

Impact of Body-Worn Cameras on Police

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Abstract

The implementation of body-worn cameras also known as BWCs by law enforcement has been widely seen and augmented to bring transparency, reduce police misconduct, and improve the trust within the communities that we live in today. This analytic research paper goes over how effective BWCs are in reaching the objectives they were intended to meet once brought into the daily work life of our officers. It explores the impact of BWCs on Officers behavior, use of force incidents, citizen complaints, and the public's perception. Additionally, the paper will discuss challenges related to privacy, data management, and policy implementation. Even BWCs have been honored for the potential to improve policing, the true effectiveness depends on several other factors like policies on their usage, officers complying, and a framework that explains who has access to them and where they're stored. By analyzing several studies and articles, this research aims to provide an understanding of the role BWCs play in promoting police accountability.

Introduction

In recent years, the development of body worn cameras (BWCs) by law enforcement agencies has been seen as a pivotal measure to enhance transparency and accountability when policing. These cameras, which record clear video footage and audio of the officers when they are in public, are intended to provide evidence of encounters along with making sure officers behaviors and actions towards civilians are correct. By being able to capture interaction in real time, BWCs are able to verify reports from incidents, making them a very crucial tool when it comes to complaints and allegations that can be so called have said to happen. Additionally, BWCs help to deter against inappropriate behavior, as both officers and the public are more

likely to act in correct manner with the law as they know they're being recorded. The increased adoption of BWCs has definitely sparked an interest in research, leading to an enormous amount of studies that are investing if they're really effective in reducing misconduct, use of force incidents, and complaints. This paper aims to take recent studies from 2022 onward to assess the impact of BWCs on police accountability and public trust, while showcasing a few challenges that have come along with their usage.

Literature Review

Recent research and studies have had mixed results in whether or not BWCs are considered to be truly effective. Some research says that BWCs are leading to reductions in use of force circumstances and complaints by citizens, while other research is saying there is minimal to no impact on the numbers. The findings being so up and down can be caused by several things, which could be the different policies in each department, officers actually being compliant with BWC activation protocols, and public awareness regarding the use of BWC being used. For example, a study analyzing data from the Chicago Police department had shown that the use of body work cameras hasn't had any major changes in reducing the complaints from citizens. But on the other hand having BWCs in place has had a major shift on investigations. Before we had them lots of investigations against officers were known to get dismissed as there wasn't enough evidence to ever take it to the next step. But now that we have these cameras there has been an increase in disciplinary actions against officers that have acted out of character or protocol. But sadly, the effects of BWCs in use of force incidents are still struggling to find data that supports that it is truly effective and this could simply be from officers failing to activate their cameras in the heat of the moment.

Methodology

This paper will do an overall analysis of scholarly articles, focusing on studies and research that evaluate the impact body worn cameras have on different aspects of police officer lives. The selected studies were analyzed to identify common findings, themes, and areas of focus. Each study was analyzed based on metrics on things like reduction in use of force incidents, changes in complaint rates, and the public's perception on if police are being held accountable. Also, this paper examines studies that go through the challenges these cameras present like privacy, data management, and compliance by police officers. By being able to gather information from multiple sources, this research aims to provide a comprehensive overview for each section of BWCs and their role in accountability in policing. Taking this qualitative approach allows for a deep thought out research and making sure each statistic is explained thoroughly.

Findings

Impact on Use of Force Incidents

The effects of BWCs on use of force incidents is still a topic that raises a lot of mixed emotions and debates. Some research studies showed that when BWCs came into play it had a positive effect in de-escalating situations, as the odds of officers having to use force or aggression wasn't needed as much. But on the other side of things, some studies showed that BWCs had absolutely no significant changes in the use of force rates, and may need to result in better training and policy reforms to achieve desired outcomes (Kahn & Martin, 2023).

A recent research study done by Hunter Boehme and Cory Schnell, analyzed a use of force trend over a 105 month period. Once the BWC program was fully introduced to the police force it was met with a major increase in use of force incidents being reported, more so in the

first year of introduction, which also remained fairly consistent for the years until early 2020. A spike of increased use of force incidents were seen during the summer of 2020, starting in June, which if you know was around the same time period as the protest regarding George Floyd's death.

The statistics shown revealed that the mean number of use of force incidents over the entire research period was 33.99, having a minimum of 14 and a maximum of 91 incidents. After the introduction of BWCs data showed a 85% increase in the mean of use of force incidents per month, whereas before cameras it was roughly 23.65% and after cameras it shot up to 43.76%. Keep in mind before the introduction of BWCs, the use of force incidents were on a slight decline. But once BWCs hit the scene that decline quickly changed course and started to increase. Furthermore, the mean number of incidents slightly before George Floyd's death was 33.36 and went to 64.56 after his death, this statistic alone showcases the dramatic shift into having to use force. This also goes against the studies of those who said the BWCs had a neutral to de-escalation effect.

These statistics highlight how complicated it truly is to see if there is a positive or negative impact of BWC on policing outcomes and suggest additional influences may be needed, such as better training and enforcing BWC policies more. While BWCs are often looked at to be tools that should reduce use of force incidents, there is much more work that needs to be done to push that kind of narrative out fully.

Reduction in Citizen Complaints

When examining the impact of body-worn cameras (BWCs) on citizen complaints, the evidence across jurisdictions reveals a complex and varied landscape. In certain jurisdictions, such as Las Vegas, Nevada, and Phoenix, Arizona, the implementation of BWCs has been

associated with statistically significant reductions in citizen complaints filed against officers. These findings suggest that BWCs may play a role in improving officer accountability and professionalism, potentially by encouraging more civil interactions or providing objective records that deter frivolous complaints. For example, in Las Vegas, the Metropolitan Police Department saw measurable decreases in both use-of-force reports and complaints following the deployment of BWCs. Similarly, evaluators in Phoenix noted statistically significant decreases in citizen complaints post-implementation.

However, this trend is not universally observed. In other major cities—such as Washington, D.C., Milwaukee, and New York City—researchers found no statistically significant differences in the number of complaints filed against officers who wore BWCs compared to those who did not. A multi-site evaluation involving eight departments across the United States and the United Kingdom also echoed these mixed results. The comprehensive study revealed no consistent, statistically significant differences in the volume of citizen complaints, police use of force, or arrests for disorderly conduct between officers equipped with BWCs and those operating without them.

Some jurisdictions reported more nuanced outcomes. In New York City, for instance, officers with BWCs experienced a statistically significant reduction in complaints; however, there were no notable changes in arrests or arrests involving the use of force. Furthermore, camera-wearing officers made more stop reports, but the likelihood of lawful stops and frisks actually decreased, and fewer subjects were searched. In Milwaukee, the data showed no statistical impact on the number of traffic stops, business checks, or citizen complaints, though officers wearing BWCs conducted fewer subject stops and participated in more park-and-walk activities, suggesting a shift in policing style rather than in complaint frequency.

These findings indicate that while BWCs may contribute to reductions in citizen complaints in certain contexts, their effectiveness is far from universal. The disparity in results points to the importance of contextual factors, such as departmental policies, officer training, community relations, and the degree to which BWC policies are enforced. Simply introducing the technology may not be sufficient to produce meaningful change in public perceptions or officer behavior. Rather, the way BWCs are integrated into broader accountability and oversight frameworks likely plays a crucial role in determining their overall impact on reducing citizen complaints.

Privacy Concerns

Police officers expressed significant concerns about both their own privacy and that of citizens regarding body-worn cameras (BWCs). Officers worried about personal conversations being recorded, the potential misuse of footage by supervisors for performance evaluations, and the unintended capture of sensitive moments. Some also feared that constant surveillance could increase stress levels. Additionally, concerns arose over accidental activations of BWCs, leading to unintended recordings in private settings such as during lunch breaks or in restrooms.

Regarding citizens' privacy, officers highlighted the ethical concerns of recording vulnerable individuals, such as victims of domestic violence, children, or individuals in medical distress. They debated whether all interactions should be documented, especially when there is no criminal concern. Some believed that citizens might not fully understand the risks to their privacy, while others suggested that redaction techniques should be used instead of restricting recordings. Despite these concerns, some officers felt that unrestricted recording was necessary for accountability and documentation.

A public survey found that only 5.6% of respondents expressed concerns about being filmed, with older individuals more likely to have reservations. Concerns increased when respondents were asked about the filming of broader citizen groups, indicating a higher sensitivity to privacy when considering community-wide surveillance rather than personal exposure.

Implementation

The implementation of body-worn cameras (BWCs) in mental health services presents several challenges that require careful consideration and structured planning. One of the primary concerns is the lack of standardized policies and governance across different Trusts. Participants expressed the necessity for clear guidelines on why, how, when, and where BWCs should be used to ensure consistency and transparency. Without national directives, individual Trusts have varied approaches, leading to inconsistencies that may impact their effectiveness and acceptance.

Another significant challenge is the governance and data management of BWC footage. Concerns were raised about where the data is stored, who has access, and how it is safeguarded against misuse. Ethical and human rights considerations were particularly emphasized due to the sensitivity of filming individuals experiencing mental health crises. Patients expressed apprehensions about footage being misused by staff, shared inappropriately, or inaccessible when requested, raising questions about privacy and security.

The successful implementation of BWCs also depends on comprehensive staff training. Many participants highlighted that policies alone are insufficient if staff members are not adequately prepared to use BWCs effectively. Training must address when and how to activate cameras, how BWCs integrate with de-escalation techniques, and the implications of capturing

footage in different scenarios. Additionally, staff must navigate challenges related to patient consent, particularly when some individuals consent while others do not, raising further ethical and legal considerations.

Finally, skepticism exists regarding the actual impact of BWCs on patient care. Some participants noted a lack of substantial evidence supporting claims that BWCs improve patient outcomes, beyond their potential role in reducing assaults or increasing accountability. This uncertainty underscores the need for further independent research to guide policy decisions and ensure that BWCs are implemented in a manner that prioritizes patient well-being and ethical integrity.

Conclusion

The implementation of body-worn cameras (BWCs) in law enforcement has been met with both optimism and skepticism. While the technology was introduced to enhance transparency, improve officer accountability, and build public trust, the effectiveness of BWCs in achieving these objectives remains a subject of debate.

Research on the impact of BWCs on use-of-force incidents has yielded mixed results. Some studies suggest that the presence of cameras de-escalates confrontations and reduces the need for force, while others indicate that use-of-force incidents have increased, potentially due to officers adhering more strictly to reporting policies or heightened tensions during significant societal events. Similarly, the effect of BWCs on citizen complaints varies across jurisdictions, with some cities reporting reductions while others see little to no change. This inconsistency highlights the role of departmental policies, officer compliance, and public awareness in determining the success of BWCs.

Privacy concerns remain a critical issue surrounding BWCs. Officers express concerns about their own privacy as well as that of civilians, particularly in sensitive situations involving vulnerable individuals. Ethical considerations regarding the filming and storage of footage, as well as public perceptions of surveillance, complicate the widespread acceptance of BWCs. These concerns reinforce the need for clear policies and strict governance over how BWC data is managed, accessed, and utilized.

Furthermore, the implementation of BWCs in mental health services presents additional challenges, such as policy inconsistencies, governance issues, and the necessity for comprehensive staff training. The lack of standardized protocols across various agencies contributes to uncertainty about the effectiveness of BWCs in these settings. Without proper regulations and training, the intended benefits of BWCs—such as improved accountability and increased safety—may not be fully realized.

Overall, while BWCs hold promise as a tool for accountability and transparency in law enforcement, their success depends on various factors, including policy enforcement, officer compliance, community engagement, and ethical considerations. Future research and policy development should focus on standardizing BWC use, improving officer training, and addressing privacy concerns to maximize the potential benefits of this technology. Only through a well-structured and comprehensive approach can BWCs truly enhance public trust and police accountability.

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