

Fatality highlights need for cop cameras

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Nobody knows precisely what happened when Abdirahman Abdi died after Ottawa police arrested him. There were plenty of witnesses, some reporting Abdi being beaten with batons. For many commentators, those reports are enough to make judgments.

But witness accounts aren't always as dependable as we might hope. This is why police officers need to wear body cameras.

Last Thursday, Const. James Forcillo of the Toronto police was sentenced to six years in prison for the attempted murder of Sammy Yatim, the agitated Toronto teenager gunned down as he exited a streetcar in 2013. Forcillo is appealing the decision. Outside the courthouse, Julian Falconer, the Yatim family's lawyer, said, "Repeatedly, it has been video that has been a game changer."

When Robert Dziekanski died in 2007 after being Tasered in the Vancouver airport, video evidence put the lie to the police narrative. Even as far back as 1991, in the Los Angeles beating of Rodney King, video showed indisputably what happened.

In Abdi's death, the public has seen video from witnesses of the immediate aftermath -- but no video of the arrest. Such video would be hugely important. It would tell a story difficult to challenge.

Things would be different if police wore body cams to record their actions. Ottawa Police Association president Matt Skof favours this, as do several union bosses and chiefs; they believe it can provide evidence to exonerate officers in many circumstances.

Some forces around the country are doing pilot projects with body-worn video, and the technology has been discussed within Ottawa's force. There are issues, such as storage capacity for all that data. But that's a problem to overcome, not an excuse for inaction. The Ottawa Police Service should equip its officers with body-worn video.

Two other issues arise. First: Should officers have discretion to turn their body cams on and off? Research suggests that discretion can heighten tensions, because flipping video on can antagonize suspects and amp up officers. Not only that, but incidents in the United States show video evidence mysteriously vanishing, or, curiously, the cameras being off at exactly the moment when they should be on.

Second: Video from police body cams is useless if it's kept from the public. We need transparency: either through proactive release of the video and/or its inclusion under access to information laws.

The confusion and suspicion swirling around the death of Abdirahman Abdi is an argument for police wearing body video. Let's get it done.