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## Body-Worn Cameras: Reducing Citizen Complaints and Improving Relationships

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## **Abstract**

Video recordings of police-citizen interactions, most notably those obtained from the dashboard cameras (dashcams) of police cars, have been successful in objectively capturing police-citizen exchanges. However, since police-civilian interactions do not solely occur in front of police cars, dashcams present significant limitations. Off-camera violent, and sometimes fatal, encounters (such as the notorious Ferguson case) have fueled increased public support for body-worn cameras. This is especially true in cases with conflicting accounts from the officer(s), victim(s), and witness(es). Requiring officers to wear bodycams may reduce incidents of force and citizen complaints, and increase officer accountability. This paper will present peer-reviewed research to help create an understanding of officer perceptions about the device, and will evaluate the effects of bodycams on both police officers and the communities they serve. Although bodycams have the potential to improve behaviors of both officers and civilians, its efficacy is dependent on its implementation (i.e., policies). Additionally, this paper will present suggestions for police agencies adopting the use of bodycams. Since bodycams hold promise for helping to rebuild relations between officers and the community, more research and feedback can help address the growing privacy and retention concerns.

## **Keywords**

police officers, body-worn cameras (BWCs or bodycams), excessive force, citizen complaints

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### **Abstract**

Video recordings of police-citizen interactions, most notably those obtained from the dashboard cameras (dashcams) of police cars, have been successful in objectively capturing police-citizen exchanges. However, since police-civilian interactions do not solely occur in front of police cars, dashcams present significant limitations. Off-camera violent, and sometimes fatal, encounters (such as the notorious Ferguson case) have fueled increased public support for body-worn cameras. This is especially true in cases with conflicting accounts from the officer(s), victim(s), and witness(es). Requiring officers to wear bodycams may reduce incidents of force and citizen complaints, and increase officer accountability. This paper will present peer-reviewed research to help create an understanding of officer perceptions about the device, and will evaluate the effects of bodycams on both police officers and the communities they serve. Although bodycams have the potential to improve behaviors of both officers and civilians, its efficacy is dependent on its implementation (i.e., policies). Additionally, this paper will present suggestions for police agencies adopting the use of bodycams. Since bodycams hold promise for helping to rebuild relations between officers and the community, more research and feedback can help address the growing privacy and retention concerns.

## **Body-Worn Cameras: Reducing Citizen Complaints and Improving Relationships**

Police body-worn cameras (BWCs or bodycams) are audio and visual camcorders that can be worn on a police officer's uniform, collar, or head. Within the last few years, more people have advocated for officers to wear bodycams in order to provide indisputable evidence and subsequently hold officers accountable. Support for bodycams as a component of an officer's uniform has become especially relevant following many recent conflicting accounts of violent (and sometimes deadly) police-citizen encounters. One notorious example is the fatal shooting of an unarmed African-American teenager, Michael Brown, by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. This 2014 daytime shooting stirred public protests nationwide due to eye-witness reports about the events leading to Brown's death that greatly differed from that of the policeman, Officer Darren Wilson. Officer Wilson argued that he drew his weapon in self-defense as the teenager charged towards him, but many witnesses claimed that the distance between the officer and teenager did not pose an immediate threat to Wilson and therefore did not warrant such action ("Ferguson decision," 2014). Witnesses also claimed that though Brown had his hands raised in a clear act of surrender, Wilson shot at Brown without regard for his life ("Ferguson unrest," 2015).

Without video evidence, the trier of fact has to rely on highly subjective evidence (e.g., testimonies from witnesses, officers, and forensic experts) and other forms of evidence to determine whose account is factual. This process sometimes leads to a sense of injustice among the public and officers being falsely accused of misconduct. In the Ferguson police shooting case, the Grand Jury's decision not to charge Officer Wilson set

off a national wave of anger that led to riots, protests, and debates regarding the use of police force, especially against minorities (Davey & Bosman, 2014). In an unrelated shooting that was actually recorded by a witness, an unarmed man by the name of Walter Scott was fatally shot as he attempted to flee from an officer. With the footage of the shooting, this witness was able to refute the officer's justification for using force; the officer had originally claimed self-defense, but the video footage captured the officer shooting Scott multiple times as he merely ran away (Schmidt & Apuzzo, 2015). In both cases, people began to question the officers' justifications for shooting—this set off a nationwide wave of anger, leading to an influx of citizen complaints. In contrast to these scenarios, a Tijuana police officer (employed by a department with a reputation for being corrupt) turned on his bodycam during a routine traffic stop, which captured a woman initially bribing and yelling at the officer before he arrested her (Kahn, 2015). This use of bodycam footage was helpful in exonerating the officer from any improprieties.

In addition to informal citizen complaints against officers, particularly due to their use of force, formal citizen complaints also generate demands for police departments to implement the use of bodycams. For instance, New York's stop-and-frisk rules, which allow officers to stop, question, and frisk a person for weapons, has led to many formal citizen complaints by minority citizens (Goldstein, 2013). These citizens argue that the practice itself, and the officers who executed the practice, violated their constitutional amendments. The complaints escalated to a class-action lawsuit against the New York Police Department (NYPD; Goldstein, 2013). Eventually, the judge ordered the NYPD to test bodycams as she believed it would

objectively capture all police-citizen encounters, monitor the officers, and, ultimately, reduce complaints (Goldstein, 2013).

In some of the anecdotal cases discussed thus far, video footage provided a visual and objective documentation of what actually happened during the police-citizen encounters that either prevented or minimized citizen complaints or held an officer accountable for his behavior. In the other cases without footage, the police-citizen encounters occurred outside the range of the police car's dashcam. If the officers had worn bodycams, then the fatal outcomes could have potentially been prevented since people tend to behave more appropriately when they are watched by others or when they know that they are being recorded. Therefore, police officers should be required to wear bodycams to help reduce incidents of unwarranted force and citizen complaints against officers.

### **Literature Review**

In the past, police officers relied on police radios and payphones, but technological innovations have changed how police departments operate. Since the 1980s, video cameras on the dashboard of patrol cars have recorded police-citizen encounters (Greene, 2007). Although these dashcams have assisted with convictions and resolved citizen disputes against officers, police-citizen encounters do not always occur in front of patrol cars so dashcams cannot possibly capture all encounters. Police bodycams, however, can as they remain on the officer's body throughout their shift, documenting what they see and hear. In effect, more law enforcement agencies are beginning to implement the use of bodycams and many others are still considering it. Incidents such as Brown's death continue to prompt public demand for bodycams. Subsequently, in late 2014, President Obama proposed a three-year \$263 million investment

towards purchasing 50,000 body cameras for police agencies, storing the footage, and training officers on how to use the relatively new technology. Since taxpayer dollars are invested in bodycams, it is important to understand officer attitudes toward bodycams, the effects of implementing bodycams, and the challenges with bodycams.

### **Importance of Minimizing Police Use of Force**

Prenzler and Porter (2013) analyzed different methods that police departments used to reduce the number of police-citizen conflicts, particularly involving incidents of force. Along with the police codes of conduct, they assert that officers should only use force as a last resort. They argue that excessive or unnecessary use of force leads to public mistrust and lack of confidence in the officers. Prenzler and Porter therefore insist officers try to maximize trust with the public since the public provides many tips that can help solve cases.

The researchers analyzed several approaches, such as Oakland's Violence Reduction Unit, to reducing incidents of force. The unit was a program that required officers involved in many violent conflicts with the public to attend a Peer Review Panel in which the officers discussed all incidents. This approach helped reduce incidents of force, citizen complaints, and injuries. Prenzler and Porter also argued for bodycams because not only can it deter and capture excessive force, but it can also help deter false allegations. From their overall analyses, it is possible for police departments to successfully implement programs or bodycams to reduce incidents of force. In turn, this can help rebuild officer-citizen relationships.

### **Officer Attitude and Perception Toward Bodycams**

Recognizing the high costs associated with bodycams and the growing attention on bodycams as a tool for policing,

Jennings, Fridell, and Lynch (2012) conducted a study to assess officers' attitudes and perceptions toward bodycams. They emphasized the importance in understanding the officers' opinions on bodycams if police departments want to effectively and efficiently adopt these devices; after all, the officers are the ones wearing bodycams in the field.

Jennings and colleagues (2012) surveyed 91 Orlando police officers that had not yet worn bodycams to assess the officers' feelings towards departmental implementation of bodycams and the potential impact. From the five-point Likert-scale surveys, researchers found that officers are generally open and accepting of bodycams, would feel comfortable wearing it, and believe that police agencies should implement their use. However, they also concluded that bodycams would not make the officers feel safer, and most officers did not believe that bodycams would reduce citizen-generated or internal complaints. Additionally, over half of the officers believed bodycams would not reduce their own use of force, but that it would reduce their fellow officers' use of force. Officers also believed that bodycams would not have a significant impact on their own or other officers' willingness to respond to calls. Despite the small sample size, Jennings et al. provided the first-ever study detailing officer attitude toward bodycams before the police department adopted it and before any before high-profile police-citizen cases.

Like Jennings et al., Fouche (2014) surveyed officers from the University of Georgia (UGA) Police Department to discern officer attitude and perceptions toward bodycams. Fouche made three hypotheses about UGA officers: (1) most officers support bodycam implementation; (2) most officers would agree that bodycams improve documentation in criminal



cases; and (3) most officers would agree that bodycams reduce citizen-generated complaints. Unlike Jennings et al., Fouche surveyed officers in a department that already implemented a bodycam program; 32 of the 52 UGA Officers ranked seven statements using the five-point Likert-scale, and at least two of the seven statements tested for each of the hypotheses.

The survey results supported all three hypotheses. Hypothesis 2 received the highest mean score on the Likert-scale followed by Hypothesis 3 and 1, which Fouche suggested meant that officers strongly agree with the perceived benefits of bodycams, but their level of agreement is lower in their support to wear bodycams. Additionally, over half of the officers would not like to wear a bodycam mounted to a headpiece, but most officers believed that bodycams serve as the best piece of evidence in court.

Fouche also found that demographics affected officer attitude and perception of bodycams. Younger officers (between 21 and 25 years old) had the highest agreement level for bodycam usage as compared to officers in older age groups. On average, officers with at least a bachelor's degree and officers with less experience (i.e., less than two years) tended to agree with each other more than officers without a bachelor's degree and officers with more experience. Overall, Fouche found that most officers strongly agree that bodycams are useful, but their agreements did not extend to actually support the wearing of bodycams.

### **Bodycams in Rialto, CA**

Ariel, Farrar, and Sutherland (2014) conducted a study to determine if bodycams would reduce incidents of police force and citizen complaints. For 12 months, officers from the Rialto Police Department (RPD) wore and activated bodycams during

all police-citizen encounters, except when meeting with informants or responding to sexual assault cases involving minors. The officers also informed citizens of the recordings during every encounter. Upon charging the device, the footage automatically uploaded to the bodycams' company cloud-based video storage, which also managed and logged the digital footage.

Over the 12-month period, researchers determined that officers not equipped with bodycams had approximately 50% more incidents of force (e.g., use of pepper spray, batons, Tasers, weapons, or canine force) than officers equipped with bodycams. Although citizen complaints against officers in both groups did not significantly differ, overall citizens' complaints during the 12-month study decreased by 87.5% in contrast to the complaints in the year prior to bodycam deployment. The researchers reason that bodycams make the officers and citizens self-aware of their behaviors, deterring the officers from using unnecessary force and citizens from being aggressive. Neither the officers nor the citizens want to get caught on tape doing something that could lead to legal consequences. Overall, Ariel et al. conducted the initial research showcasing the effects of bodycams, particularly their ability to change people's behaviors and ultimately reduce incidents of force and external complaints.

### **Bodycams in Mesa, AZ**

More recently, in collaboration with the Arizona Mesa Police Department (AMPD), Arizona University Professors Ready and Young (2015) evaluated the impact of bodycams on police-citizen encounters. For 10 months, 50 officers wore bodycams and 50 officers did not. For the first five months (referred to as the mandatory period), researchers implemented a strict rule that required officers to wear and activate bodycams

following similar guidelines as in the RPD study. For the following five months (referred to as the discretionary period), Ready and Young allowed officers with bodycams to decide when to activate the bodycam.

During the discretionary period, bodycam activation decreased by 42% in comparison to the mandatory period. In contrast to officers without bodycams, officers with bodycams received 40% fewer departmental complaints. The researchers argue that officers with bodycams are more cautious of their actions than officers without bodycams. This is due to the fact that their superiors or the public can legally request to see the footage under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act. As a result, bodycam users conduct less stop-and-frisk searches. Similarly, these officers issued more traffic citations than officers without bodycams, because perhaps, as Ready and Young suggest, officers would get in trouble for not issuing it when the bodycam caught the violation on tape. Nevertheless, the researchers found that bodycams can encourage officers to adhere to the rules more often.

### **Bodycams in Orlando, FL**

Jennings, Lynch, and Fridell (2015) conducted a study to assess the effects of bodycams. Officers from the Orlando Police Department (OPD) volunteered to participate in the study. Over a 12-month period, 46 officers wore the Taser AXON Body-Worn Camera, and 43 officers did not wear a bodycam. These participants are the same officers who participated in Jennings et al.'s earlier study assessing officer attitude and perception of bodycams in 2012. After the 12-month study, Jennings et al. found that, contrary to both the year before the bodycam study and officers in the control group, officers with bodycams had reduced response-to-resistance incidents (e.g., an incident in

which an officer used force such as a chemical agent or impact weapon) and citizen-generated complaints.

A follow-up survey given to the officers to assess their attitudes and perceptions toward bodycams showed the following: 74% of the officers agreed that police agencies should implement bodycams; Over 85% of officers believed bodycams helped them recall events and improve their evidence collection; 67% of officers would like to wear bodycams after the study; and 25% of the officers believed the bodycams directly impacted their behavior during police-citizen encounters and thus helped de-escalate police-citizen confrontations. Also, most officers believed that viewing the footage helped them identify how they could improve their interaction with the public better. From their findings, Jennings et al. argue that, overall, bodycams are positive equipment that are beneficial to both the public and the officers who wear them.

### **Challenges of Implementing Bodycams**

Coudert, Butin, and Metayer (2015) examined the challenges, particularly privacy concerns, associated with bodycams. Coudert et al. present the argument that bodycams interfere with the privacy of both the officer and citizen. In particular, officers have the right not to be surveilled during their shift, and citizens have the right to not be recorded on private and public property. Coudert et al. also explores the possible threats of having the footage, particularly to the people in the recordings. For instance, remote control of the footage could be used in conjunction with other technological capabilities (e.g., facial recognition) to identify people in the footage. Coudert et al. thus argues for policy agencies with a bodycam program to have strict storage and access to footage.

Harfield (2014) argues that bodycams are morally wrong unless all parties being recorded provide consent. In particular, he believes bodycams violate people's personal privacy, especially when citizens explicitly state that they do not want to be recorded. He further argues that bodycam recordings infringe citizens' privacy because they do not have any authority over the footage. The footage can contain information, whether sensitive or not, of the citizen(s) being recorded that can then be used against him or her, perhaps to bribe or coerce the citizen. Harfield therefore believes that bodycams may not always be used for its intended purposes.

### **Discussion**

The recurrent use of force by officers on citizens ignited a national discussion on whether or not the use of force was necessary. The public demand for bodycams has increased, especially after deaths of unarmed citizens. In addition to the aforementioned anecdotal cases showing the effectiveness of video footage, researchers empirically show that bodycams improve officer and citizen behaviors. These studies also show how officer use of bodycams reduced their use of force and increased police accountability (e.g., bodycam-equipped officers gave more traffic citations than bodycam-less officers). Although officers in the control group did not wear bodycams, they also used less force. Additionally, bodycams reduced the number of citizen complaints lodged against officers. With such positive outcomes, police agencies should implement a program for all police officers to wear bodycams in order to reduce citizen complaints and police use of force.

Although there is empirical evidence supporting the perceived positive effects of bodycam implementation, there are a few issues associated with the adoption of police bodycams.

For instance, police agencies require significant monetary resources to finance the portable technology, though competition among bodycam vendors would drive the prices down. However, it is even more costly for footage storage and retention and for the continual technological support police agencies must provide to officers.

Another issue regarding bodycams is that many people, including law officials and the public, increasingly present bodycams as the one-and-only solution for police-community issues (e.g., police brutality/misconduct and public distrust in police) because the recordings serve as objective evidence. However, surveillance footage is subject to human interpretation, which can vary as seen in *Scott v. Harris* (2007) and will play a vital role in assessing officers' justifications for using force. Bodycams, therefore, should not be viewed as an inclusive form of evidence to determine the absolute truth. Instead, they should be used in conjunction with other evidence, such as the officers' reports. In addition, officers should not be allowed to view the footage at their free will, especially prior to initial interviews following officer-involved incidents, because it may skew their perspectives and responses. These bodycam recordings serve as evidence, so their accessibility and retention should be heavily regulated.

### **Conclusion**

Although bodycams can help provide accountability, improve behaviors, and reduce citizen complaints, their efficacy is dependent on its implementation (e.g., policies). For instance, police departments should not give officers limitless discretion on when to activate bodycams. As seen in Ready et al.'s study, officers will not always activate their bodycam, defeating one of the bodycam's main purposes of objectively documenting

police-citizen encounters. Instead, police agencies should provide a written policy governing bodycam usage. The policy should require officers to activate their bodycams when responding to a call-of-service or a self-initiated police action. The recordings may contain sensitive information, such as the identities of sexual assault victims or private properties. Such sensitive information and, thus, sensitive-containing footage cannot be withheld by police agencies because of the FOI law. This becomes problematic when the public wants access to footage containing sensitive information, like an officer's questionable use of force in someone's home. Therefore, strict policies not only on the use of bodycam, but also on bodycam footage, must be included and enforced. The policies should require officers to inform citizens when they are being recorded, which helps to address the growing concern about citizens' privacy rights in public. In addition to the need for strict policies to govern bodycam usage and footage, there must also be additional funding and research to assess the most effective method of implementing bodycams.

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