

**Lake Section Officers' Perception of Body Worn Camera 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. Lake Section officers recognized four potential benefits that they anticipated BWCs would provide to patrol work:
 - a. Improved police legitimacy from the ability for community members to watch BWC video, which would demonstrate a more inclusive portrait of police work
 - b. The capability to exonerate complaints that may be considered baseless
 - c. Civilize police-community interactions
 - d. Provide enhanced clarity in court proceedings where BWC video may be considered preferable to written police reports

- II. Lake Section officers identified six major concerns that were considered the most significant in regards to BWC implementation:
 - a. Restrictions on police preference when considering decisions to arrest, particularly in domestic incidents
 - b. Reductions in information gathered from witnesses as result of witness fear of retaliation
 - c. Potential disciplinary consequences if BWC activation is forgone in situations that may be considered impractical or unsafe to activate
 - d. Concerns that BWC malfunctions may be considered as deception by the general public
 - e. Concerns that the placement of the BWC may not capture the entirety of an incident

- III. The experiences of officers in other patrol sections where BWC deployment was already completed influenced the perceptions of officers in the Lake Section

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 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 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. The study design consists of pre-implementation of BWCs interviews and post-implementation of BWCs interviews. 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 the Lake Section in the form of a ride-along (See Appendix B). This report summary focuses on the results of the Lake Section officer interviews pre-implementation of BWCs.

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

Key Findings

Perceived Benefits of Implementing BWCs

The officers of the Lake Section discussed a variety of benefits that they expected BWCs to deliver to policing. Officers stated that they believed BWCs could: *improve police legitimacy, exonerate officers of falsely filed complaints, provide a civilizing impact on police-community interactions, and provide utility in court proceedings.* Frequently, officers stated that they believed that BWCs would substantially increase the extent to which the public viewed RPD as transparent. By being able to request and view BWC video, officers believed that the footage may be able to help improve the community's perception of the police. These officers believed that the BWC video would show that officers genuinely attempt to connect with the individuals in their communities.

Additionally, officers believed that BWC video will greatly assist in the adjudication of complaints. Officers believed that in some circumstances, officers face complaints that have no basis to them. However, by having BWCs, officers will be able to record before, during, and after an incident, which could provide additional clarity when resolving complaints filed against them.

Officers frequently mentioned that the BWCs could be used to encourage courteous and respectful interactions on the behalf of officers as well as community members. Officers believed that when both parties are aware that their interactions are being recorded, they will modify their behavior so that there will not be any documentation of either individual engaging in misconduct.

Lastly, officers mentioned that the BWCs could provide utility in court proceedings. Often times during trial, juries rely on written reports describing an incident. BWC video was described as advantageous over written reports as it would visually depict the circumstances of an incident. As a positive consequence, officers predicted that they would potentially spend less time delivering testimonies that characterize the scene and incident.

Perceived Concerns of Implementing BWCs

The officers of the Lake Section stated that they had several concerns with the implementation of BWCs. These fell into five primary concerns that were associated with the usage and implementation of BWCs. These concerns were: *limited volition in decisions to arrest, reduced intelligence from witnesses, increased workloads, BWC equipment malfunction, and BWC placement.*

Officers frequently cited that they believed the BWCs could potentially reduce the level of discretion that officers have when deciding to make an arrest. Domestic violence incidents were commonly referenced by officers as a type of incident where BWCs would limit discretion than most. Occasionally in domestic incidents, the content of verbal exchanges between the involved parties may be considered criminal, but, generally, no arrest is made as they are considered to be hypothetical rather than remarks grounded in action. With the addition of BWCs, officers predicted that official documentation of verbal threats would have to be considered criminal, which would result in an arrest.

Officers also stated that they anticipated a reduction in information gathered from witnesses and the general public. The officers believed that the presence of a camera would make individuals hesitant to speak to the police and hamper investigative efforts. These officers believed that witnesses to a crime would fear retaliation, as BWC footage is publicly attainable by other individuals.

Frequently mentioned by Lake Section officers were concerns that BWC-related functions would significantly increase their workloads. According to the officers, the primary element in using BWCs that was considered to likely be the most stressful was camera activation. In certain circumstances where BWC activation may be considered unpractical or unsafe, officers stated they would fear for disciplinary action.

Officers also stated that they were concerned about the technical and operational issues with using BWCs that have been experienced in other sections. In some circumstances, these technical issues would result in a non-functioning camera during a call-for-service. In these scenarios, officers said that they were concerned that the general public would consider camera failure as a deliberate attempt by officers to “cover up the facts.”

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Lastly, officers were concerned that the placement of the BWC would hinder the collection of evidence. Due to its placement on the chest, officers stated that the BWC could potentially miss body language and other cues that may determine whether an arrest was justified. Due to these complications, the officers believed that the BWC should be placed closer to eye level, rather than on the chest.

Conclusion

The officers of the Lake Section acknowledged a variety of potential benefits that the BWCs can bring to policing. These benefits included increased transparency, behavioral modification in officers and civilians, and evidential utility in court proceedings. However, the officers were not able to endorse the BWCs without concerns, such as limited discretion, weakened communication between the police and public, increased workload, BWC technical malfunctions, and BWC placement issues. Whenever a potential benefit that BWCs can deliver was discussed, this was often mentioned in conjunction with a lingering concern. For example, while BWCs could offer enhanced evidence in court proceedings, this benefit was considered limited due to concerns that BWCs may malfunction, or reduce intelligence from witnesses.

At the time of the ride-along interviews in the Lake Section, other patrol sections within the RPD were deploying BWCs. It was apparent to researchers that the experience of officers with BWCs in other sections was an influential factor in the information that the Lake Section officers provided. Therefore, it should be acknowledged that there is a possibility of potential biases in the Lake Section officers' responses.

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:

