

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

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Nate LeMahieu
Research Assistant

Na Liu, M.S.
Research Associate

Chris Sweadner
Research Assistant

John Klofas, Ph.D.
Director
jmkgcj@rit.edu

John McCluskey, Ph.D.
Department Chairperson
jdmgcj@rit.edu

Irshad Altheimer, Ph.D.
Deputy Director
ixagcj@rit.edu

www.rit.edu/cpsi/

Executive Summary

- I. On average, officers felt uninformed about the implementation of the Body-Worn Camera Project (BWC).
- II. The majority of officers thought BWCs cannot, by themselves, produce socially desirable behavior among civilians, citing communication skills as a necessary tool for police work.
- III. Officers identified three major benefits in implementing BWCs:
 - a. Improvements in incident documentation
 - b. Providing visual justification for officers' actions
 - c. Dispersing street-level crime
- IV. Officers identified four primary concerns in implementing BWCs:
 - a. Potential effect on officer performance and efficiency
 - b. Officer and civilian privacy
 - c. Concern that footage will be utilized to discipline officers
 - d. Anticipated loss of discretion and autonomy in arrest decision-making
- V. Supervisors' feelings and expectations were consistent with that of patrol officers
 - a. They expected BWCs to increase the accuracy and completeness of report writing
 - b. They were concerned that cameras might increase workload when reviewing reports
- VI. On average, younger officers were more receptive to adopting BWC technology

Report Summary

Introduction

*This report serves as an executive summary of a larger report by identifying and summarizing the key findings of the larger report herein.*¹ 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 in order to collect qualitative data on officers' perceptions and expectations of body-worn cameras. For these interviews, researchers developed a semi-structured interview that was designed around anticipated changes in policing and police processes 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).

¹ For additional information, please contact: jmkgcj@rit.edu or see www.rit.edu/cpsi

Key Findings

Lack of Information on the BWC Project

During ride-along interviews, Clinton Section officers often indicated that there was a lack of information among officers in regards to the BWC, stating that there were not enough updates on the progress of the BWC implementation. Due to officers' lack of information, difficulties were present in identifying expectations and perceptions of BWCs, and officers were cautious about making assumptions about the impact of BWCs on police work.

Perceived Impact of BWCs on Police-Citizen Encounters

The majority of officers felt that BWCs would not make a substantial difference in terms of impacting encounters between citizens and police, unless citizens realized a camera was present during an interaction. Officers cited communication and de-escalation techniques as a primary tool to regulate interactions, and that body-worn cameras, a secondary tool, could not replace good police work.

Perceived Benefits of Implementing BWCs

Three possible benefits of BWCs that the officers of the Clinton Section frequently mentioned were: *improvements in incident documentation*, *providing a justification for police officers actions*, and *dispersing street level crime*. Officers frequently mentioned that BWCs could be a useful tool for acquiring evidence as they provide video footage from the police officer's perspective, and may assist in criminal investigations and convictions. As a result of the different perspective that BWC footage is able to provide, officers felt that BWCs could bridge the gap between the public and officers by providing a more complete view of police work. Frequently, officers indicated that they believed the general public has been misinformed into thinking that officers regularly engage in misconduct. In this light, BWCs were discussed as a tool that could resolve complaints filed against officers as a result of enhanced incident documentation. Lastly, officers believed that BWCs could reduce the appearance of street level crimes such as drug dealing and loitering. Officers stated that by having the presence of cameras,

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these crimes would disperse from the area. However, officers also believed that these street-level crimes may just be redirected into areas with less police activity.

Perceived Concerns in Implementing BWCs

The officers in the Clinton Section shared a variety of concerns with researchers in regards to implementing BWCs, including *performance and efficiency, privacy considerations, BWCs serving as a disciplinary tool against, and a loss of discretion*. First, officers were concerned that BWCs could potentially impact officers' efficiency depending on the speed of uploading/downloading BWC videos. Thus, officers vocalized hopes that the BWC that they receive is up-to-date and easy to use.

Officers were concerned that BWCs may complicate civilian and officer expectations for privacy. Concerns for privacy were often mentioned in conjunction with the BWC recording policy. For example, officers were not aware if the BWCs would have to be turned on throughout an entire shift, or could be disabled between responses to calls. In the case that the BWC was required to always be on, officers were concerned about undercover officer anonymity. Additionally, officers were concerned for the privacy of witnesses, who could potentially be deterred from cooperating with the police in the presence of a camera.

Officers were also concerned that BWCs would be used as a tool to discipline officers. Officers were not sure if footage would be randomly selected in order to evaluate officer performance, and felt that they would experience additional stress during their shifts if they felt that their actions were being second-guessed.

Officers cited a potential loss of discretion around decision making during an arrest as their greatest concern. If the BWC video was to be utilized to evaluate officer performance, officers expressed anxiety around potential consequences in situations where they chose not to make an arrest.

Supervisor Perceptions of BWC Adoption

Researchers discussed BWCs with several sergeants within the Clinton Section. The sergeants of Clinton Section generally shared the perceptions and expectations of patrol officers in regards to BWCs, but provided additional insight for how BWCs might pertain to supervisory

responsibilities. The expected impact on supervisory work was closely associated with how the BWC policy would be developed, and whether or not they would be required to utilize BWC footage when reviewing reports. Sergeants believed that using BWC footage would increase the accuracy and completeness of report writing, but would increase their workload substantially.

Conclusions

As a pre-study project, these ride-along sessions not only gave researchers direction for future BWC studies, but also offered some insight on improving the efficiency of the BWC implementation. Researchers gained a thorough understanding of officers' expectations for BWCs, and set the foundation for future evaluation studies.

Based on the group of officers interviewed and observed, researchers speculated that officers who were younger tended to be more open-minded to the BWC technology than that of older officers. Older officers tended to express more concern in regards to how BWCs operate and the policies surrounding it. However, this is based on a very small sample, and surveys would be needed to gain further insight.

Due to the lack of information on the BWC project, officers were confused on what to expect or how to prepare for implementation. Generally, officers viewed BWCs as a national trend rather than a necessity in policing, and believed any change resulting from its adoption would be limited. One of these limitations included the BWCs' ability to positively influence citizen encounters, and officers perceived that verbal communication skills would be a more effective tool.

Officers had agreed that the most substantial benefit that BWCs could deliver would be the ability to provide a justification for their actions when falsely accused of misconduct. These officers believed that the BWC could show the general public the entirety of police work, and potentially minimize officer stereotypes and prejudices held by the public. Additionally, officers believed that the BWC technology could simplify incident documentation and record searching procedures.

Officers expressed a variety of concerns with implementing BWCs. These concerns were largely associated with the thoroughness of the BWC recording policy and the specific parts of

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the policy mandating when officers are to turn on their cameras. Officers believed that the BWC policy should specifically address recording in environments such as schools, hospitals, and private property.

Officers expressed concern that the BWC footage could potentially be utilized by supervisors in order to evaluate their performance. This concern was mentioned in conjunction with the officers' prediction that BWCs would be required to be on throughout a shift, without discretion to turn off their BWC. Additionally, officers anticipated a loss of discretion when deciding to arrest an individual, with a belief that decisions not to arrest an individual would be scrutinized.

Lastly, officers expressed concerns regarding officer and citizen privacy. Officers believed that if BWCs would be required to be on for the entirety of a shift, the privacy of undercover officers would be compromised, and efforts to obtain witness statements might be undermined.

Future ride-along interviews will be conducted in the other four RPD patrol sections: Genesee, Lake, Goodman, and Central. As these patrol sections are located in distinctive neighborhoods, there is a likelihood that BWCs and their effectiveness could be perceived differently according to their sections.

References

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

Appendix A:

A Framework of Interview for Ride-along

1. What does a typical work today look like?
 - a. How long have you been a police officer?
 - b. How long have you been patrolling this area? And how long have you been working on this shift?
 - c. What's your patrol area?
 - d. What are the major crime concerns of this area based on your experience working here?
 - e. What time of your shift and what days of the week do you have larger workload (Calls for service etc.)?
 - f. How often do you have to call your supervisor? (Use of force report, major crime scene or other issues)
 - g. Overall, what do you think the police/citizen encounter right now? Are citizens cooperative? How much trust do you think you receive from the community you are patrolling (not trusted vs. trusted)?
 - h. What are the type of crimes in this area that need citizen input the most?
 - i. How often do you have to use force to solve the problem?
 - j. How comfortable are you with the idea of using BWC in policing? (Based on your personal experience and the national trend)
 - k. What issues do you want the BWC study to address?
 - l. Was there any situation where you thought having a BWC could have helped?
2. In what ways do you think BWC are going to affect the nature of police work and why?
 - a. Do you think there would be a detectable change in policing with the addition of BWC? (Example: Police citizen encounter,
 - (1) What are the common crimes in this patrol section? In what ways do you think BWC will change your job in this particular patrol area?
 - Do you think BWC will change the likelihood of proactive encounters?
 - Do you think BWC will change response to reactive encounters?
 - Do you think BWC will bring more reliance on supervisor consultation?
 - (2) Possible changes in different kinds of encounters/calls?
 - Mentally ill
 - Family disturbance/domestic dispute
 - Any early investigative activities (calls to assaults)
 - Dealing with juveniles
 - Drug dealing
 - Gang
 - (3) How's BWC going to change citizen's view/cooperation of police work?
 - Do you think BWC will help increase public's trust to police? (Justify certain cases?)
 - Do you think that the BWC will affect the quality of police/citizen encounter?
 - What's your expectation of whether or not citizens would question the camera usage? Why?

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- How do you think the appearance of the BWC would affect the quality/quantity of informational communication between police and concerned citizens?
 - How will BWC affect police interaction with witnesses?
 - How will BWC affect evidentiary usage?
 - How will BWC affect the possibility of follow-up investigative interviews?
- (4) In what ways do you think BWC would affect domestic violence cases? (Victim cooperation, criminal charge, etc.)
3. Police perception of the BWC (Positive, Neutral or Negative)
- (1) Do you think BWC going to be an extra burden or do you tend to perceive it as an improvement that will make your job easier? Why do you think so?
- If Concern > Benefit:
- What's your major concern with using/implementing BWC? (Technology? Workload? Discretion? Policy? Etc.). Can you give an example of how BWC could cause a problem in your work?
- If Benefit > Concern:
- What's your expected benefit of using/implementing BWC? (Technology? Workload? Discretion? Policy? Etc.). Can you give an example of how BWC could solve a problem in your work?
- (2) How comfortable are you with BWC as a new policing technology?
- (3) Would the amount of time you'll have to spend on BWC related work affect your role as an officer?
- (4) Are there locations/situations/encounters where you believe the camera may present issues, regardless of policy? (e.g., in homes, schools, with minors, in extreme weathers, particular kinds of events/witnesses)
- (5) What's your thought on BWC vs. officer vision/reaction?

Appendix B:

