

## Police Body Cameras

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### ABSTRACT

Officer body-worn cameras (BWCs) are relatively small devices that record interactions between community members (e.g., the public, suspects, and victims) and law enforcement officers. Body-worn cameras are widely used by state and local law enforcement agencies in the United States. They are worn principally by officers in the performance of duties that require open and direct contact with the public. All police officers, detectives, sergeants, and lieutenants regularly assigned to perform patrol duties throughout the city are equipped with body-worn cameras. This involves police officers wearing cameras on their uniforms to improve the civility of their interactions with citizens. The main reasons they have acquired body-worn cameras are to improve officer safety, increase evidence quality, reduce civilian complaints, and reduce agency liability. This paper introduces the reader to the use body-worn cameras by law enforcement officers.

**KEYWORDS:** *cameras, police body cameras, body-worn cameras (BWC) for law enforcement, policing, law enforcement.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Body cameras are being used in policing, retailing, healthcare, jails, etc. For example, healthcare body cameras provide an additional layer of security to your staff with a healthcare body camera designed to record engagements and mitigate workplace violence. Such a camera is shown in Figure 1 [1].

A police officer on duty is shown in Figure 2 [2]. Body cams have impacted modern policing and is at the forefront of modern policing. Police body cameras have the potential to serve as a much-needed police oversight tool at a time of a growing recognition that the United States has a real problem with police violence. Police body cameras are often similar to body cameras used by civilians, firefighters, or the military, but are designed to address specific requirements related to law enforcement. Body worn cameras (BWC) are quickly becoming standard-issue equipment for law enforcement officers throughout the United States because they promote professionalism, accountability, and transparency by documenting officer performance and interactions with the public.

### WHAT IS A POLICE BODY CAMERA?

A police body camera or wearable camera, also known as body worn video (BWV), body-worn camera (BWC), or body camera, is a wearable audio, video, or photographic recording system used by police to record events in which law enforcement officers are involved. Law enforcement officers have extensive experience with the deployment and operation of body-worn cameras (BWCs) and report that they help reduce citizen complaints, lower instances of resistance and use of force, improve police-community interaction, and enhance public safety. About 86% of general-purpose law enforcement agencies that had acquired body-worn cameras had a formal body-worn camera policy. The technology consists of the camera, which is typically worn on the officer's uniform (placed optionally on the shoulder lapel, sunglasses, or hat), with a forward-facing viewable area. Additional accessories may be required to ensure the camera is properly positioned, securely attached and protected to support the officer and his or her unique mission. The video and audio recordings from BWCs can be used by law enforcement to demonstrate transparency to their

communities; to document statements, observations, behaviors, and other evidence; and to deter unprofessional, illegal, and inappropriate behaviors by both law enforcement and the public. There are a number of different types of camera with differing options, including user controls such as push to record, touch-screen controls, video and audio feed, and playback in field [3]. Officers wearing cameras had significant reductions in complaints filed against them. The use of body cameras is more likely to result in arrests, charges filed, cases furthered, and guilty pleas and verdicts attained. A typical body-worn camera is shown in Figure 3 [4], while Figure 4 shows an officer wearing one [2].

Body-worn cameras serve numerous functions including [5]:

1. Enhancing officer safety.
2. Preserving visual and audio information of scenes, events, and statements for use in current and future investigations.
3. Enhancing the officer's ability to document police-citizen contacts, arrests, and critical incidents.
4. Enhancing the accuracy of officer reports and testimony in court.
5. Providing an impartial measurement for evaluation during officer training, self-critique, coaching, and mentoring.
6. Enhancing the agency's ability to review probable cause for arrests.
7. Enhancing the public's trust by accurate representations of officer-public interactions in the form of video and audio recordings.

The police departments worldwide place value on transparency and professionalism. Body-worn cameras (BWC) are quickly becoming standard-issued equipment for police officers throughout the United States and around the globe. For example, police in the United Kingdom first began wearing body cameras in 2005, which have since been adopted by numerous police departments and forces worldwide. The Baltimore Police Department began the rollout of its BWC program on May 26, 2016. Within two years (2018), every sworn member of the police department will be outfitted with a BWC. Thus far, officers and supervisors assigned to each of the nine patrol districts as well as specialized enforcement units from the Operational Investigations Division and the Special Operations & Development Division have been issued body worn cameras. The Baltimore Police Department takes very seriously any officer conduct that casts the department and its members in an unfavorable light [6].

## APPLICATION OF POLICE BODY CAMERAS

The presence of body cameras reduces citizen violence and fatality rates. Common applications include the following [7,8]:

- *Training:* Body cameras can be used for police training. Although officer training was not an originally intended purposes of body-worn cameras, many departments have found footage of actual officer interactions with community members useful. Footage from body cameras can identify areas where officers may need additional training and can help improve police practices. At most agencies, an officer will enter a probationary period after graduating from the police academy. During this time, the officer is still “in training” and being observed by a senior officer. A police body cam can be a crucial part of this training, allowing both the probationary officer and their superiors to observe events after the fact and break down what went right and what went wrong. In this way, the police body cam becomes an invaluable tool in the officer’s training.
- *Evidence:* It is commonly said that a picture speaks a thousand words. Body cameras are used by law enforcement to record public interactions and gather video evidence at crime scenes. An essential tool for law enforcement agencies worldwide, body cameras provide independent and reliable visual and audio evidence to verify events, document statements, and behaviors, and increase transparency with communities. Body camera recordings serve as valuable evidence in criminal cases. The captured footage provides an objective record of events that can be used to verify witness and officer testimony and ensure the accuracy of any report. Footage captured by body-worn cameras can be used as evidence for arrests and prosecutions, potentially enhancing the chances of a successful prosecution and even reducing the amount of time an officer spends on paperwork. The police body cam can be an invaluable tool in modern policing, actually helping make the job easier and officers more successful. Police body cams also provide evidence to dispel false accusations.
- *Surveillance:* Although surveillance is not a primary purpose of BWCs, the technology does offer a form of community surveillance. A growing body of research has demonstrated the negative consequences of surveillance in the public sphere, including violations of reasonable expectations of privacy, a chilling effect on public discourse and life, and avoidance of systems (e.g., education, medical care) where surveillance is

anticipated. As a result, BWCs tend to increase monitoring of already heavily surveilled communities, particularly overpoliced communities of color. Figure 5 shows a security guard using body camera [1].

- *Police Investigations:* This consists of criminal investigations, crime resolution, intelligence gathering or court proceedings, and outcomes. Prosecutors rarely bring cases against the police and it remains to be seen whether this will change much as a result of BWCs. Empirical results are hard to find. Three studies (all from the UK) revealed positive outcomes: officers can pursue prosecution even without victim cooperation and cases may more likely be charged.
- *Border Protection:* US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) is piloting a body-worn camera program for officers and agents throughout the United States. CBP's Incident-Driven Video Recording System Directive provides guidance for implementation throughout CBP. The policy went into effect in August of 2021. Throughout the pilot phase, and transition to regular use, the policy will be adhered to by all CBP employees. CBP is also committed to expeditious release of body worn camera footage consistent with CBP policy.

## BENEFITS

Advocates for police body cams assert the multitude of advantages they bring to both public safety and the professionalism of law enforcement officials. Body-worn cameras (BWCs) provide a recording of the clinical encounter, enhance the quality of documentation with a video record, and offer footage for quality assurance, quality improvement, and training purposes. Other benefits include the following [2,7,9]:

- *Accountability:* The police department recognizes public interest in access to body camera footage as a measure to police oversight and accountability. The record provided by a police body cam helps to hold officers accountable for their actions and can even help prevent negative incidents from occurring. Having solid, tamper-proof video evidence with an ironclad chain of custody is crucial to better understanding police actions. Police body cams provide a record of events from the officers' point of view, often highlighting when an officer has gone above and beyond.
- *Transparency:* Body cameras promote transparency by providing an objective record of police-civilian interactions. They help ensure that everyone is held accountable for their actions, provide an unbiased account of events, and help protect agencies from libel. Police body cams can bolster public trust by providing community members with better transparency into police actions. Police body cams can also allay citizen concerns by providing clear documentation of encounters to shore up police officers' versions of events. Receiving praise for their potential to improve transparency, accountability, and public trust and by deterring unwanted and illegal behaviors, these cameras also increase safety for both law enforcement personnel and the public.
- *Safety:* Body cameras enhance the safety of officers and civilians. Knowing their actions are being recorded can ensure officers follow procedures and can also deter civilians from behaving in a confrontational or aggressive manner.
- *Officer Behavior:* Impact on officer behavior is measured by complaints, use of force reports, arrests/citations or proactive behaviors. A study regarding the impact of police body cameras came to the conclusion that these cameras have a proven link to a decrease in complaints regarding use of excessive force and misconduct of police officers.
- *Civilian Perception:* Police body cameras have been cited in resulting in increased levels of compliance by civilians and lowered levels of complaints in relation to policing in their neighborhoods. One study found that when looking at support for BWCs race, ethnicity, differing neighborhoods, and other demographics had an effect on support for BWCs. Most likely due to the goal of transparency and trust in police that are often linked to BWCs.
- *Public Trust:* Body cameras strengthen public trust in law enforcement agencies. By promoting good behavior, evidence transparency, and accountability, body cameras can help reinforce trust between law enforcement agencies and their communities. Body-worn cameras can help increase trust between police and the communities they serve because the video evidence collected will provide an independent, unbiased, and objective way to capture interactions between the community and police officers.
- *Legal Implications:* Body cameras have been shown to be valuable in legal processes, especially in securing quick guilty pleas for lower-level offenses. Footage that is ripped from police body cameras is captured from the officer's



perspective, which can allow for prosecutors to have indisputable evidence against individuals that are involved in lower-level offenses such as traffic violations and trespassing. This makes it easier to prosecute and speeds up the receipt of guilty pleas.

## CHALLENGES

In spite of their widespread and growing adoption, the current evidence regarding the effectiveness of body-worn cameras is mixed. Some studies suggest that body-worn cameras may offer benefits while others show either no impact or possible negative effects. This shows that further research is essential to determine the value of body-worn cameras use and potentially the more effective ways body-worn cameras could be deployed. Agencies not using body-worn cameras stated cost (hardware acquisition, video storage, system maintenance) to be the primary disincentive. While there are numerous benefits of police body cameras, there are some concerns, such as privacy, data storage, cost, and potential bias. Other challenges include the following [4,9]:

- *Privacy Concerns:* While body cameras aim to increase transparency and accountability, they have also sparked debates over privacy and effectiveness. There is concern about the privacy of the people being filmed (suspects, victims, witnesses) but also about that of the officers wearing the cameras or the officers whose actions are recorded by their colleagues. If the bodycams are equipped with biometric facial recognition technology, this could have a major impact on people's everyday lives, depending on the reliability of the technology to prevent false positives. In the context of recording, the biggest issues arise from whether consent from parties involved is required before starting a recording.
- *Technical Challenges:* There are several technical challenges associated with the use of body cameras in law enforcement agencies. There is the need to connect to wireless networks or other devices for data transfer and live streaming. There is also the need for the camera to operate for an entire shift without the camera running out of battery power. Large amounts of data are generated by these devices, requiring significant storage capacity and backup systems to ensure footage is not lost. High-quality video and audio is needed to ensure evidence is clear and easily understood.
- *Good Policies:* If the BWCs are to be effective at providing oversight, reducing police abuses, and increasing community trust, it is vital that they be deployed with good policies to ensure they

accomplish those goals. Without good policies, they risk becoming just another police surveillance device—and one with very real potential to invade privacy. Especially important are policies governing when the cameras are turned on, and who has access to the footage, and under what conditions.

- *Interoperability:* There are several types of body cameras made by different manufacturers. Each camera serves the same purpose, yet some function in slightly different ways or have to be worn in a specific way.
- *Usage Inconsistencies:* Throughout police departments in the United States or even worldwide there is an inconsistency from one police department to the next, some have body cameras while others may not which makes the use of body cameras difficult. Body cameras could be more beneficial and useful if they were mandatory over all police departments.
- *High Cost:* Body cameras require sizable investments. In any case, the camera itself is just the start of the expenses. Police departments also have to run software and store data for all the cameras which can add up quickly. Other costs include maintenance, training, and evaluations.

## POLICE BODY CAMERAS AROUND THE WORLD

With 88% of Americans and 95% of Dutch people supporting body cameras on police officers, there is strong public support for this technology worldwide. Across various countries, police body cameras have shown the potential to reduce complaints and enhance police officer accountability, although their effectiveness remains debatable. Here we consider the use of police body-worn cameras in the following selected nations [9,10]:

- *United States:* In 2012, the National Institute of Justice at the United States Department of Justice issued a primer regarding laws, policies, practices, and technology for local police departments to consider. Following The Law Enforcement Officer-Worn Body Camera Act (effective January 1, 2016), the state of Illinois became one of the first states to have a comprehensive set of rules for police departments in regards to body camera usage. On December 1, 2014, President Barack Obama proposed reimbursing communities half the cost of buying cameras and storing video—a plan that would require Congress to authorize \$75 million over three years to help purchase 50,000 recording devices. Body camera footage has become more

visible within the past few years due to media coverage. The NAACP National Board of Directors has endorsed the use of policy-based automatic body-worn camera solutions for use by law enforcement. The NYPD body-worn camera program is the largest in the United States with over 24,000 members of the Department equipped with body-worn cameras. The Department of Public Safety in Alaska has finalized the policy that will govern the use of body-worn cameras, dash cameras, audio recorders, and other audio and video capturing devices after completing public feedback earlier this year. The American Civil Liberties Union has advocated body camera use for both police departments and US Customs and Border Protection, granted that safeguards are in place to protect the privacy of both officers and civilians. Almost all Americans (89%) support requiring police officers to wear body cameras to record their on-duty interactions. Figure 6 shows that Americans strongly support equipping police with body cameras[11].

- *United Kingdom:* Body worn cameras are being trialed by officers in Wolverhampton and Birmingham. Body-worn video cameras received wide media coverage because of the first testing of body-worn cameras in the United Kingdom in 2005. The basic command units equipped with the head cameras recorded everything that happened during an incident from the time of arrival which led to the preservation of good-quality first disclosure evidence from the victim. Now that the benefits of using body cameras are being realized, the implications on the digital infrastructure are being called into question.
- *Australia:* The number of body-worn cameras in use by the police of Australia is growing increasingly prevalent in parallel with other countries. The first bodycams or “cop-cams” were trialed in Western Australia in 2007. Despite the increasing prevalence of the devices, some Australian commentators have expressed privacy concerns.
- *Belgium:* As of January 2024, there are approximately 4,000 body cameras in use across local police zones and the federal police. Additionally, the Belgian police have recently acquired 5,000 new body cams from a Swedish security company as part of a broader contract. The new legislation provides clarity on when and how they can be used, with footage typically stored for 30 days unless needed as evidence.
- *Canada:* Some police services in Canada such as the Calgary Police Service have outfitted all front-line officers with body-worn video systems since 2019. Police unions in Canada have been opposed to body-worn video systems, citing privacy and cost concerns. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) is committed to ensuring that Canadians feel protected by the police. As part of their modernization plan, RCMP will be rolling out body-worn cameras and a Digital Evidence Management System to RCMP officers across the country.
- *China:* The use of body-worn cameras by law enforcement offers potential advantages in keeping officers safe, enabling situational awareness, improving community relations and accountability, and providing evidence for trials. A legislation regarding body-worn camera has been enacted by the Ministry of Public Security, making the body-worn camera standard and mandatory policing equipment for law enforcement agencies in China. Figure 7 shows some Chinese officers with body-worn cameras [9].
- *France:* French law enforcement has been using bodycams regularly since 2013. National and municipal police have also been outfitted with body cameras, starting with 2 000 cameras in 2017, after experimentation during the previous years. In 2018, the senate approved plans to experiment with bodycams in fire fighting and in detention centers.
- *Japan:* Japanese law enforcements has been experimenting with body cams since 2022. In order to quickly and accurately share the situation at the scene of an incident, the police have introduced a system that automatically transmits video footage of police officers at the scene of an incident to the prefectural police headquarters in real time. When the officer operates the radio, the camera is automatically activated and starts recording video, and the video and sound are transmitted to headquarters and the relevant department at each police station. Some police officers in Japan will strap on body cameras in a trial set for fiscal 2024, with an eye to introducing them across the country in the future.

## CONCLUSION

Body cameras are a valuable tool for law enforcement agencies. By promoting transparency, accountability, and public trust, they can help to improve policing practices and help provide a better service to their communities. Ever since body cameras were introduced, there has been a debate over whether

capabilities that make the camera superior to that of the officer's eyes should be allowed. Body camera footage provides critical evidence for internal and external investigations of police conduct and offers community members a detailed, firsthand account of what happened during an encounter. It is no surprise, then, that body cameras have widespread support from both the public and police officers and appear poised to become a standard in police practice. They help us build a future where everyone, everywhere has the opportunity and power to thrive.

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**Figure 1 Healthcare body cameras [1].**





**Figure 2 A police officer on duty [2].**



**Figure 3 A typical body-worn camera [4].**



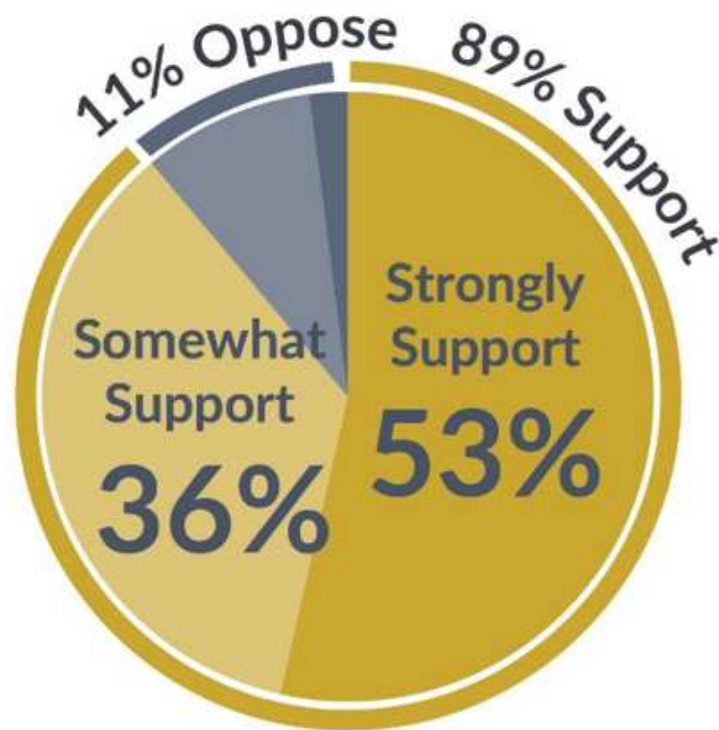
**Figure 4 An officer wearing a camera [2].**



Figure 5 A security guard using body camera [1].

## Americans Overwhelmingly Support Equipping Police with Body Cameras

*Do you favor or oppose requiring police to wear body cameras to record video of their interactions?*



Note: Somewhat oppose, 9%; strongly oppose, 2%.

Figure 6 Americans strongly support equipping police with body cameras [11].





**Figure 7 Some Chinese officers with body-worn cameras [9].**

