

AFSCME Facts

Body-Worn Cameras

Background

Body-worn cameras (BWC) are either worn behind the ear or clipped to an officer's uniform. Thousands of police agencies across the country are using body cameras. Many others are currently exploring their use in light of the Ferguson, Missouri incident as a way to promote greater accountability and transparency. About 50 percent of law enforcement agencies in the United Kingdom currently utilize them.

A federal judge who ruled that the New York City police department's "stop and frisk" policing was unconstitutional instructed the department to begin a pilot program of BWC in September 2014. This is the largest police force in the country utilizing this technology. Other large departments piloting body cameras include Los Angeles and Oakland, California.

Are BWC a Positive Tool for Law Enforcement Officers?

The often cited study of their use involves the 115 member police force in the town of Rialto, California. Every police officer was required to wear a body camera for one year starting in February 2012. During that period, citizen complaints against officers declined by 88 percent and incidences of use-of-force declined by 60 percent. No other such quantitative studies have been undertaken.

The federal Office of Justice Programs' Diagnostic Center did issue a report in early 2014 in which it concluded that the use of body cameras help resolve citizen complaints against police officers more quickly and are useful for training purposes. The center concluded in its report that more research was necessary to determine whether body cameras actually improve the quality of encounters between officers and citizens.

The city of Atlanta began using BWC on a trial basis last July. According to anecdotal evidence, citizen complaints are down and officers are spending less time in court testifying because the number of plea deals has increased.

Questions Regarding the Use of BWC

When should cameras be turned on and off?

How should the video footage be stored and for how long?

Who can view the video footage?

Are supervisors permitted to view video footage?

Does the state require consent from the person being recorded?

How and when will video footage be released to the public?

Privacy Concerns

The American Civil Liberties Union has endorsed the use of BWC despite privacy concerns for both the public and police officers. However, it does advocate for clear department protocols for when cameras can be turned on and off, as well as length of time for storing video footage.

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