misconduct, prompted in part by the increased availability of video, may be contributing to a change in attitude towards the police. According to Gallup polling confidence in the police is at its lowest level in 22 years.

Yet police officers should view body cameras as one of the ways to regain some of Americans' lost confidence in law enforcement. Body camera footage showing police misconduct can go viral, but some lesser-known police body camera footage provides examples of police officers behaving admirably in difficult and life-threatening situations. Police officers can and should make sure to highlight this kind of footage.

Nevertheless, while many police officers do behave admirably, Americans live in a country where every year police officers carry out at least 50,000 SWAT raids, shoot around 10,000 dogs, and kill around 1,000 people. In such an environment it is reasonable for citizens to demand tools that increase law enforcement accountability and transparency.

Just over a year ago, in the wake of the news that Ferguson, Missouri police officer Darren Wilson would not be facing charges for killing Michael Brown, the Obama administration announced a \$75 million three-year body camera funding plan. In the months that followed many lawmakers wrote, introduced, and passed body camera legislation while police body camera footage, showing the best as well as the worst American law enforcement has to offer, was being collected.

It remains to be seen what long term effects the widespread use of police body cameras will have on the state of American policing. But whatever the effects, 2015 will almost certainly be remembered as the year body cameras became an established and prominent feature of the much needed discussions on law enforcement accountability and transparency.

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