

**Clinton Officers' Perception of Body-Worn Cameras in Policing After
Implementation: An Executive Summary**

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Executive Summary

- I. On average, most of the Clinton Section officers felt impartial in regards to the implementation of body-worn cameras (BWCs)
- II. Officers reported four major operational and technological issues regarding BWC usage:
 - a. Connectivity issues between BWCs and docking stations
 - b. Inadequate BWC attachment to the officers' uniforms, with reports of cameras detaching from the uniform
 - c. Diminished video and audio quality in low-light situations, or during windy weather
 - d. Issues with the activation button's placement and sensitivity causing accidental camera activation or deactivation
- III. Officers had multiple interpretations of the BWC recording policy
 - a. Some officers had concerns that the BWC recording policy would conflict with HIPAA laws.
- IV. Concerns with Freedom of Information Laws (FOIL) being used to infringe upon the privacy and safety of civilians and officers
- V. Officers reported less discretion with the addition of BWCs when used in domestic incidents, resulting in a higher frequency of arrests
- VI. BWCs have generally gone unnoticed by civilians, but have the potential to decrease information gathered from witnesses because of concerns for privacy
- VII. Officers described increased professionalism in other officers with the presence of BWCs
- VIII. Sergeants reported increased workloads in order to assist officers with their BWCs when technological malfunctions occurred

Report Summary

Introduction

This report serves as an executive summary of a larger report by both identifying and summarizing the key findings of the larger report herein.¹ Body Worn Cameras (BWCs) have recently been adopted by police departments nationwide in order to redefine policing, accountability, and transparency. BWCs are argued to encourage constructive encounters between police and community members, enhance police legitimacy, improve evidence collection for arrest and prosecution, and expedite the resolution of internal and external complaints (White, 2014). After receiving broad support from local communities in Rochester, the Rochester City Council invested financial support for BWCs with additional support in the form of a grant from the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA). A stipulation of receiving federal assistance from the BJA included an independent evaluation conducted by the Center for Public Safety Initiatives (CPSI). CPSI's evaluation of the Rochester Police Department's (RPD) implementation of BWCs is multi-faceted, including a variety of qualitative and quantitative data to assess the impact of BWCs on policing processes and outcomes. This assessment includes, but is not limited to, changes in crime occurrence, complaints against police, and criminal justice processes (including criminal and internal investigations).

A component of CPSI's evaluative strategy was to include ride-along interviews with RPD officers to collect qualitative data on officers' perceptions and expectations of body-worn cameras. For these interviews, researchers developed a semi-structured interview to collect information that reflects changes in police work after BWC adoption (See Appendix A). The researchers interviewed ten RPD officers from ten beats in Clinton Section in the form of a ride-along (See Appendix B). This report summary focuses on the results of the Clinton Section officer interviews post-implementation of BWCs.

¹ For more information, email: jmkgcj@rit.edu or see www.rit.edu/cpsi

Key Findings

Officers' General Attitudes on BWC Implementation

In general, the attitude towards BWCs amongst the officers of the Clinton Section was neutral. Due to the nationwide trend of BWC implementation in police departments, officers acknowledged that BWCs in the RPD were likely to happen regardless of agency-wide opposition or support. At the time of the ride-along interviews in the Clinton Section, the officers had been using the BWCs for three months on average. Due to the limited experience that officers had with the BWCs, most officers were unable to make conclusive assessments pertaining to their perceptions of them.

Attitudes on BWC Technology

The officers of the Clinton Section frequently noted many problems and frustrations regarding the operational and technological functions of the BWC. Of these issues, the most frequently mentioned were *docking stations*, *uniform attachment*, *footage quality*, and *activation button placement*. The most significant issue to the officers was the connective ability of the docking stations. After recording an incident, officers dock the BWCs inside of their patrol cars to upload the footage. However, officers reported that docking stations frequently had issues connecting to the BWCs and would require several attempts before successfully connecting. In some circumstances, officers were required to return to the headquarters to upload their footage, which could be time consuming.

Officers also stated that they were having issues with the attachment of the BWC to their uniforms. During physical engagements such as foot chases, BWCs would occasionally fall off. Officers viewed this to be quite problematic during incidents involving a physical altercation. Such footage may be necessary to vindicate or justify an officer's actions. Officers further believed that the lack of footage from a dropped or fallen BWC might be viewed as deliberate by a jury during a trial and/or a supervisor when handling an officer's complaint.

The quality of video footage was described as poor in low-light situations. The audio quality during situations with windy weather was also described as problematic. However, in ideal lighting and quieter environments, the audio and video quality of footage was described as

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exceptional. In one situation, the clarity of the BWC produced a high-resolution video that helped provide context for an officer drawing his firearm in a near use-of-force case.

Lastly, the sensitivity and placement of the BWC activation button was perceived as problematic. The BWC is turned on or off via a button located on the front of the device, and due to its sensitivity, would occasionally depress accidentally. This was viewed as a serious issue in the case of a physical dispute where a camera deactivating could potentially be seen as a deliberate action by an officer.

Perceived Impact on Officer Workload

How officers perceived the added BWC-related responsibilities was closely connected to the aforementioned technological issues. In the absence of technological issues, BWC-related tasks only consumed twenty minutes from a shift on average. However, in the case of docking station issues, the time spent on uploading BWC footage could be substantially increased. Additionally, officers viewed the added responsibility of turning on their BWC as very challenging. Officers feared that they would be subjected to disciplinary measures if they failed to follow this procedure. However, this was described as most problematic in earlier stages of the BWC implementation, and it seemed that most officers had adapted to this procedure at the time of these interviews.

Perceptions of the BWC Recording Policy

Researchers identified differing interpretations of the RPD BWC recording policy. One set of responses indicated that all incidents and interactions were required to be recorded without discretion. A differing set of responses indicated that “A” jobs, as they appear Mobile Data Terminal (MDT), were required to be recorded whereas “B” jobs were up to the officer’s discretion. “A” jobs are described as more serious calls and “B” jobs are considered less serious. One other officer cited the “safe and practical” clause in the RPD recording policy when deciding to record incidents.²

Officers also expressed confusion with how HIPAA laws interact with the BWC recording policy. HIPAA laws deal with doctor-patient confidentiality, and states that

² To see the RPD’s BWC Recording Policies, see: <http://www.cityofrochester.gov/RPDBodyWornCamera/>

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conversations between patients and doctors are to be kept confidential (Your Rights Under HIPAA, 2017). As officers often respond to calls in a medical environment, officers expressed concerns that recording in a hospital environment would potentially infringe upon HIPAA laws.

BWCs, FOIL, and Privacy

Officer concerns for privacy were mentioned in conjunction with FOIL laws. FOIL laws dictate the public's right to gain access to government records, including BWC footage (Open Government, 2017). Most officers believed that citizens could request any BWC footage without restrictions. Officers also believed citizens would be able to access video that could potentially disclose undercover officers' identities, the identities of victims or witnesses, among other types of sensitive circumstances. However, according to the RPD's BWC policy in Section XIII, the FOIL policy includes exemptions from the distribution of videos infringing upon the safety, privacy, or integrity of law enforcement operations.¹

BWCs and Officer Discretion

While most officers did not feel that their discretion had been limited due to BWCs, a few officers identified changes in discretion when dealing with domestic incidents. If footage contains statements in an incident that are considered criminal by law, regardless of factuality, officers stated that they would be mandated to make an arrest. Before BWCs, officers stated that they would spend time mediating the situation and attempt to develop a better understanding of what had occurred before deciding to make an arrest. This was perceived as an issue as officers felt they would have to make arrests on baseless claims versus factual information.

BWCs and Changes in Police-Citizen Encounters

A general consensus amongst officers was that citizens did not notice their BWCs. The officers suggested that civilians who did notice the BWC would in some cases become more cooperative, but generally this was not the case. As police often respond to calls where individuals are emotionally elevated, the presence of a BWC might often be disregarded. In some instances, officers noticed increased hesitation from witnesses in regards to obtaining information, citing privacy concerns. In these situations, officers reported having to turn off their cameras to obtain a statement from these individuals.

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Officers stated that regardless of BWCs, they will conduct their patrols in the same manner. However, across the department, officers have noticed an increase in using more professional language since the implementation of BWCs. As a result of this, officers stated that it is possible that BWCs have promoted more respectful interactions.

Clinton Section Sergeants' Experience with BWCs

Researchers interviewed two of the sergeants from the Clinton Section regarding the BWC's impact on their responsibilities. In addition to confirming the aforementioned experiences of patrol officers, the sergeants stated that BWCs have increased their responsibilities substantially. Due to the BWCs' technical malfunctions, sergeants have had to spend considerably more time assisting patrol officers with their BWCs to ensure they remain in working order. Additionally, sergeants have stated that BWCs have not aided in complaint reduction, as typically complaints are resolved through conversations with the complainant. While the sergeants believed that BWCs could be an asset to policing, one of the sergeants described it as a project where the "benefits are yet to be seen."

Conclusion

The dialogue exchanged between researchers and officers of the Clinton Section were primarily centered on the technological concerns with the BWC implementation. These issues included docking stations, uniform attachment, footage quality, and activation button placement and sensitivity. Generally, officers did not believe that the BWCs significantly added to their patrol responsibilities, except for when issues occurred with their docking stations.

The researchers identified a variety of interpretations of BWC policy, specifically pertaining to the recording policy and FOIL policies. As some officers' concerns were specifically related to these policies, addressing policy misinterpretations may help to alleviate many officers' concerns.

Officers noted that BWCs had a minimal impact on police-civilian interactions, stating that the BWC generally is unnoticed. However, when dealing with witnesses, officers have experienced reductions in information gathered from witnesses, while citing privacy concerns.

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However, officers have reported observing increased professionalism from their peers in the presence of BWCs, especially as it pertains to the language used during calls-for-service.

The sergeants of the Clinton Section confirmed the experiences of the patrol officers within their section. In specific reference to supervisory responsibilities, the sergeants stated that BWCs have significantly increased their workload due to technological problems experienced. While they regarded BWCs as an asset, the benefits “remain to be seen.”

The next step of the CPSI’s evaluation includes ride-along interviews in the Genesee Section after BWC implementation. As the Genesee Section and the Clinton Section are distinctive from each other in terms of demographics and policing responsibilities, there is an interest in comparing and contrasting these sections’ responses.

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References

White, M. D. (2014). *Police officer body-worn cameras: Assessing the evidence*. Office of Justice Programs, US Department of Justice.

Your Rights Under HIPAA. (2017, February 01). Retrieved April 03, 2017, from <https://www.hhs.gov/hipaa/for-individuals/guidance-materials-for-consumers/index.html>

Appendix A:

A Framework Interview for Post-Implementation Ride Along

- a. What does a typical work day look like?
 - a. How long have you been a police officer?
 - b. How long have you been patrolling this area?
 - c. How long have you been working on this shift?
 - d. How long have you used a BWC?
 - e. How long do you spend on BWC related work per day (downloading footage, activating the camera)? Have BWC related processes contributed significantly to your workload? If so—has this interfered with patrol operations, and how?
 - f. Have you had to contact your supervisor more since using BWC?
 - g. How has your attitude towards BWC changed since its first deployment? What part of the process was difficult for you to get used to? (Ease of use, downloading and uploading data, camera activation, etc.)
 - h. Did you notice other changes after the BWC deployment?
2. Do you think BWC has changed the nature of police work?
 - a. Have you experienced changes in the nature of policing with the addition of BWC?
 - i. Do you think BWC made a change on your policing style? Or did you notice that you become more/less proactive because of BWC?
 - ii. When you have your BWC on, do citizens you encounter during calls for service tend to be more compliant/cooperative? Do citizens acknowledge the presence of BWC during interactions?
 - iii. Do you think BWC has affected your discretion? Example: whether or not make an arrest, give a traffic ticket, stop a person, use force, pay more attention to language etc.,
 - iv. Has the BWC presented any privacy concerns for yourself? If yes, could you explain?
 - b. Possible changes in different kinds of encounters or calls due to BWC?
 - v. Family disturbances/domestic disputes?
 - vi. Repeated calls on same individuals?
 - vii. Early investigative activities
 - viii. Dealing with juveniles? (Especially in school settings)
 - i. How has BWC changed the citizens' view of cooperation with police work?
 - i. Do you think there's a change in citizen's trust in police after BWC's deployment? (Justify certain cases?)
 - ii. Have you experienced circumstances where citizens questioned the camera and how the footage is being used or asked you to turn it off?
 - iii. Has the BWC affected police interactions with *witnesses or person with knowledge*? (not general police-citizen interactions) Has the BWC effected the quality of follow up investigative interviews?
 - iv. Has any of your BWC footage been used as evidence in court? Or have you heard of other officers' footage being used as evidence, what kinds of cases are they used for?
- b. Police Perception of BWC (Positive, Neutral, or Negative)
 - a. Do you perceive the BWC as an improvement of policing or do you tend to perceive it as a burden in your daily work? Why do you think so?
If Burden > Improvement

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- What was the most difficult part with using/implementing the BWC? (Technology? Workload? Discretion? Policy? Privacy Etc.). Can you give an example?

If Improvement > Burden

- In what aspects has BWC improved policing? (Technology? Workload? Discretion? Policy? Etc.). Can you give an example?
- b. Now that you have had the chance to use a BWC, how do you feel about the expanding usage of BWCs nationwide?
 - c. Based on your knowledge of RPD's BWC implementation and nation-wide BWC implementation, how do you think RPD's BWC project could have been improved?
 - d. Do you think the amount of time and effort you spend on BWC related work affect your role as a police officer?
 - e.
 - f. Can you give me some examples of circumstances/locations/encounters where the presence of BWC (whether it's on or off) posed a major problem regardless of policy? (e.g., in homes, schools, with minors, in extreme weathers, particular kinds of events/witnesses)
 - g. Can you give me some examples of circumstances/locations/encounters where the presence of BWC (whether it's on or off) helped you solve the problem easily?
 - h. Is your opinion of body-worn cameras different now in comparison to when they first rolled out?
 - i. Are there any shifts or patrol areas that the BWC would provide more utility?

Appendix B:

