

# Understanding Law Enforcement's Use of Body-Worn Cameras



The rapid and widespread adoption of body-worn cameras (BWC) has contributed to some misconceptions about their use, function, and effects on police-public relationships. This fact sheet will present information about body-worn cameras.

## What Are Body-Worn Cameras?

Body-Worn Cameras are small cameras that capture audio and video which typically face forward on an officer's chest, glasses, or headwear. Some BWCs offer real-time streaming or have an option for automatic recording, such as recordings that are initiated by the unholstering of a gun, turning on cruiser lights or sirens, or the sudden acceleration of an officer's vehicle. Recordings from BWCs can document police-public contacts, including statements, behaviors, movements, and other circumstances of an incident that can later be used as evidence in a criminal or administrative investigation. BWC programs have also been implemented by some departments as a potential deterrent for unprofessional and inappropriate behaviors by both officers and the public.<sup>1-2</sup>

## Do Body-Worn Cameras Capture Everything?

While body-worn cameras have the potential to capture an incident, they cannot capture everything. They have a limited range of view, and their visibility depends on available lighting and weather conditions. BWCs capture different details depending on where they are worn on the officer's body and the direction the officer is facing—meaning some context or details of an incident may be out of the camera's view. Additionally, agency policies, laws, and guidelines may determine when officers should turn their cameras on or off. Typically recording is turned off during breaks and in areas with an expectation of

privacy, such as restrooms and locker rooms. Some agency policy requires that officers turn off cameras when discussing investigative procedures or safety plans with victims. Depending on state and local laws, an individual may be allowed to request an officer turn off his or her camera; however, this request can be denied if the recording is pursuant to an arrest, lawful search, or other circumstances for which recording is deemed necessary. Recording of juveniles or crime victims may be prohibited in certain situations.

## Is Body-Worn Camera Footage Accessible to the Public?

A common question about BWCs is whether videos will be eligible for release under public record laws. State laws balance evidentiary, privacy, and public interests differently, and these differences affect the way that states deal with the public release of videos. Many law enforcement agencies also have their own policies regarding public access to videos. If a member of the public makes a request and is granted access to body camera footage, the video must often go through a redaction process in which certain images are covered or removed, to protect the privacy of bystanders and the identity of people who may be endangered. State laws may also direct how, where, and for how long BWC video footage is stored, which can also affect public record requests. Given the volume of video footage and the privacy and security requirements, the storage space for the videos can be very expensive.

## Resources on BWC Issues and Statutes

Laws on the release of public information vary state by state. These resources can help you research your state's statutes regarding the release of police body worn camera footage.

The Urban Institute, "Police Body-Worn Camera Legislation Tracker": <https://apps-staging.urban.org/features/body-camera-update/>.

The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, "Access to Police Body-Worn Camera Video": <https://www.rcfp.org/bodycams>

The International Association of Chiefs of Police, Body-Worn Cameras. Concepts and Issues Paper. April 2014. <https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/all/b/BodyWornCamerasPaper.pdf>

Cynthia Lum and Christopher S. Koper, "The Evidence Base for Body-Worn Cameras: What Law Enforcement Leaders Still Need to Know," Research in Brief, *Police Chief Online*, December 28, 2018.

Bureau of Justice Assistance's *Body-worn Camera Training and Technical Assistance*: <https://www.bwctta.com/>

## What is the Effect of Body-Worn Cameras on Police and Public Trust?

A growing number of agencies have implemented BWC programs in hopes of improving trust and relations between the community and police. In some communities, these cameras have made a positive impact, but research on their overall effectiveness has shown somewhat mixed results. For example, some research has shown that officers who used BWCs were more likely to issue citations and make arrests, but had fewer use of force incidents, and a cost-benefit analysis demonstrated a net gain for the department;<sup>3</sup> other research saw fewer citizen complaints, but little change to use of force.<sup>4-5</sup> In addition, some departments saw an unexpected increase in reported assaults against officers.<sup>6</sup> However, other issues can affect officer compliance with activating the camera, making it difficult to isolate the impact of the BWCs on a police department.<sup>7-8</sup> One thing that is clear is that a body-worn camera program cannot be a standalone effort, but when implemented in concert with community policing strategies, BWCs may be an important tool for promoting transparency and trust between the police and community.

Body-worn cameras may help achieve the goals of protecting people's rights, strengthening accountability, and improving trust between the public and law enforcement communities. However, they may create new challenges for communities, victims, and departments. Agencies implementing BWC programs must address equipment and data storage costs, learning to handle information requests, and protect data and privacy. Therefore, police and communities must weigh the potential benefits and costs of BWCs. It is critical for police and communities to look at the research, issues, and policies surrounding BWCs to determine the goal they are trying to accomplish, if BWCs are necessary for that goal, and how to make them effective at meeting it.

### Endnotes

- 1 Hung, Esq., Vivian, Steven Babin, M.D., Ph.D., and Jacqueline Coberly, Ph.D. 2016. *A Primer on Body Worn Camera Technologies*. Applied Physics Laboratory, Johns Hopkins University, Laurel, MD: Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory.
- 2 Miller, Lindsay, Jessica Toliver, and Police Executive Research Forum. 2014. *Implementing a Body-Worn Camera Program: Recommendations and Lessons Learned*. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.
- 3 Braga et al. "The Benefits of Body-Worn Cameras: New Findings from a Randomized Controlled Trial at the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department." Final report to the National Institute of Justice, 2013-IJ-CX-0016, September 2017.
- 4 Ariel, B., Farrar, W.A. & Sutherland, A. *J Quant. Criminol.* (2015) 31: 509. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10940-014-9236-3>
- 5 Ariel, Barak, et al. "Wearing Body Cameras Increases Assaults against Officers and Does Not Reduce Police Use of Force: Results from a Global Multi-Site Experiment." *European Journal of Criminology* 13, no. 6 (November 2016): 744-55. doi:10.1177/1477370816643734.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid. Doleac, Jennifer. October 2017. "Do body-worn cameras improve police behavior?" *Up Front*. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2017/10/25/do-body-worn-cameras-improve-police-behavior/>.
- 8 McClure, et. al. "How Body Cameras Affect Community Members' Perceptions of Police." *Results from a randomized controlled trial of one agency's pilot*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

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