

# **Body-Worn Cameras in Law Enforcement Agencies**

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## An Analysis of the Use of Body-Worn Cameras in Law Enforcement Agencies

There has been a lot of debate in the news lately about the use of body-worn cameras in law enforcement. “Body-worn cameras are small video cameras—typically attached to an officers’ clothing, helmet, or sunglasses—that can capture, from an officer’s point of view, video and audio recordings of activities” (Miller, Toliver & PERF, 2014, p.1). Considering the recent events in Ferguson, Missouri, where a young, unarmed man was shoot and killed by a police officer, there can sometimes be a lot of conflict between police officer and eyewitness stories. It is often suggested that if there were video footage to either prove or disprove the police officer’s story, then there would not have been the huge divisive battle that followed the shooting in Ferguson. In this paper, I will thoroughly analyze the benefits of body-worn cameras for both the communities and the police departments. Then, I will judiciously evaluate the drawbacks of body-worn cameras. Finally, I will explore other considerations to think about when starting a body-worn camera program in law enforcement agencies.

### Benefits

#### *Community Benefits*

The first benefit of body-worn cameras for police officers is accountability. Video evidence can help a police department hold its officers accountable if they have done something unprofessional. If one officer behaves unethically, it reflects poorly on the whole department. Gomez reported that “the cameras serve sort of as a conscience, reminding officers to act professionally” (2015, p.4). This is largely because if the police officers fail to behave ethically there will be evidence of their behavior. This could also apply to the citizens interacting with

these officers. If they do something illegal or just behave badly, they know they will be held accountable. Topeka [Kansas] Police Department's Chief of Police stated, "Everyone is on their best behavior when the cameras are running. The officers, the public—everyone" (as cited in Miller, Toliver, & PERF, 2014, p.5). This level of accountability and transparency could go a very long way in rebuilding trust between law enforcement agencies and citizens.

The second benefit of body-worn cameras in law enforcement is a reduction in the "use of force". It has been documented through research that introducing body cameras into a police department has a tendency of reducing the rates of "use of force" in that department. One study conducted on the Rialto [California] Police Department found a "60 percent reduction in officer use of force following camera deployment" (Farrar, 2014, p.25). This study also found that the shifts with cameras had half the number of use of force incidents than the shift without cameras (Farrar, 2014, p.25). A separate study conducted by the Mesa [Arizona] Police Department found that there were "75 percent fewer use of force complaints for officers with cameras during the pilot program" (Rankin, 2013). Much like the increases in professionalism that occur when police officers are being watched, there is also cause to believe that knowing they are being recorded affects their decision of whether to use force or not. The reduction in rates of "use of force" can provide a vital stepping stone in repairing the relationship between law enforcement agencies and the communities that they protect.

### *Police Benefits*

The third benefit of body-worn cameras is that with use there has been a dramatic decrease in the number of complaints against officers. The study in Mesa reported 40 percent fewer complaints for officers with cameras in the pilot program, and three times as many

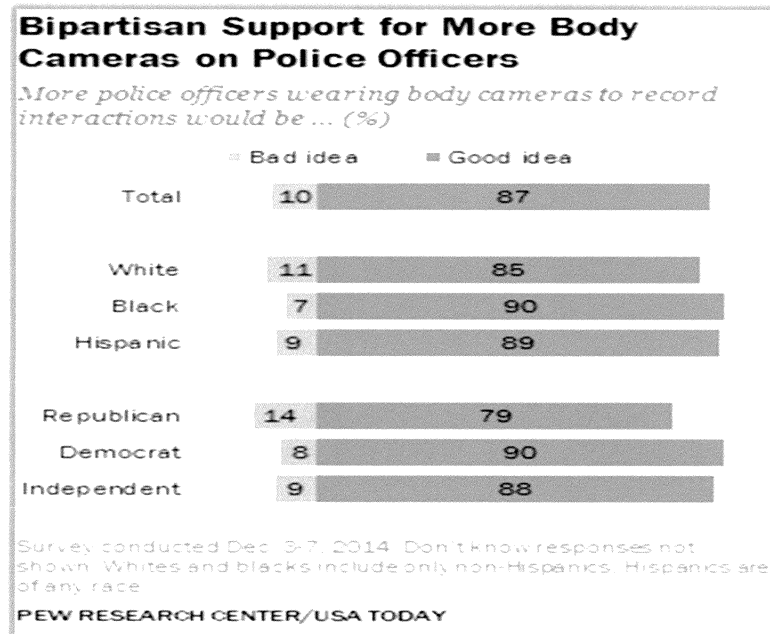
complaints for officers without cameras eight months later (Rankin, 2013). This shows that body-worn cameras can sort of protect officers from false accusations. With indisputable video evidence of a police encounter, that officer should not have to worry about being falsely accused of wrongdoing. Chief Miller of Topeka [Kansas] Police Department stated, “We’ve actually had citizens come into the department to file a complaint, but after we show them the video, they literally turn and walk back out” (as cited in Miller, Toliver, & PERF, 2014, p.6). This drastic reduction in complaints could save police departments a lot of time by not having to deal with as many groundless accusations, long investigations, and expensive lawsuits.

A fourth benefit of body-worn cameras is the use of video footage for training purposes. According to a survey performed by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), 94 percent of respondents reported using body-worn camera footage to train new officers, to help with administrative reviews, and to determine the areas in which further training is needed (Miller, Toliver, and PERF, 2014, p.7). This is perhaps one of the best uses for body-worn cameras. Because these cameras allow supervisors to see things they would not have been able to see before. They now have the opportunity to interfere, and correct problems before they get out of hand. For example, if a video recording shows a new police officer is consistently messing up a certain protocol, this gives his superiors a chance to provide further assistance or training in that particular area. If this mistake is not caught and corrected early on, it could potential damage a future case, making the whole department look bad. Another example of how body-worn cameras could be useful is if the police department establishes a new policy, and the department administrators want to know if the new policy is helping or hurting. The administrators can now see firsthand what the effects of the new policy are, and make adjusts if necessary.

A fifth benefit of body-worn cameras for police officers is that they aid in criminal prosecution by providing instrumental evidence. One article reported that several jurors claimed that without the police video footage as evidence, they would have let the defendants walk (Gomez, 2015, p.4). The fact that jurors tend to be swayed by video footage is a huge plus on the side of body-worn cameras. In other cases, the body-worn cameras come in handy because with the police officers being required to make split second decisions, it can sometimes be difficult to gather evidence. Chief Parker of Dalton [Georgia] Police Department explained “it is always hard to gather evidence from accident scenes... officers are often focused on securing the scene and performing life-saving measures” (as cited in Miller, Toliver, & PERF, 2014, p.9). For these cases it can be vital to have the body-worn camera video because things often happen so quickly that it can be hard to remember details later. A video camera can provide a much more accurate account than eyewitnesses or even the police officer’s own memory. With body-worn cameras growing more and more in popularity around the country, law enforcement officials are already starting to see the effects on legal cases. “Prosecutors have found that when defense attorneys are shown video evidence of their client’s criminal activity, the number of guilty pleas and plea bargaining agreements goes up” (Bolton, 2015, p.14).

The final benefit of using body-worn cameras in law enforcement agencies is community reassurance. Whether or not body-worn cameras actually make law enforcement more effective or make citizens safer, it is already widely believed that body cameras do both of these things. This popular belief is almost just as important as the actual evidence because it reassures the community. Recent polls report overwhelming support for body cameras on police officers across racial and party lines (Pew Research Center, 2014). At a time when too many people

have lost faith in their local police departments, a policy that makes the community feel safer and more trusting of law enforcement has benefits that go beyond what is measurable.



### Drawbacks

The primary concern of many police departments when debating whether or not to establish body-worn cameras is cost. There are not only huge initial costs for preparing a body camera program, but there are also ongoing costs for maintaining the program. In one example, the city of Grand Rapids, Michigan recently approved funding for 200 cameras with the total estimated costs for the first two years totaling \$674,124 (Dewey, 2015, p.8). The cost breakdown is as follows:

“The funding covers the initial acquisition of 200 body-worn cameras (\$77,964), docking stations (\$35,880), 200 licenses (\$191,940 each year), assurance plan (\$7,200 each year), training (\$15,000), integration with the computer-aided dispatch system

(\$48,000 each year) and contingencies (\$45,000 each year)”  
(Dewey, 2015, p.8).

The breakdown above shows just how expensive these body-worn cameras can be. In addition to the huge upfront costs of these programs, there are also the ongoing costs to consider. In above example, the Grand Rapids police department will be adding over \$200,000 per year to their annual budget to accommodate the new body-worn cameras. For the many police departments that are already on a tight budget as it is, the hefty cost of these body-worn cameras may be the deciding factor for their department. In the survey conducted by PERF, the 39 percent of respondents that do not currently use body-worn cameras cited cost as the primary reason (Miller, Toliver & PERF, 2014, p.31).

The secondary concern is privacy. Some people are concerned with how these body-worn cameras will affect their right to privacy. There may be issues regarding when citizens are being recorded and when they can reasonably expect privacy. “Citizens may not wish to be recorded or for these recordings to be preserved or shared with others” (Lum, C., 2015, p.10). The biggest concern will likely be who will see the videos? “Since what is recorded may be accessible to the general public through Freedom of Information Act requests, some redaction of the video may be required to remove images of minors, crime victims, etc” (Bolton, 2015, p.15). Because the laws on privacy vary from state to state, each department will have to establish its own policies regarding privacy. Many law enforcement agencies have taken the position that officers have the right to record inside a private home as long as they have a legal right to be there” (Miller, Toliver & PERF, 2014, p15).

The tertiary concern is data organization and storage. “To put the amount of data these cameras produce into perspective, one officer having 10 citizen encounters per shift at 10 minutes per encounter will produce approximately 11 terabytes (TB) of data in the course of a year [in standard definition]” (Bolton, 2015, p.15-16). This can create a new problem for law enforcement agencies. They now have to figure out where to store the data and who will organize and manage it. Almost all departments that use body-worn cameras choose to store data on an in-house server that is internally managed, or on an online cloud database that is managed by a third party vendor (Miller, Toliver & PERF, 2014, p. 15). Both of these options will come at a significant cost for department both in terms of time and money. This will further burden agencies that are already stressed in these two areas.

### Other Considerations

#### *Police Perceptions*

Police officers may also be concerned about a perceived lack of trust between the officers and the supervisors (Miller, Toliver & PERF, 2014, p.24). Some police officers may feel like they are not trusted to do their job, or that they will be micromanaged by their superiors. Just like with any new policy, there will be those who approve, and those who don't. A recent survey of police officers found that “the officers generally reported considerably high rates of agreement to questions such as they believe that their agency should adopt body-worn cameras for all of their police officers, and that they would feel comfortable wearing body-worn cameras” (Jennings, Fridell & Lynch, 2014, p.552). This survey shows that a majority of officers seem to approve of the use of body-worn cameras. The survey also reported that the police officers felt that the cameras would improve citizen behavior (Jennings, Fridell & Lynch, 2014, p.552).



Knowing that not only are the police officers being watched, but that the citizens are also being watched seemed to sway the opinions of many officers towards the idea of body cameras. One more thing the police officers resoundingly agreed on was that wearing body-worn cameras would not reduce their willingness to respond to calls for service (Jennings, 2014, p.552). This same sentiment was also expressed in terms of their fellow officers. They collectively agreed that even if they did not feel comfortable with the body-worn camera idea, that it would not change their willingness to do their job, nor would it change their fellow officers' willingness to do their jobs. Every agency should consider conducting a survey of their own police officers and their collective attitudes towards body-worn cameras before implementing any type of body camera program.

#### *User Error*

There is a lot of room for error when it comes to new technology and new policies. Many errors that occur in the beginning stages of a new body-worn camera program will probably be innocent, but “forgetting or deciding not to turn on their cameras in certain instances can create the perception that officers had something to hide” (Gomez, 2015, p.4). This has the potential to be harmful to community perceptions of law enforcement agencies. Especially if those perceptions were already negative to begin with. Other errors could be as simple as forgetting to charge the camera or failing to adjust the viewing angle to avoid obstructions. There will certainly be a learning curve in the beginning, and some will catch on quicker than others. This is definitely something that needs to be taken into consideration before establishing a body-worn camera program.

#### *Quality of Video/Audio*

The quality of the video and audio produced by body-worn cameras can vary greatly between models. Adding to the problem, police officers basically have no say in where they have to go or the time of day when they are responding to a call. Outside interference like cars going by, and other civilians walking through the video can completely ruin the evidence. Gomez noted that “lack of sound quality,” “limited field of view,” and “diminished picture quality at night” could also be problems (2015, p.4). Bolton further explains that “the field of view on commercially available body-worn cameras ranges from 63 to 180 degrees” he also comments that it is ideal to have a view closest to human vision (Bolton, 2015, p.16). A camera that provides a view that is either too much higher or too much lower than the average human’s vision may confuse those watching the video. For example, a camera with night vision would provide a great picture, but the officer wearing the camera is only human. Others may view the footage and assume that the officer could have seen things that he simply could not have seen. When implementing a new body-worn camera program, all police departments should evaluate the different camera options in terms of video and audio quality.

### *New Policies*

“Implementing the use of body-worn cameras for your officers should not be done without first creating policies and procedures for how those cameras should be used. That can help you ensure consistency, and avoid liability and the appearance of impropriety” (Gomez, 2015, p.15). These new policies will have to answer questions that many law enforcement officials have not yet had to ask. The new policies should cover issues like: who will be required to wear the new cameras? When will the cameras need to be turned on and off? Who will be responsible for downloading and tagging all the video footage? How will camera malfunctions be handled in the field? Some of these questions can be answered by looking at the several

departments that already have body-worn cameras. For example, many agencies require that "if an officer gets out of his car, his camera should be recording, except when interacting with victims of rape or sexual assault" (Gomez, 2015, p.15). Any law enforcement agencies considering body-worn cameras should thoroughly think about the policies that will be needed in order to accommodate the cameras.

### *Financial Considerations*

Due to the fact that cost is the biggest issue for police departments considering a body-worn camera program, there are important financial considerations that must be addressed. The most expensive part of the body-worn camera programs is often the data storage and organization. Therefore, all three of the following financial considerations will address ways to reduce or minimize these costs. The first financial consideration is that costs can be cut significantly by reducing data retention times for non-evidentiary videos (Miller, Toliver & PERF, 2014, p.34). Any videos that have been determined to be non-evidentiary, meaning the video doesn't contain any pertinent events or information, should be deleted as soon as what is reasonably possible. In many cases, this type of footage will make up most of the data being obtained. Getting rid of this useless data quicker will certainly cut down on the data storage costs. The second financial consideration is that videos for more serious offenses that require long-term storage can be downloaded onto a disc and placed directly into the case file in order to delete the video from server or cloud storage (Miller, Toliver & PERF, 2014, p. 34). This could free up a lot of data space and make organization easier by have fewer files to organize. The final financial considerations is that linking all recorded data to the department's record management system can reduce the administrative burden of organizing videos later. For example, some agencies require police officers wearing the body-worn cameras to download and

tag their videos at the end of their shift (Miller, Toliver & PERF, 2014, p.33). They would “tag” the videos by using software that would allow them to mark each video as evidentiary or non-evidentiary, and then label the video by the type of incident that occurred. This one policy can save hundreds of administrative hours on the back-end; therefore, reducing the total costs of the program. These are just three financial considerations that should be taken into account before implementing a body-worn camera program.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I thoroughly analyzed the numerous benefits of body-worn cameras for both the communities and the police departments. Then, I judiciously evaluated the many drawbacks of body-worn cameras. Finally, I explored several other considerations to think about when starting a body-worn camera program in law enforcement agencies. Although there are several weakness for body-worn camera programs, there are even more strengths and benefits for the community and the police departments. These benefits have made body-worn camera programs very popular around many parts of the country, but due to the costs and policy issues, a body-worn camera program may not be suitable for every law enforcement agency. Each agency should carefully weigh the positives and negatives before deciding if a body-worn camera program is best for their departments and their communities.

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