

## **Police-Community Relations, Body Cams and the Co-optation of the Community Agenda**

*By Michelle Gross, President, Communities United Against Police Brutality  
12/15/2014*

These are interesting times.

For nearly 25 years, I've been trying to get people to pay attention to and act on the very serious issue of police brutality, 14 of those years as part of Communities United Against Police Brutality. Mostly it's been an uphill battle. White folks largely have responded with disbelief and the idea that the victims "must have done something to deserve it." People of color have been much more aware of the issue but often resigned to the idea that little could be done to effectively take it on.

Now, thanks to the widespread use of video cameras and the courageous people of Ferguson, MO and elsewhere, the reality of police brutality is finally coming home in ways that are undeniable to anyone with a TV set. As cities explode in widespread unrest, public officials on all levels are forced to at least act as if they are interested in addressing the issue.

Now, along comes Obama. His solution? Forming a task force and placing at its head former DC police chief Charles Ramsey, a man who has cost taxpayers millions in excessive force lawsuits and who is [well known for a history of crack downs on protestors and massive civil rights violations](#). He is one of the nation's mouthpieces for militarization of police. This task force is on an aggressive time line—they are expected to provide recommendations within 90 days.

Despite widespread criticism of attacks on protesters by police officers who look more like soldiers using a wide variety of military armaments, Ramsey and Obama immediately declared that "demilitarization of police is off the table." Instead, their plans include increasing police department budgets for even more military equipment and doling out \$75 million for body cameras.

### *Body Cams are Not the Solution*

After release of a much vaunted [study out of Rialto, CA](#) about the efficacy of body cameras in decreasing police officer use of force, talk of implementing them across the country has been all the rage. However, while the methodology of the Rialto study appears to be solid, it was co-authored by the Rialto police chief as part of his master's thesis. The size and length of the study and local conditions unique to the city in which it was conducted make it questionable whether the results can be generalized to larger communities.

One problem with body cams is what they capture and what they don't. These cameras sit on the chest or shoulder or are mounted on glasses worn by the officer and point to the community member. They don't actually capture the officer's actions, only the community member's responses to those actions. Hearing the interaction may be beneficial or it may not. Due to their location and angle, chest and shoulder-mounted models may also give the appearance that the community member is larger and more menacing to the officer.

More important than the cameras themselves are the policies put into place around the use of these devices. If police officers are allowed to turn them on and off at will, if the video is not preserved in ways that prevent its destruction or alteration or if the footage is not available through public data requests, then these devices are useless as a tool for police accountability. Bear in mind that one of the two officers who killed James Boyd, a mentally ill homeless man sleeping in the hills near Albuquerque, NM, turned off his body cam right before shooting Boyd, yet was never disciplined.

Without good policies and serious consequences for violating them, Obama's proposal is little more than an early holiday gift for TASER International and the rest of the corporations peddling these body cams as the miracle cure for police brutality.

Finally, as St. Louis University law professor Justin Hansford [aptly points out](#), even with video evidence such as in the Eric Garner case, the laws are heavily stacked against ever holding police accountable.

### *Police-Community Relations vs. Police Accountability*

All of these reform efforts center on improving what politicians like to call “police-community relations.” In fact, Obama stated that he formed his task force to “tackle simmering distrust” between law enforcement and the community. While this sounds good on the surface, it is faulty framing. This framing proposes that if police and the community could just get along better, the problem would be solved. It also places half the responsibility for the problem on the community, when we have little control over police descending on our streets in tanks and armored vehicles, wearing riot gear and carrying high-powered weapons, or violating people's rights—and bodies—with impunity.

As activists addressing a thorny problem of state power, we need to be clear. The issue is police abuse of authority, the oppression that underpins it, and the lack of accountability that encourages it. No amount of “dialogue” or other relationship-building measures will improve this because “relations” aren't the underlying cause of the problem except, perhaps, relationships among people in power who benefit from the current police state.

### *What is Needed NOW*

It has become clear very quickly that [Obama put together his task force with a particular outcome in mind](#). The task force has no members who are known activists on police accountability and, given the rapid time line and proposals under consideration, is a PR move to pacify the public while limiting the parameters of the debate and only allowing consideration of [“solutions” that pose no threat to the police state](#).

The sudden upsurge in interest in the issue of police accountability brings many new voices to the movement but the solutions that matter most to the community are at risk of getting lost unless we can quickly come together as a movement and coalesce around a community agenda. This agenda doesn't have to be long or detailed. Pushing for four or five solid proposals would give the movement an opportunity to get out ahead of Task Force efforts to narrow solutions to only what they propose. Now is the time for the main national coalitions on police accountability (October 22 Coalition and National Copwatch Coalition) as well as groups such as the National Lawyers Guild, ACLU and others with history in this movement to work together to provide an infrastructure for new and veteran activists to craft and advance this community agenda.

Now is the time to seize the moment. Let's not squander this opportunity to bring forth concrete, effective solutions to address the issue of police abuse.