

# **Beyond Patrol**

## **Exploring the Perceptions of Police Body-Worn Cameras among Officers in Specialized Units**

Janne E. Gaub, Ph.D.  
Natalie Todak, M.S.  
Michael D. White, Ph.D.

February 2017



This report was funded by the Laura and John Arnold Foundation.  
The opinions expressed here are those of the authors and may not reflect those of the Arnold Foundation.

# **Beyond Patrol: Exploring the Perceptions of Police Body-Worn Cameras among Officers in Specialized Units**

## **Executive Summary**

Police body-worn cameras (BWCs) have diffused rapidly in law enforcement both in the United States and abroad. BWCs are perceived to have wide ranging benefits, from increased transparency and police legitimacy to reduced use of force and citizen complaints. Given that the vast majority of police-citizen encounters involve patrol officers, departments have almost universally focused on the deployment of the technology to frontline officers assigned to patrol.

Questions have begun to emerge regarding the potential utility of BWCs for specialized units in a police department, such as K9, traffic, tactical, gang, and undercover units. Given the near-sole focus on patrol, the role of specialized units in BWC deployment is often overlooked. Further, the advantages, disadvantages, and challenges associated with BWCs may be very different for specialized units than for patrol. There is little to no guidance on this issue from either the academic literature or police leadership organizations (e.g., the International Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP]).

The authors explore this issue through focus groups conducted with officers assigned to specialized units in the Spokane (WA) and Tempe (AZ) Police Departments. We interviewed officers from more than 15 different specialized units, collecting their perceptions on a wide range of issues tied to BWCs. The focus groups identified important considerations for the unique challenges and benefits of deploying BWCs to officers in specialized units, which are highlighted below. Based on the officer's responses, we propose five recommendations for agency to contemplate when deploying BWCs to specialized units.

## **Key Findings**

1. Officers assigned to specialized units identified a wide range of benefits and limitations with BWCs. In some cases, their views matched the views of patrol officers. In other cases, they identified benefits and challenges unique to their units.
2. Officers assigned to specialized units highlighted the evidentiary value of BWCs, including for more accurate report writing, resolving citizen complaints, aiding in prosecution, and documenting problematic crowd behavior.
3. Officers assigned to specialized units stated BWCs capture their sometimes extensive efforts to de-escalate a situation before having to resort to use of force.
4. Officers assigned to specialized units described the training value of BWCs, especially for K9s, bikes, and crisis negotiations (e.g., sentinel events-type review).
5. Officers assigned to specialized units described a number of innovative uses for BWCs to either capture their own actions, or the actions of a suspect (e.g., traffic officers positioning the BWC to show recorded speeds on their radar gun).

6. Officers assigned to specialized units identified a number of concerns with BWCs, such as the increased workload associated with using cameras (tagging, downloading), the perceptions of citizens who view their sometimes unique work (e.g., K9 deployments), and public access to BWC footage.
7. Officers assigned to specialized units noted that some aspects of their work inhibit the use of BWCs, such as their reliance on take-home vehicles, plainclothes and undercover work, emphasis on cultivating criminal informants (CIs), secrecy surrounding their tactics, and their participation in multi-agency task forces (e.g., not all agencies use BWCs, especially federal agencies who may object to the cameras being present).

### **Recommendation 1: The technical aspects of BWC implementation must be considered individually for each unit.**

The mounting options, audio and video buffering functions, mute, and other technical aspects of various BWC manufacturers and models must be studied for each specialized unit that will receive BWCs. What works for general patrol may be particularly ill-suited for a specialized unit, and vice versa. Negotiations with vendors during the procurement process should take into account the special technical needs of each specialized unit.

### **Recommendation 2: Administrative policy may need to be adjusted for the specific needs of specialized units.**

Policy adjustments may be necessary for some specialized units, particularly with regard to device placement, activation, deactivation, video tagging, and downloading. For example, decisions on activation may vary based on the unit involved (e.g., SWAT/tactical units v. traffic). Similarly, officers working overtime shifts or long special events, or operating with take-home vehicles, may require special accommodations regarding the downloading/charging process.

### **Recommendation 3: Department leadership should understand the unique challenges to effective use of BWCs with specialized units, especially in terms of what can be seen on BWC footage.**

Some situations are not conducive to body-worn cameras, such as undercover and surveillance operations, or close-quarter, combative encounters in which very little is visible on the footage (or footage can be misleading). Specialized units may have unique features or tactical strategies which limit the current camera model's field of view (e.g., plain clothes officers, mounted units).

### **Recommendation 4: Department leadership will need to manage the public's expectations regarding BWCs in general, but especially for specialized units.**

Many officers, including specialized unit officers, are concerned that the public, including juries, may view BWCs as a "silver bullet" solution, leading to the belief that if an event did not occur on camera, then it never happened. Additionally, some police behavior can be shocking – even when tactics are executed properly and within policy (e.g., K9 bites). Officers questioned the wisdom of releasing footage of such incidents. Departments must balance the need for accountability and transparency with public education regarding the limitations of BWCs.

Release of video depicting aggressive police behavior, even if justified, can do significant harm to police-community relations.

**Recommendation 5: BWCs may not be appropriate for certain specialized units, and Department leadership should carefully weigh the advantages and disadvantages of deployment for each unit.**

Some specialized units have a specific mission or purpose that may not be consistent with the deployment of BWCs. Officers may routinely engage in activities that should not be recorded, such as undercover and surveillance work as well as interacting with confidential informants. The advantages and disadvantages of BWCs likely vary across specialized units, and department leaders should carefully weigh the relevant issues on a unit-by-unit basis.

**Conclusion**

We believe there are two important takeaways from our focus groups with officers in specialized units. First, officer acceptance will lead to appropriate use of the technology, compliance with administrative policy, and based on available research, will lead to a wide range of positive outcomes. The best way to garner officer acceptance is be collaborative from the start, soliciting questions, opinions, and recommendations.

Second, the implementation of BWCs in an agency cannot be viewed as a monolithic process. Flexibility is key. Failure to account for unit-level variation will likely produce low or no use among officers in specialized units, and may present significant risks to officers, citizens, and the department as a whole.

# **Beyond Patrol: Exploring the Perceptions of Police Body-Worn Cameras among Officers in Specialized Units**

Janne E. Gaub, Natalie Todak, and Michael D. White

## **Introduction**

Body-worn cameras (BWCs) have become a significant component of 21<sup>st</sup> century policing. They are featured as a tool for improving police accountability and transparency in the President's Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing Final Report (2015), and both the White House and U.S. Department of Justice have devoted considerable resources to promote their adoption by law enforcement agencies across the country (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2016a; Department of Justice, 2016). In December 2014, President Obama committed \$75 million to police departments to deploy 50,000 cameras on officers nationwide. The President's pledge led to the creation of a U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) funding program, which provides grants to police departments for the purchase of BWCs. Over the last two years, the Body-Worn Camera Policy and Implementation Program (PIP), managed by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), has awarded approximately \$40 million to more than 175 law enforcement agencies (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2016b; Department of Justice, 2016). Early indications from the Trump administration also suggest strong support for BWCs (Feeney, 2016).

The proliferation of BWC programs has been driven, in large part, by a persistent pattern of highly publicized deaths of citizens at the hand of police, as well as the public protest and civil unrest that has followed some of those tragic incidents. These protests drew attention to poor police-community relations and high levels of citizen distrust for police in many communities. In this context, BWCs quickly emerged as a tool that many believe can enhance transparency, build trust among citizens, and provide an important police accountability tool. Law enforcement agencies across the U.S. have moved quickly to deploy BWCs, and a small but growing body of research has shown that the technology can lead to a number of positive outcomes, from enhanced views of procedural justice (White et al., Forthcoming) to reduced citizen complaints and use of force (Ariel et al., 2015, 2016a, 2016b; Jennings et al. 2015; Katz et al., 2016; White et al., 2017).

Given that the vast majority of police-citizen encounters involve patrol officers, departments have almost universally focused on the deployment of the technology to frontline officers assigned to patrol. Moreover, the dialogue over potential benefits and drawbacks of BWCs, as well as the academic research, has also similarly revolved around the patrol function.

Questions have begun to emerge regarding the potential utility of BWCs for specialized unit in a police department, such as anti-crime, K9, traffic, tactical, gang, undercover, and detective units. Given the near-universal focus on patrol, the role of specialized units in BWC deployment is often overlooked. Further, the advantages, disadvantages, and challenges associated with BWCs may be very different for specialized units than for patrol –in fact, they may actually vary a great deal across different kinds of specialized units. Given the importance of the crime control responsibilities of specialized units, and their sometimes unique interactions with the public, the lack of attention to this question is problematic. There is little to no guidance on this issue from either the academic literature or police leadership organizations (e.g., the International

Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP], Police Executive Research Forum [PERF], Police Foundation).

To address this gap in our understanding of BWCs, the authors conducted a series of focus groups with officers assigned to 17 different specialized units in the Spokane (WA) and Tempe (AZ) Police Departments. From these discussions, several important themes emerged regarding the use of BWCs among specialized units. Below we describe the methodology employed, the key themes from the focus groups, and our recommendations for the deployment of BWCs to specialized units.

## The Focus Group Process

Focus groups were conducted at the Spokane (WA) Police Department in October 2016 and at the Tempe (AZ) Police Department in October and November 2016. Both departments are medium-sized (200-300 sworn officers) and serve cities in the western United States. The estimated 2015 population of Spokane is just over 213,000 people; for Tempe, it is nearly 176,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015a, 2015b). Both departments use the TASER Axon Body 2 camera with the cloud-based Evidence.com storage option.<sup>1</sup> Focus groups with specialized units were coordinated either with a centralized department contact (Spokane) or directly with sergeants of the units (Tempe). Most focus groups included 3-6 interviewees and 1-2 interviewers. Table 1 lists the units interviewed at each site.

**Table 1: Specialized Units Interviewed in Each Department**

<b>Spokane (WA) Police Department</b>	<b>Tempe (AZ) Police Department</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traffic</li> <li>• K9</li> <li>• Neighborhood Conditions (downtown)</li> <li>• Tactical (crowds &amp; special events)</li> <li>• SWAT</li> <li>• Crisis Negotiations</li> <li>• Dignitary Protection</li> <li>• Patrol Anti-Crime Team</li> <li>• Neighborhood Resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traffic</li> <li>• K9</li> <li>• Bicycle (Bike; downtown)</li> <li>• Special Events</li> <li>• SWAT/Tactical Response Unit</li> <li>• Gangs</li> <li>• Mounted</li> <li>• Criminal Investigations Bureau*</li> </ul>

\*Denotes a detective unit that uses BWCs  
See Appendix A for more information about each unit

Each unit was asked a series of questions regarding the benefits and drawbacks of BWCs for their unit. In general, participants were asked to consider the question, “If a police department were considering implementing BWCs in a unit like yours, what considerations should be taken

<sup>1</sup> Tempe allows officers to choose between the Body and Flex models, but the vast majority choose the Body.

into account?” Specifically, officers were asked about benefits and drawbacks of BWCs that are similar to general patrol, as well as those that are specific to their unit. Officers were also asked about the integration of BWCs into their daily work and unique uses for their unit. Finally, we asked officers to discuss considerations regarding purchasing, policy, implementation, and training that are specific to their unit. Below we review the key findings from the focus groups, and we use direct quotes from officers to highlight those findings.

## Results

### Benefits of BWCs Generally

A number of researchers have explored patrol officer perceptions of the benefits of BWCs (Jennings et al., 2014; Gaub et al., 2016), and multiple themes have emerged from this work. For example, patrol officers frequently cite several advantages of BWCs such as: evidentiary value, protection against false allegations (in complaints or lawsuits), and providing a more permanent record of what transpires during a police-citizen encounter.

Similarly, officers in specialized units discussed the evidentiary value of BWCs. Units discussed the usefulness of BWCs in documenting conversations, citizen behavior, and evidence collected at the scene, and for eliminating frivolous citizen complaints. This benefit was specifically noted among sergeants in terms of assisting with investigating complaints. But nearly universally, the most significant benefit identified by units is the ability to use BWC footage to facilitate more accurate report writing.

The benefits would be the same [for SWAT] as they are for patrol. In most cases, it would help describe events. It would help tell the story. It’s a resource for the officer to go back and look at, help their memory, especially knowing how we encode and store and retrieve things under stress. (SWAT)

Nearly every sergeant explained that they use BWC footage to determine whether a complaint is valid. Sergeants also said that in some cases, merely mentioning the presence of the camera will motivate a citizen to withdraw their complaint (presumably in cases where the complaint is frivolous).

A lot of the time [NCOs] are dealing with [...] the nuisance property where the people living there [...] don’t get along. And so they want to complain on the NCO and tell me just how bad they are and how bad they were treated. And I can pull that body camera video and [say], “No, that’s not what happened here.” [...] And I think 99% of the time it shows that our people are doing things right. (NCO)

### Benefits of BWCs in Specialized Units

Officers in specialized units identified a number of issues that were especially acute or unique for their work.

#### *Documenting Charges*

Officers in specialized units commonly noted the evidentiary benefits of BWCs is pronounced because of the unique nature of their work. Officers assigned to traffic units explained that the 30-second video buffer often allows them to record vehicle violations on camera before making the traffic stop, supporting their contention that the traffic violation actually occurred. DUI officers, traffic enforcement officers, and Tempe bike officers use the BWCs to capture incidents



as they happen, and they all noted that seeing the behavior on video has a more profound impact than reading about it in the report, which aids in prosecution.

We had a lot of communication with our prosecutor's office about disorderly conducts – two people fighting in the street – how we needed to really [carefully] articulate it [in the report]. Now you can see on the video two people fighting, and 50 people around them, and it's spilling into the street, so it looks a lot better from our perspective and from the prosecutor's perspective in being able to go forward with a lot of those. It goes from "Two guys fighting in the road," to "Look how much chaos this caused." (Bikes)

Spokane neighborhood conditions officers, who primarily work in the crowded downtown area, said the BWC allows them to document the behaviors and statements of mentally ill persons that are difficult to describe in a written report. Similarly, the neighborhood resource officers typically focus on disorder and nuisance crimes in individual neighborhoods, and they reported that BWCs are useful for providing a 360-degree visual record of the state of an abandoned building or problem house. Neighborhood conditions officers also use the BWC to document disorder problems such as homeless encampments on the downtown sidewalks.

Officers in the Tempe gang unit described how they use the BWC to document the search and inventory process. They use the BWC to capture evidence such as bullets, shell casings, and drugs, as well as personal effects like cash and credit cards. The recordings, of course, have evidentiary value, but the BWC also protects officers from allegations of theft or evidence tampering.

Finally, several units, including SWAT, K9, crowd control, and hostage negotiations, believed BWCs were especially valuable in documenting the extensive steps officers take to gain citizen compliance verbally before resorting to force. For example, K9 officers stated the cameras record their numerous "K9 announcements" and loud dog barks before deploying the dog. Similarly, negotiators noted that, following a suicide, family members will sometimes sue the police department for failing to save the life of their loved one. With the BWC, however, courtroom actors and juries can view the substantial actions taken by officers in their attempts to save a suicidal person's life.

It captures how much we put into trying to get these guys to surrender prior to using force. (K9)

Say that [suicidal] person did not [survive], and they jumped. So what it's been helping us with, is showing that in good faith that we spent this much time talking with this person. And all the things that we said [...] to try and get this person you know to not harm themselves or others. (Crisis Negotiations)

### *Documenting Problematic Crowd Behavior*

A common theme among officers who handle crowds is the utility of BWCs for documenting problematic or potentially violent crowd behavior. For example, Tempe bike officers routinely deal with large crowds and are often outnumbered. They noted BWCs allow them to document the numerous verbal commands they issue before more forceful action is taken, such as deploying OC spray. The bike squad works in conjunction with the mounted unit, who noted that the high aerial view of mounted officers provides a good vantage point for documenting large-scale encounters.



Both the Spokane tactical unit and the Tempe special events unit noted they do not continually record prolonged public events; the departments are conscious of the cost of data storage as well as battery life of the BWC.

There is a special event coming up, the Ironman. I will report to work at 5 in the morning, and I will go home at 1:00 the next morning. [The battery will not last that long]. (Special Events)

Moreover the proximity of officers to the large crowds (e.g., close-quarter movement) makes the footage difficult for viewing. However, officers keep their cameras in standby mode, which continually records a 30 second buffer, and they will activate the camera if there are signs of a developing problem (e.g., furtive movements, growing discontent, etc.). In these kinds of situations, officers said the BWC is useful for documenting the “slow burn” of increasingly violent crowd behavior, particularly during protests.

I could see myself at a large event, as a TAC officer, if I’m going to mill through a crowd that I think is going to be a problem or I can see something budding[...], I think [it] would be advantageous to be able to turn [the camera] on, walk through that crowd so when it came time to explain [...] you can actually see it on the camera because there’s so many variables, it would be so difficult to articulate in a report. (TAC)

### *Training*

Officers noted BWCs have tremendous capacity as training tools, especially in specialized units. K9 handlers in both departments, for example, use the cameras to describe problems in the field so trainers can work with the dog and handler to better understand and address the issue.

The Tempe bike squad runs a three-day “bike school” for officers who wish to join the unit, and they use BWC footage from actual incidents in this training to demonstrate both correct and incorrect tactics. The bike squad also views footage during unit training to identify and discuss both exemplary and poor tactics.

We’re able to take incidents that happen on the street, good or bad, and then use them when we’re teaching our bike schools to show our bike students good examples of what we’re trying to teach, and then examples of even us as bike cops having messed up, and to learn from that. [...] We probably have 20 videos now that we can rotate through for bike school. (Bikes)

Spokane crisis negotiators noted they also use the video footage for training purposes. Individually, an officer can review his or her own footage and listen to their voice to make personal assessments and improvements. Also, the unit will review an encounter as a team and discuss the officer(s)’ handling of the situation (e.g., a sentinel events-type review).

Over the weekend I reviewed it so I could hear my own voice. My own tone. To see if there were things I could have done different. So it’s a great way to reflect on some of the way you word things and say things and, how could I tweak that just a little bit? (Crisis Negotiations)

### *Innovative Uses of BWCs*

There are several examples of innovative applications of BWCs in specialized units. One of the most common uses involves removing the camera from its standard mount to view something from a different point of view.

On the Monroe Street Bridge, I took my smart phone and logged into the camera and set it on a railing. I can't remember if we zip tied it to a post. But we had gotten close enough to a male, very drugged and disoriented. The closer you got, the more he threatened. We were able to zip tie it to the railing on the bridge and then back up and talk. (Crisis Negotiations)

The last time I was working DUI enforcement, at [intersection] they had some construction barricades up, and the guy that I ended up stopping and arresting for DUI made a wide right turn and he totally didn't need to do that, but I didn't want his argument to be "Well, there were construction barriers." So on my way back to the jail to process him, I [back-tracked] and made sure that I stopped, took my camera off, and just held it out the window [of the car] and captured about 7 or 8 people making the turn properly with those same barricades [...] to show that they didn't have to make that wide turn. (Traffic)

The Tempe Tactical Response Unit (TRU) described using the cameras to view inside attics or around corners. Detectives from the Criminal Investigations Bureau (CIB) in Tempe described a colleague who held his camera above his head to surreptitiously record a robbery suspect in the dark.

Officers also use the cameras to record aspects of their job that are frequently questioned in court. Tempe K9 officers will situate themselves to record dogs doing searches, especially while the dog is conducting a search inside a vehicle. Spokane K9 officers try to record a dog bite on camera whenever possible, since the specifics of these deployments are frequently requested in court. Tempe gang and bike officers make sure to record property searches and impounds, especially small personal items such as cell phones and wallets. Finally, Tempe traffic units stated that they place their "radar" guns in view of the BWC to record the documented speed.

### **Concerns with BWCs Generally**

Prior research on patrol officers attitudes and results from our focus groups suggest that there are some common concerns with BWCs. Surveys of patrol officers have highlighted a number of concerns, such as an increased workload, concerns about supervisor review, skepticism about the impact on citizen behavior, and impact of the BWC on citizens' willingness to provide information to officers (Jennings et al., 2014; Gaub et al., 2016).

Officers in our focus groups expressed many of the same concerns. For example, officers assigned to specialized units frequently mentioned the increased workload associated with BWCs in terms of downloading and tagging videos, charging the cameras, and documenting the video in their written reports. Many officers noted they feel compelled to watch the videos before writing their reports to ensure that everything in the written report completely aligns with the BWC evidence, so as not to appear dishonest or misleading.

Similarly, many officers felt that BWCs created an environment where officers are not taken at their word; in other words, if it didn't happen on video, it didn't happen at all.

Everybody thinks that if [...] you have a camera, that it's going to catch everything [...] when that's not the case at all. [...] It doesn't catch everything you see because it's facing [another direction]. And even if it does catch something, you know, you get scrutinized, somebody who gets to watch it in slow-motion [...] and fourteen times, over and over and over again. (TRU)

Finally, officers noted significant concern regarding the impact of BWC video and audio on citizen perceptions of the police. Officers stated that citizens with an “untrained eye” do not fully understand the role, responsibilities, or training of the police. Often, this will result in citizens drawing incorrect conclusions about the legality or appropriateness of an officer's behavior.

If we get sued and they have a jury trial, and they show this video of a dog attacking somebody that we directed him to attack [...] we can put an expert witness up there that's done dog stuff for 30 years, say that's exactly what it should look like, and the jury is still going to look at that and say, “Nobody should have to go through that.” (K9)

Officers felt that current tensions between officers and communities, nationally, are exacerbated by sweeping generalizations and incorrect conclusions made by citizens about police, based on the actions of a few officers that were recorded on a video camera.

## Concerns with BWCs in Specialized Units

### *Technical Components*

When an agency goes through the vendor selection process, it is typical to focus attention on which vendor and model is best suited for the needs of officers assigned to patrol. This is a reasonable course of action, given that most BWCs will be assigned to patrol officers. However, during this early stage in the process law enforcement agencies should also carefully consider whether they will expand use of BWCs to specialized units, and if so, they should seek input from officers in those units.

Officers in our focus groups frequently complained about the available mounting options for their BWC. In Spokane, all officers are issued Axon Body cameras; in Tempe, officers were issued Axon Body cameras, but they had the option of selecting the Flex model. Tempe PD leadership expected that some specialized units, such as motor traffic units and bike officers, would prefer the Flex model because of the options to mount on the helmet or lapel. As it happened, bicycle and motor officers who chose the Flex model found that their normal head movements made the footage nearly impossible to view without getting dizzy or nauseous. Nearly all soon opted for the Axon Body model. The Body mounting choices proved complicated as well. Some units found the magnetic mount for the Body camera to be insufficient, as the camera was easily knocked off by dogs in the K9 unit, or knocked or turned off during hand-to-hand scuffles.

We've had instances where we get into a fight and have to wrestle somebody and then the camera gets [powered] off in the middle of it. And that happens a lot. (Bikes)

Additionally, officers in specialized units highlighted problems with body placement. Female officers talked about difficulty in finding a good placement for their camera, a problem compounded when wearing plainclothes that are less rigid than Kevlar. Mounted officers indicated their BWCs continue to face forward when they turn their head (moving their body causes the horse to move). Thus, many encounters are only partially captured, and in some cases

only audio is usable. However, mounted officers did note the camera's vantage point about 10 feet off the ground typically allows for a good aerial view of encounters, as long as the officer is not talking to a citizen standing on the ground next to the horse. Similarly, tactical units in Spokane stated the cameras offer little visual value when they are walking around in crowds or at public demonstrations, showing only close-up views of backs and shoulders.

Criminal investigation detectives in Tempe also noted that the camera is designed to be used when wearing a bulletproof vest. In plainclothes, there is no good mounting option, and the camera is visible to the point of distraction. They suggested a camera design that is less intrusive and bulky, perhaps designed as part of their badge-holder worn around their neck. Likewise, tactical units in Spokane said the cameras did not fit on riot gear and therefore could not be worn at all when in these specialized uniforms.

The second most common complaint regarding product specifications was the placement of the power/recording light indicator on the TASER Axon Body 2. In the transition from the Body 1 to the Body 2, the vendor moved the location and enhanced the brightness of the light. Officers, especially in the dark, find the flashing green light in standby mode to be distracting. More importantly, officers in covert operations find the light threatening to their safety as it reveals their identity and location. As a result, officers described how they often cover the light on their cameras with black electrical tape, which then defeats the purpose of having the indicator light and is also in violation of some BWC policies.

The green light's still bright. [Gives away position.] That's another reason why we tape it. (TRU)

### *Take-Home Vehicles*

Units with take-home vehicles said the BWCs do not easily fit into their work patterns since a BWC must be docked daily for charging and downloading (often required by department policy). One option is to return to the station to dock the camera before they go home. Officers noted, however, that they would then have to return to the station to retrieve their camera prior to the start of their next shift (e.g., thereby short-circuiting one of the primary benefits of having a take-home vehicle). Alternatively, some officers stated they could try to carve out time during their shift to return to a station and dock the camera (e.g., timing a return to the station for report-writing with the need to download a charge a BWC). However, this option is typically time-prohibitive since it takes approximately 6 hours to fully charge the camera after a normal shift.

In traffic we do a lot of enforcement details, [...] and one enforcement shift can do 10, 15 stops – so you have 10 or 15 different videos, a lot of people do two enforcement details in one weekend [...] so you'll have like 30 videos to upload on Monday, and that will take more than half of my shift [to download]. I'll be constantly pulling it off the dock to go out to a wreck, and then come back and have to put it back on the dock. (Traffic)

Several officers suggested take-home vehicles be outfitted with a USB cord that permits at-home charging and downloading to their computer. This option could also be made available to officers taking advantage of off-duty jobs if department policy requires them to wear their department-issued BWC during uniformed off-duty work. This approach could raise concerns about chain-of-custody however.

In Spokane, officers with take-home vehicles are permitted to upload videos by attaching their camera to their department-issued laptop. This allows the camera to charge and upload without going to the precinct. However, even that option has presented challenges.

There's the problem, [a few of us] have with the old Crown Vics and probably half my work days I come [out to the car] and my battery's dead because [I need to] leave my docking station on in order to give my computer power to upload. I jumpstart my car probably three times a week. (K9)

### *Public Access to Videos*

The majority of officers who participated in our focus groups were concerned with the public's ability to access the videos, and they cited two reasons for their concern. The first reason was unique to Spokane: officers were apprehensive about the disclosure of police tactics. Officers from multiple units were concerned that chronic offenders would research police tactics by studying BWC footage obtained through public records requests. While this is a common concern among SWAT officers – and is the primary reason why SWAT officers in Spokane do not wear BWCs – even the K9 unit was concerned about commands and training tactics being available to the public. The Spokane Dignitary Protection team had a similar concern. The unit largely operates undercover, and the presence of the camera would immediately give away their identities as police officers.

The biggest reasoning for us [to have the SWAT team not wear cameras] comes down to a protection of our tactics. When you're on a SWAT operation, when it comes to tactical planning, and the actual tactics used by the team, obviously all the body camera footage is open to public records requests [...] if that were to get out into the general public, how the [...] SWAT team is going to do a hostage rescue scenario [...] it could help people defeat our tactics in the future [...] if I was the bad guy, I would do my research and I would own every piece of that [footage]. (SWAT)

Interestingly, this concern was not as pronounced among Tempe officers. In fact, full time Tempe tactical officers wear BWCs (though cameras are not turned on during full SWAT call-outs). The difference in the level of concern on this point may be tied to variation in state public records laws. Washington has one of the most open public records laws in the country; conversely, Arizona is considerably more restrictive.

[When] we do pre-sweeps for bombs for football games and special events [at the university stadium], I'm not recording that because I'm with an EOD tech and then [citizens] get to see the whole pattern of how we check the building before an event happens. It sounds pretty far-fetched that someone would want to look that up, but if someone truly wanted to know how we check [the university] stadium before a football game, all they have to do is check all the videos of us checking." (K9)

Officers in both departments questioned the wisdom of releasing sensitive videos to the public. Officer noted that police work is not always “pretty,” and this is especially true in specialized units working with more dangerous persons. For example, Spokane SWAT and Patrol Anti-Crime teams (PACT) said they sometimes must use aggressive tactics because they deal with people who have long histories of violent behavior. Moreover, they often arrest people who are facing long prison sentences, and who may be highly motivated to avoid capture. BWC recordings of these encounters can be graphic and shocking to the public, even when they are

within policy. The release of such videos can be potentially inflammatory and could do harm to the police-community relationship. Similarly, officers in K9 units noted that dog bites can seem brutal to the untrained eye, even when the dog behaves exactly as trained. Citizens with little knowledge of police policy and practice will likely misinterpret the appropriateness of use of force in such encounters.

People tend to not see the ugly that we see. Whether it be a use of force or just the suspect's behavior or any of that kind of stuff. And some people aren't ready to see it. And if all of a sudden it's just thrown out to the general public or somebody that really doesn't understand the severity of what is going on in that situation and whether it's a dog contact or any other use of force for that matter they don't realize it just might look different than it actually is. (K9)

In Spokane, there are a series of bridges in the city that sometimes serve as jumping points for suicidal citizens. These calls are common events for the negotiations team. Negotiators expressed privacy concerns regarding use of BWCs to record persons going through intense personal crisis. Further, negotiators said that they will sometimes use verbal tactics that may seem cruel to the average citizen but have a track-record of successfully "talking down" a suicidal person. One negotiator recounted a story where she "shamed" a teenage boy for threatening to commit suicide by telling him he would be hurting his parents. The officer said the tactic convinced the boy to step away from the ledge, but she acknowledged the approach might seem cruel to a citizen viewing the video.

#### *Subjects on Video*

A primary task of the Patrol Anti-Crime Team (PACT) officers in Spokane is to recruit and work with criminal informants (CIs). PACT officers expressed serious concerns regarding the use of BWCs because of the potential to capture confidential informants on video (which would then become public record). PACT officers will often initiate conversations with potential CIs during a routine traffic stop or arrest, which should be recorded according to the department's administrative policy. But PACT officers noted the requirement to record jeopardizes their ability to "turn" suspects into CIs.

For example, if an officer records someone being arrested, but the suspect subsequently becomes a CI, he or she will likely not be booked into jail. PACT officers said that serious criminals could easily request and review camera footage of people who they suspect are informants and look for these discrepancies. For this reason, the PACT officers in Spokane strongly opposed BWCs for their unit because they believed the cameras place the safety of CIs in jeopardy. Further, PACT officers were concerned that subjects would be less inclined to cooperate or inform if they knew the officers were wearing cameras.

A lot of times they'll start to accuse people of snitching on Facebook. So if they already have a thought that someone's doing that, they go back, run that name, pull all the body camera videos and they're going to see that they got stopped and had dope and didn't go to jail. And it's not going to be very hard for them to connect the dots [...] We're dealing with the worst of the worst; it's only going to take once and it's going to get someone killed and we're going to be on the hook for it. (PACT)

The Spokane Dignitary team worried the presence of a BWC would capture privileged communications held by those they are providing protection for, such as foreign dignitaries and government leaders.



Additionally, some officers described conflicts that can arise when collaborating with officers from other agencies that do not use BWCs. Specialized units in Tempe often work with nearby agencies on joint assignments, and the officers described several instances where they received “push back” from their non-BWC colleagues who did not want to be recorded. The Spokane Dignitary unit likewise often serves as supplemental protection to the Secret Service and other federal agencies that do not use BWCs, and do not approve of their use during multi-agency operations.

## Recommendations

Given our discussions with officers in specialized units in both the Spokane (WA) and Tempe (AZ) Police Departments, we have identified five recommendations for the deployment of BWCs in specialized units.

### Recommendation 1: The technical aspects of BWC implementation must be considered individually for each unit.

The mounting options, audio and video buffering functions, mute, and other technical aspects of various BWC manufacturers and models must be studied for each specialized unit that will receive BWCs. What works for general patrol may be particularly ill-suited for a specialized unit, and vice versa. Negotiations with vendors during the procurement process should take into account the special technical needs of each specialized unit.

### Recommendation 2: Administrative policy may need to be adjusted for the specific needs of specialized units.

Policy adjustments may be necessary for some specialized units, particularly with regard to device placement, activation, deactivation, video tagging, and downloading. For example, decisions on activation may vary based on the unit involved (e.g., SWAT/tactical units v. traffic). Similarly, officers working overtime shifts or long special events, or operating with take-home vehicles, may require special accommodations regarding the downloading/charging process.

### Recommendation 3: Department leadership should understand the unique challenges to effective use of BWCs with specialized units, especially in terms of what can be seen on BWC footage.

Some situations are not conducive to body-worn cameras, such as undercover and surveillance operations, or close-quarter, combative encounters in which very little is visible on the footage (or footage can be misleading). Specialized units may have unique features or tactical strategies which limit the current camera model’s field of view (e.g., plain clothes officers, mounted units).

### Recommendation 4: Department leadership will need to manage the public’s expectations regarding BWCs in general, but especially for specialized units.

Many officers, including specialized unit officers, are concerned that the public, including juries, may view BWCs as a “silver bullet” solution, leading to the belief that if an event did not occur on camera, then it never happened. Additionally, some police behavior can be shocking – even when tactics are executed properly and within policy (e.g., K9 bites). Officers questioned the wisdom of releasing footage of such incidents. Departments must balance the need for



accountability and transparency with public education regarding the limitations of BWCs. Release of video depicting aggressive police behavior, even if justified, can do significant harm to police-community relations.

### Recommendation 5: BWCs may not be appropriate for certain specialized units, and Department leadership should carefully weigh the advantages and disadvantages of deployment for each unit.

Some specialized units have a specific mission or purpose that may not be consistent with the deployment of BWCs. Officers may routinely engage in activities that should not be recorded, such as undercover and surveillance work as well as interacting with confidential informants. The advantages and disadvantages of BWCs likely vary across specialized units, and department leaders should carefully weigh the relevant issues on a unit-by-unit basis.

## Conclusion

We believe there are two important takeaways from our focus groups with officers in specialized units.

First, research has clearly demonstrated that successful implementation of a body-worn camera program hinges on patrol officer acceptance of the technology (Hedberg et al., 2016). The same principle applies equally well to officers in specialized units. Officer acceptance will lead to appropriate use of the technology, compliance with administrative policy, and based on available research, will lead to a wide range of positive outcomes. Officer resistance to BWCs will short-circuit all of those positive outcomes. The best way to garner officer acceptance is be collaborative from the start, soliciting questions, opinions, and recommendations.

Second, BWC implementation, operation, policy and practice in specialized units will differ widely from patrol, and in fact, may vary considerably across specialized units. The benefits and challenges may also vary by unit. In simple terms, the implementation of BWCs in an agency cannot be viewed as a monolithic process. Flexibility is key. Failure to account for unit-level variation will likely produce low or no use among officers in specialized units, and may present significant risks to officers, citizens, and the department as a whole.

## About the Authors

**Janne E. Gaub** is a senior project manager at the Center for Violence Prevention and Community Safety at Arizona State University. She earned her Ph.D. in criminology and criminal justice from ASU in 2015. Her research interests center on policing, including technology, misconduct, and gender. Her work has been published in *Police Quarterly*, *Policing: An International Journal of Policy & Practice*, *Urban Affairs Review*, and *Women & Criminal Justice*.

**Natalie Todak** is a Ph.D. candidate in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Arizona State University. She received her B.A. in psychology from the University of California, San Diego and her M.S. in criminal justice from Bowling Green State University. Her primary research areas are policing and qualitative research methods. Natalie's work has been published in *Criminal Justice & Behavior*, *Police Quarterly*, and the *Journal of Legal & Forensic Medicine*.

**Michael D. White** is a Professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Arizona State University, and is Associate Director of ASU's Center for Violence Prevention and Community Safety. He is also the Co-Director of Training and Technical Assistance for the US Department of Justice Body-Worn Camera Policy and Implementation Program. He received his Ph.D. in Criminal Justice from Temple University in 1999. Prior to entering academia, Dr. White worked as a deputy sheriff in Pennsylvania. Dr. White's primary research interests involve the police, including use of force, technology, and misconduct. His recent work has been published in *Justice Quarterly*, *Criminology and Public Policy*, *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, and *Applied Cognitive Psychology*.

## References

- Ariel, B., Farrar, W. A., & Sutherland, A. (2015). The effect of police body-worn cameras on use of force and citizens' complaints against the police: A randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, *31*(3), 1–27.
- Ariel, B., Sutherland, A., Henstock, D., Young, J., Drover, P., Sykes, J., Megicks, S., Henderson, R. (2016a). "Contagious accountability": A global multisite randomized controlled trial on the effect of police body-worn cameras on citizens' complaints against the police. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854816668218>
- Ariel, B., Sutherland, A., Henstock, D., Young, J., Drover, P., Sykes, J., Megicks, S., Henderson, R. (2016b). Report: Increases in police use of force in the presence of body-worn cameras are driven by officer discretion: A protocol-based subgroup analysis of ten randomized experiments. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, *12*(3), 453–463.

- Bureau of Justice Assistance. (2016a). Body-Worn Camera Toolkit. Retrieved October 5, 2016, from <https://www.bja.gov/bwc/>
- . (2016b). Training and Technical Assistance. Retrieved October 5, 2016, from <http://www.bwctta.com/training-and-technical-assistance>
- Department of Justice. (2016, September 26). Department of Justice awards over \$20 million to law enforcement body-worn camera programs. Retrieved October 5, 2016, from <http://ojp.gov/newsroom/pressreleases/2016/ojp09262016.pdf>
- Feeney, M. (2016). Body cameras especially urgent under Trump Administration. <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/body-cameras-especially-urgent-under-trump-administration>
- Gaub, J. E., Choate, D. E., Todak, N., Katz, C. M., & White, M. D. (2016). Officer perceptions of body-worn cameras before and after deployment: A study of three departments. *Police Quarterly, 19*(3), 275–302.
- Jennings, W. G., Fridell, L. A., & Lynch, M. D. (2014). Cops and cameras:” officer perceptions of the use of body-worn cameras in law enforcement. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 42*, 549-556.
- Jennings, W. G., Lynch, M. D., & Fridell, L. A. (2015). Evaluating the impact of police officer body-worn cameras (BWCs) on response-to-resistance and serious external complaints: Evidence from the Orlando Police Department (OPD) experience utilizing a randomized controlled experiment. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 43*(6), 480–486.
- Katz, C. M., Choate, D. E., Ready, J. T., & Nuño, L. (2014). *Evaluating the impact of officer worn body cameras in the Phoenix police department*. Phoenix, AZ: Center for Violence Prevention & Community Safety, Arizona State University.
- President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing. (2015). *Final Report of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing*. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2015a). Annual estimates of the resident population: Spokane city, Washington. Washington, DC: Author.
- (2015b). Annual estimates of the resident population: Tempe city, Arizona. Washington, DC: Author.
- White, M. D., Gaub, J. E., & Todak, N. (2017). Exploring the Potential for Body-Worn Cameras to Reduce Violence in Police-Citizen Encounters. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice, 11*(3). DOI: 10.1093/policing/paw057
- White, M. D., Todak, N., & Gaub, J. E. (Forthcoming). Assessing citizen perceptions of body-worn cameras after encounters with police. *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies and Management*.

## Appendix A: Description of Specialized Units

### Spokane Police Department

#### *Traffic*

The Spokane traffic unit serves the entire city of Spokane. There are currently 6 motorcycle officers and 1 commercial vehicle officer in the unit. The purpose of the traffic unit is to reduce the number and severity of traffic collisions in the city through traffic law enforcement.

#### *K9*

Six dog handlers make up the Spokane K9 unit. The purpose of the unit is to assist patrol officers and nearby agencies when they need assistance searching vehicles and buildings, apprehending suspects, tracking fleeing suspects, and protecting officers. The K9s also assist in finding evidence and lost subjects who are in danger.

#### *Neighborhood Conditions*

The neighborhood conditions officers (NCOs) of the downtown precinct serve the downtown Spokane area. There are 10 officers, 1 sergeant, 1 detective, 1 lieutenant, and 1 captain. The Spokane Downtown Precinct opened in 2013 to respond to chronic issues occurring downtown that were negatively affecting businesses and city life. Today, NCOs continue to address chronic issues, and are also responsible for responding to calls for service generated within the downtown area.

#### *Tactical*

The Spokane tactical team consists of 36 officers, 3 sergeants, and 1 lieutenant. The tactical team specializes in managing crowds and civil disturbances at demonstrations, riots, concerts, and special events. The tactical team is responsible for managing the annual Lilac Parade, Hoop Fest (the world's largest 3-on-3 basketball tournament), and the 12k Bloomsday Race that features over 50,000 participants.

#### *Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT)*

The Spokane SWAT team is comprised of 39 officers with specialized training for responding to high-risk tactical situations, such as barricaded subjects, high-risk arrests, high-risk warrant service, high-risk rescues, active shooters, mass casualty incidents, and terrorism. Specifically, the team includes 19 officers, 2 detectives, 2 corporals, 6 sergeants, and 1 lieutenant. SWAT in Spokane is a collateral duty assignment, which means officers work SWAT part-time and have another full-time assignment.

#### *Crisis Negotiations*

Crisis negotiators receive specialized training in mitigating crisis situations and preserving the lives of hostages, suspects in crisis, as well as police officers and the general public. The Crisis Negotiations team falls under the command of the SWAT team commander, and currently includes 6 officers, 1 detective, and 2 sergeants. All negotiators in Spokane are trained in hostage negotiation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, as well as communications with barricaded subjects, suicidal persons, terrorist confrontations, and persons in mental health crisis.

### *Dignitary Protection*

The Spokane Dignitary Team provides protection for high profile persons visiting the city of Spokane. The team typically works undercover and in collaboration with the person(s)' existing security detail.

### *Patrol Anti-Crime Team (PACT)*

The Patrol Anti-Crime Team (PACT) is a proactive team that targets certain types of suspects or certain areas of Spokane that are hard-hit with particular crime types. PACT is comprised of two teams, each with three officers, one corporal, and one sergeant. The team is able to address these issues or subjects with targeted strategies. This unit often makes use of confidential informants.

## Tempe Police Department

### *Traffic*

There are 18 traffic officers and 4 sergeants serving the entire city of Tempe. They are divided into four areas of expertise: Selective enforcement motor squad (handling resident complaints of speed and other traffic concerns), vehicular crimes, collision investigation, and DUI enforcement. All traffic officers primarily drive take-home motorcycles, though the unit also has DUI task force vans and unmarked vehicles.

### *K9*

The K9 unit serves the entire city of Tempe. There are 6 dogs and handlers, and all dogs are dual-purpose. Every dog is trained in use of force and apprehension; additionally, four are trained in narcotics detection and the remaining two are trained in explosives detection. The K9 unit assists with suspect, vehicle, and building searches. The handlers also patrol for suspicious persons, packages, bags, etc. While on patrol, the K9 unit assists with general calls as needed and prioritizes calls that could potentially require or benefit from the use of the dog.

### *Bike*

The bike unit serves the Mill Avenue Downtown District, a one-mile stretch of Mill Avenue immediately adjacent to the Arizona State University (ASU) main campus, and a three-square mile area surrounding the Downtown District, including Tempe Beach Park. This area houses a number of bars, restaurants, and other businesses, as well as several apartment complexes primarily housing ASU students. The bike unit also assists with special events such as ASU home football game security and traffic enforcement and events along the Tempe Beach Park. There are 20 full-time bike officers and 3 sergeants, making it one of the largest full-time bike unit in the country, and more than 100 bike-certified officers who assist off-duty.

### *Special Events*

The city of Tempe coordinates more than 350 special events per year, including the P.F. Chang's Rock N' Roll Marathon, the Tempe Ironman triathlon, the Tempe Fantasy of Lights Boat Parade, and other annual events (e.g., fireworks on Fourth of July and a New Year's Eve block party). Additionally, this unit ensures safety and order during protests and assists the Arizona State University Police Department with crowd control and traffic management during ASU home sporting events, graduation ceremonies, and other events. Special events are coordinated by one sergeant and involve relevant officers as needed.

### *Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT)/Tactical Response Unit (TRU)*

The full-time SWAT team is known as the Tactical Response Unit (TRU). This team consists of 4 officers and 1 sergeant. They support patrol calls that might require a tactical function and handle small-scale SWAT calls. Full SWAT deployment consists of 4 team leaders (sergeants), 2 back-up team leaders (also sergeants), and 22 SWAT operators (officers), including TRU. SWAT officers have a number of full-time assignments, including K9, narcotics, special investigations, and general patrol. There are also 4 EOD (bomb) technicians and 14 hostage negotiators.

### *Gangs*

There are 6 full-time gang officers, including 1 sergeant, who serve the entire city of Tempe, and an additional officer assigned to a statewide task force. All officers are considered detectives and they build cases for gang-related crimes. Felonies originating with other patrol officers are routed to the gang unit once gang ties are suspected.

### *Mounted*

The mounted unit primarily serves as a crowd control unit. At least 2 officers patrol Friday and Saturday evenings along the Mill Avenue Downtown District, providing assistance to the bike officers assigned to patrol that area. Additional mounted officers provide support on holidays and during other special events on Mill Avenue. Mounted officers also assist large special events, such as the PF Chang's Rock 'N Roll Marathon, the Tempe Ironman triathlon, and the New Year's Eve Party near the Tempe Town Lake Beach Park. The unit is composed of 8 horses, 2 full-time officers, and approximately 17 mounted-certified officers who assist off-duty.

### *Criminal Investigations Bureau (CIB)*

The Criminal Investigations Bureau (CIB) is a non-patrol unit composed of approximately 60 detectives and 10 sergeants, divided into 10 divisions: Criminal Apprehension and Surveillance Team, Domestic Violence/Assault (Persons Crimes), Homicide/Missing Persons, Robbery, Computer Forensics, Property Crimes, Pawn/Document Crimes, Special Victims Unit, Juvenile Unit, and Homeland Defense.