

**Community Views of Body-Worn Cameras in the Rochester Police
Department: An Executive Summary**

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Executive Summary

- I. In order to identify community expectations and sentiment revolving around body-worn cameras (BWC), researchers utilized three different methods:
 - a. Focus group interviews
 - b. Analyzed dialogue from BWC community presentations
 - c. Community surveys in two Rochester neighborhoods through the TIPS (Trust, Information, Programs, and Services) police-community endeavor
- II. Of all the total focus group participant categories, 92.1% believed BWCs would improve police-community relationships.
- III. Focus group participants offered additional insight in regards to BWCs. Researchers categorized them into three aspects based on the content:
 - a. Enhancements in transparency and accountability
 - b. Concerns with footage manipulation/editing
 - c. BWCs' inability to serve as a cure-all for improving police-community relationships
- IV. The analysis of the community presentation dialogue revealed five primary subjects matters in relation to BWCs:
 - a. Requests for quarterly reports
 - b. Concerns regarding unstable BWC attachment
 - c. Footage gathering protocols in the incidence of BWC failure
 - d. BWC program costs particularly as it pertains to footage storage
 - e. Officer discretion as it relates to the BWC recording policy
- V. Community surveys indicated positive perceptions of BWC usage.
 - a. 68.4% of the respondents from Norton Village and Edgerton Park were aware of the Rochester Police Department (RPD) using BWCs.
 - b. 86.1% of the respondents believed that BWCs would improve their community's relationship with the RPD.
 - c. Across both sites, 85.7% of the respondents believed that the RPD would use BWC footage fairly and impartially.

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. Although the expectations of BWCs are high, they are speculated 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 in 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 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 the CPSI's evaluation included identifying the communities' perceptions and expectations of the BWC implementation. In order to accomplish this, researchers facilitated community surveys, community focus groups, and analyzed dialogue exchanged at BWC community presentations. In subsequent sections of this report are the findings subdivided by the strategies researchers took to accomplish these goals.

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

Key Findings

Community Focus Groups

Focus groups are defined as a technique that uses in-depth group interviews where the subjects of interest concentrate around a particular topic (Thomas, MacMillian, McColl, Hale, & Bond, 1995). While they are not necessarily representative of a population as a whole, focus group participants are selected because of their expertise around a particular subject (Thomas et al., 1995). During the focus groups, researchers utilized the group feedback analysis method (Heller, 1969). Group feedback analysis begins with a survey question that participants respond to anonymously and after the surveys are completed, the results of the surveys are revealed and discussions are facilitated around the results. One component in identifying the community's views of BWCs includes a focus group question that was incorporated into a pre-existing study.² For the focus group, one BWC-related item was presented: "The use of BWC cameras is good for the relationship between the police and the community." The focus group participants could respond with: "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," and "strongly disagree." The survey item was presented to five different classifications of focus group participants: *community groups*, *neighborhood groups*, *police-citizen groups*, *youth groups*, and *reentry groups*. Across all five categories, 92.1% of the total participants agreed or strongly agreed that the use of BWCs are good for police-community relationships.

Discussions were held after displaying the results of the BWC survey item. Researchers identified three subject matters that were discussed pertaining to BWCs: *enhancements in accountability and transparency*, *concerns regarding footage manipulation*, and *limitations in BWCs' ability to improve police-community relationships*.

The focus group participants believed that BWCs could serve as a behavioral modification tool for police and citizens due to increased accountability. Focus group attendees believed that BWCs would positively influence police-community interactions, creating more respectful interactions between the two parties. Additionally, the community felt that

² For more information on the CPSI's Community Views Project, see: <https://www.rit.edu/cla/criminaljustice/cpsi/work/bydate>

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disseminating BWC videos could serve as a means to increase police transparency, which in turn predicts an increase in trust between the police and community’

Focus group participants also expressed concerns in regards to footage manipulation, which included video editing, mishandling footage resulting in the footage being “lost,” and possible disabling of the BWC during tense incidents. Due to these concerns, focus group attendees suggested that an agency independent from law enforcement should be responsible for the management of BWC data.

Lastly, focus group attendees stated that even if BWCs were used correctly and with high standards, they are not a cure-all for improving police-community relationships. The participants believed that while BWCs may help police-community relationships initially, the benefits that BWCs are presumed to bring to police-community interactions will become acclimated to by officers and community members over time.

Presentation Dialogue

In order to introduce the idea of BWCs to the public, the RPD hosted four community presentations in the summer and fall of 2016.³ The content of the presentations detailed a variety of aspects pertaining to BWCs, which included the intended impact of BWCs, an update on the implementation of BWCs, a description of the operational and technical functions of the BWC, BWC assignment, and BWC recording and storage policies. To conclude the presentations, the attendees and sworn personnel of the BWC program had discussions in regards to the implementation of BWCs. Researchers attended and observed the community presentations and documented the dialogue from the discussions. Below are the themes of the dialogue from the meetings based on subject matter.

The primary BWC topics that researchers observed were: *dissemination of information, camera attachment, camera failure, program costs, and the BWC recording policy*. First, attendees expressed interest regarding the dissemination of information regarding the BWC implementation in the form of quarterly reports. In response, an RPD representative stated that

³ For further details, see: <http://www.cityofrochester.gov/article.aspx?id=8589967628>

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updates would be delivered to the public six months after implementation, contingent on the approval of the Mayor and/or the Chief of the RPD.⁴

During the presentations, attendees were able to examine the BWCs. Attendees expressed concerns that the attachment of the BWC may be inadequate, stating that additional support such as Velcro straps may be necessary. The RPD personnel acknowledged these concerns and stated that Velcro, while a good idea, may also be vulnerable to camera detachment.

Attendees inquired about the procedures that would be taken to gather footage in case of BWC failure. The RPD personnel explained that they had collaborated with the BWC provider to address technical problems as they had arisen. Additionally, the presenter stated that while possible, retrieving footage from broken BWCs would be difficult.

Program costs related to the storage of footage was also a major concern expressed by attendees. The attendees inquired as to whether funding would need to be increased in the case that footage would need to be backed up. In response, RPD officials stated that they were unable to predict the cost of storage at the time, and further research would be required to ultimately make such predictions.

Lastly, attendees and RPD personnel discussed officer discretion in turning BWCs on and off as it relates to the recording policy. The attendees stated that they preferred officers to have limited discretion in decisions related to turning on and off their cameras. In response, the RPD assured presentation attendees that the recording policy was strict in comparison to other police departments.⁵ Researchers verified the validity of these claims.

Community Surveys—Trust, Information, Programs, and Services (TIPS)⁶

The third and final mechanism used to identify community perceptions and expectations of BWCs is an ongoing door-to-door survey collected periodically to gather information from community members in various police beats. These surveys are collected in preselected neighborhoods hosting TIPS initiatives, an event that aims to strengthen police-community

⁴ For a detailed history of BWC efforts on behalf of the City of Rochester and the RPD, see: <http://www.cityofrochester.gov/RPDBodyWornCamera/>

⁵ To see other model policies, see: <http://www.cityofrochester.gov/article.aspx?id=8589967630>

⁶ For additional information on Project T.I.P.S, see: <https://www.campgooddays.org/programs-project-tips>

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relations while connecting participants with various service providers and local agencies. During the summer of 2016, the TIPS initiative was held at Norton Village Rec Center and Edgerton Park in the City of Rochester. TIPS initiatives are police-community engagement events that are held periodically in Rochester neighborhoods throughout the summer. Researchers surveyed approximately 27 selected street segments within the boundaries of the establishments on various topics, including BWC awareness and perceptions of its usage.

The first BWC-related item on the survey was: “Before today, I knew that the RPD is using BWCs.” The level of awareness between Norton Village respondents and Edgerton Park respondents were similar, reporting 70.5% and 66.4%, respectively. Researchers then asked residents about their beliefs as to whether “BWCs will improve their community’s relationship with the RPD.” To this question, 93.5% of the Norton Village respondents either strongly agree or agree, while 79.4% of the Edgerton Park respondents agreed or strongly agreed. The last survey item asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement “BWCs will be used fairly and impartially by the RPD.” The Norton Village respondents largely agreed with this statement (89.5%), as did the Edgerton Park respondents (81.9%).

However, limitations should be acknowledged due to the methodology of the TIPS surveys. Due to the nature of TIPS surveys in that they are door-to-door surveys during periods of time where working-class populations are not present to be surveyed, these results are not generalizable to the population at large.

Conclusion

Utilizing focus groups, community presentation dialogue, and surveys allowed for a diverse collection of information pertaining to community perceptions of BWCs. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach couples quantitative data collection that can be coded and scored, with qualitative data, which enables a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the quantitative data collected.

TIPS surveys are anticipated to be repeated in following summers. As BWCs are deployed, the perceptions held by the public may change over time, and could be monitored by the TIPS survey. As the impact of BWCs on police-community relations, transparency, and accountability develop, further questions could be added to expand future research. Furthermore,

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TIPS surveys are often conducted within different areas of the City of Rochester. These areas are characterized by different socioeconomic backgrounds, community sentiments, and police obligations resulting in differences in BWC impact. Therefore, future TIPS initiatives could be utilized to monitor the impact on different sections of the city.

Future efforts will be made in order to survey the RPD officers' perceptions and expectations of BWCs. The RPD officer surveys will include items in regards to BWC efficacy, efficiency, impact on policing processes, impact on safety, and impact on police-civilian interactions, among other subject matters. Additionally, subsequent reports will compare officer perceptions of BWCs before-and-after implementation.

References

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