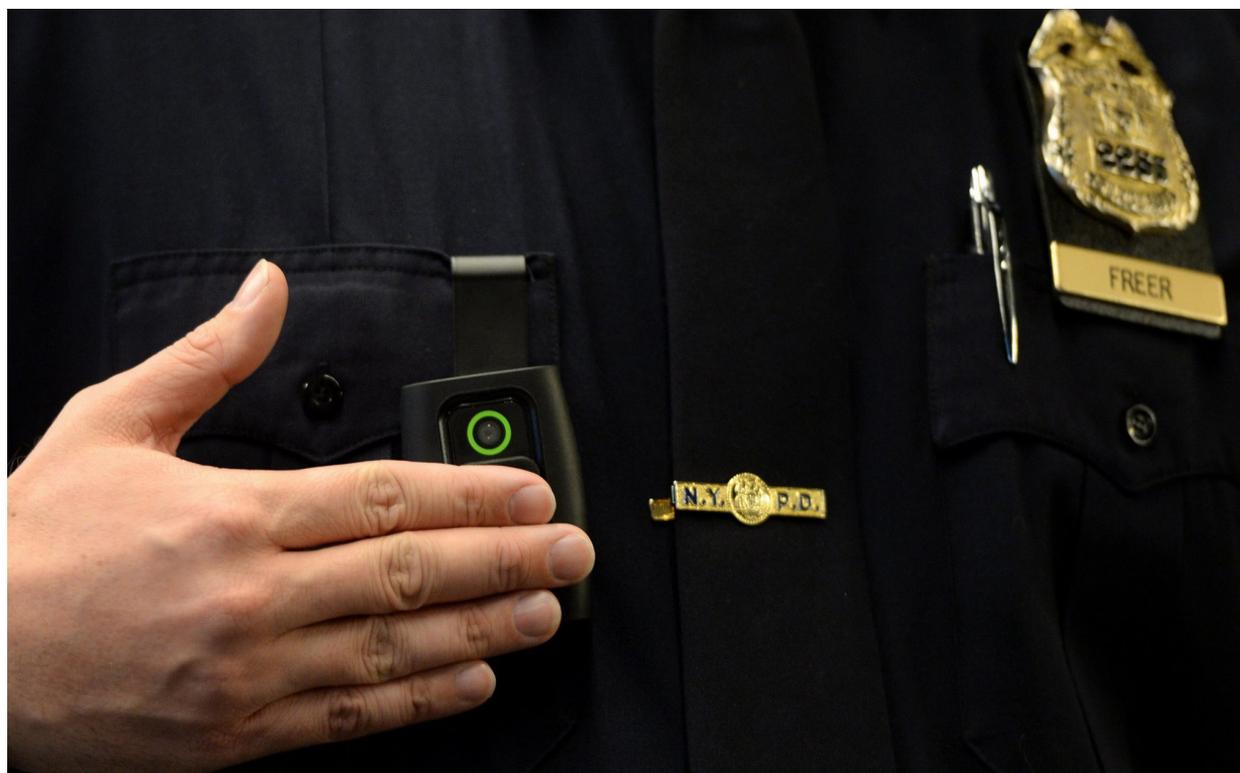


# Federal Monitor Proposes Larger Trial of Body Cameras for New York Police

BY AL BAKER AND J. DAVID GOODMAN | July 9, 2015



New York Police Sgt. Joseph Freer demonstrating a body camera in 2014. Several dozen officers are testing the devices. Photo Credit: Justin Lane/European Pressphoto Agency

New Yorkers would be more likely to encounter a police officer wearing a body camera under a vast new trial program recommended by the federal monitor for the Police Department.

A federal court had ordered the department to conduct a one-year pilot program to test cameras in five precincts with the highest number of police stops as part of its 2013 decision finding the department’s stop-and-frisk program to be unconstitutional. The department has already given cameras to several dozen officers, all volunteers, to test the technology.

But the monitor installed to carry out the court’s orders, Peter L. Zimroth, argued in his first report on Thursday that a broader, more scientific plan — involving 1,000 cameras in 20 precincts and control groups — would better gauge the impact of capturing video on police stops and community relations.

“I will be recommending an alteration to the court order,” wrote Mr. Zimroth, 72, a former corporation counsel for the city, in a letter accompanying the report. “This will allow the N.Y.P.D. and others to evaluate what impact cameras have on the behavior of the police officer and the person encountered.”

The outcome of the trial program is likely to be a key indicator in judging how well the department has improved under the court’s orders. The program, the details of which are being worked out with the department, will not be in place for another 12 months. The results will come a year after that, just as the monitor will be evaluating whether his supervision needs to continue.

The costs of the monitor’s recommended trial were not clear.

Body cameras have been embraced by the Obama administration, the families of unarmed men killed by officers and many police departments across the country as a primary tool for improving police-community relations. The cameras can provide documentation of disputed encounters and a check on the behavior of officers and civilians, though policing experts say much depends on how they are used by officers and to what degree the images are shared with the public.

Bystander video has played a central role in illuminating several high-profile police killings, including the deaths of Eric Garner on Staten Island and Walter Scott in South Carolina. Cameras would be likely to capture not only fatal encounters involving officers

but also the much more numerous mundane law enforcement interactions that can also generate complaints or draw scrutiny.

In his report, Mr. Zimroth observed that the court’s selection of five precincts was “problematic for several reasons”: Some of the precincts that performed the highest number of street stops no longer do so; the selection of those five prevents “the use of a rigorous randomized experimental design”; and the requirement that all officers in a precinct wear cameras presents technical hurdles for the department.

Instead, the report, which also touched on training and supervision of officers and street stops that have gone undocumented, described in detail the creation of “treatment” groups with cameras and “control groups” without them. He recommended choosing from 40 precincts that had the highest average number of complaints to the Civilian Complaint Review Board.

“We picked this measure because the number of C.C.R.B. complaints is highly correlated to the highest rates of reported stop activity,” he wrote.

The precincts would then be paired based on commonalities — including arrests, crime rates and demographics — and half would be assigned cameras. The monitor and the department are in discussions over which officers would be made to wear the cameras. “One possibility is to select all officers assigned to a specific shift,” he wrote, or about 50 officers on an eight-hour shift in each of the 20 precincts.

For the best results, Mr. Zimroth argued, several precincts should be excluded from the pilot program: the five already testing cameras, four precincts where a new neighborhood policing strategy is being tested, and Central Park, which does not have residents or much police activity.

William J. Bratton, the police commissioner, said last week that he had high hopes for implementing the body camera program with the federal monitor, adding that he was “very anxious” to move forward with the trial.

“We think it’s going to be very beneficial to the men and women of the department,” he said, “in terms of showing that most of the actions they engage in out there, if not the vast majority, are appropriate.”