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Do Cameras Make a Difference? The Death of Eric Garner and another “No Indictment”

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Do Cameras Make a Difference? The Death of Eric Garner and another “No Indictment”

Abstract

"If body cameras are supposed to help clear up the record, why was there no indictment in a case that seems so clearly abusive, and if a grand jury declined to indict despite the video evidence, what use is adopting cameras?"

Posting about the grand jury decision in New York City following the death of Eric Garner and how Christians should react to it from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/do-cameras-make-a-difference-the-death-of-eric-garner-and-another-no-indictment/>

Keywords

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Disciplines

Christianity | Civil Rights and Discrimination | Criminal Law

Comments

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Do Cameras Make a Difference? The Death of Eric Garner and another “No Indictment”

 inallthings.org/do-cameras-make-a-difference-the-death-of-eric-garner-and-another-no-indictment/

Donald Roth

Just over a week ago, I wrote an [article](#) for this site calling for us not to rush to judgment in the Ferguson case, to review what was available of the record, and to consider fruitful paths forward. An initiative for moving forward that has been advocated from many quarters, including by President Obama, is outfitting police officers with cameras that record their encounters with the public. As more departments embrace the evidence-based principles of community policing, there will be a continued increase in the number of officers on foot patrol, and it makes some natural sense that these patrolling officers would carry cameras just like so many patrol vehicles already do. However, the recent decision by a New York grand jury not to indict any officers involved with the death of Eric Garner, which was captured on video in its entirety, has raised questions about whether this change will really make a difference.

It's very possible you haven't followed the proceedings surrounding Mr. Garner's death, as what has happened in Ferguson has largely overshadowed it in media coverage. However, although it is disturbing, I encourage you to [watch the video](#). It shows Mr. Garner clearly distraught at being accosted by police and nonviolently resisting arrest when he is brought to the ground and subdued by a chokehold (a maneuver the NYPD banned in the 90s) administered by Officer Daniel Pantaleo. Several officers converge on Mr. Garner and press down on him while he begins to complain that he can't breathe. After a few seconds, Mr. Garner goes into cardiac arrest and he subsequently died an hour later in the hospital. After an investigation, the Medical Examiner ruled Mr. Garner's death a homicide brought on by compression of Mr. Garner's neck and chest.¹

However, and this is why I'm writing today, a Staten Island grand jury on Wednesday decided to return no bill of indictment against the officer who administered the chokehold. This raises a natural question: if body cameras are supposed to help clear up the record, why was there no indictment in a case that seems so clearly abusive, and if a grand jury declined to indict despite the video evidence, what use is adopting cameras?

For me, this only underlines why cameras are so important. Despite New York City banning the procedure over twenty years ago, there have been over 1,000 complaints of police using the maneuver there in the last four years alone.² It seems apparent that, even though administration officially considers the technique too dangerous, there has been little internal will to bring about a change of policy. Some have defended Officer Pantaleo's actions as necessary to subdue a large man when officers are much smaller,³ and others have placed blame on Mr. Garner for being overweight and out of shape,⁴ however, the fact remains that police resorted to a banned maneuver to subdue an unarmed, non-threatening man suspected of selling untaxed cigarettes.

My purpose here is not to claim expertise as to the realities or necessities of using force for police officers on the street, as I certainly don't have the experience to speak to that. I'm also not arguing a certain narrative based on the use of force against minorities in New York, as I have not lived in that city and am not a person of color. What is clear is that the facts of this case create significant cognitive dissonance, if not moral outrage, for most people, and this is provoking a serious consideration of both how we regulate the police use of force effectively and why the grand jury system seems so willing to indict in most cases,

but so hesitant in cases involve police officers.

What I am arguing is that the public discussion that this incident has provoked is a very good thing. These are exactly the sorts of conversations that we need be having as a nation, and, more than conversations, this should spur action. If the chokehold here was justified, then let's remove the ban. If it was not, then let's do something to make sure this doesn't happen again. If the grand jury system is broken with respect to officer-involved deaths, let's come up with useful ways to fix it. Although Ferguson raised some of these questions, the facts were muddled. Eric Garner's case lacks many of those same ambiguities precisely because it was caught on camera. Perhaps this second "no bill" decision will stir enough sustained sentiment to lead to true reform, and that will lead to greater justice for all than one conviction alone could bring.

Some may fear that the increase of cameras will only increase the number of these sorts of conversations that we have, amplifying pain in a society already beset by so many issues. These may be painful conversations, but that does not make them a bad thing. Our criminal justice system is authorized by our votes, and we cannot allow its flaws to deny justice to our neighbors due to our failure to be adequately educated or concerned about it. We may, as a democracy, choose not to change some of the things that others view as problems, but videos like the one in this case make the issue viscerally impossible to ignore, and this is where I see things like officer cameras having a powerful ability to make sure that these sorts of decisions are reached out of careful consideration and not ambivalence.

In the end, what I pray for is not only that these tragedies, whatever their specific cause, might not occur, but that seeing them might provoke all of us to care enough to wrestle with and discuss solutions.

Dig Deeper

Read more articles by iAt contributors on Ferguson and other issues related to this topic.

[No Indictment: Making Senses of Monday's Decision in Ferguson](#) by Donald Roth

[Or does it explode?](#) by Howard Schaap

[Prayer of Confession](#) by Liz Moss

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Footnotes

1. See *Medical Examiner ruled Mr. Garner's Death a Homicide, Says He was Killed by Chokehold*, NBC New York (August 21, 2014) available [here](#). ↩
2. See *Clamping Down on Chokeholds*, New York Law Journal (July 25, 2014) available [here](#). ↩
3. See *Eric Garner was not put in a chokehold, Police Unions say*, DNAinfo – New York (August 5, 2014) available [here](#). ↩
4. See *Fat-Shaming Eric Garner*, The Atlantic (December 4, 2014) available [here](#). ↩

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