Body-Worn Cameras

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What It Is

A body-worn camera (BWC) is a small video and audio recording device worn on an officer's chest, lapel, or glasses. It captures the officer's approximate field of view during calls for service, enforcement actions, and use-of-force events. Footage is uploaded to a cloud or agency server after each shift and retained according to departmental or statutory policy.

BWCs are now standard equipment in most large US law enforcement agencies. As of 2022, approximately 80% of local police departments serving populations over 25,000 had deployed them.

Program Objectives

BWC programs are designed to serve four functions simultaneously, which is part of why their outcomes are complicated:

1. Accountability – create an objective record of officer conduct
2. Evidence – provide footage usable in criminal prosecution and civil litigation
3. Deterrence – reduce misconduct by making officers aware they are recorded
4. Transparency – allow agencies to release footage to the public following critical incidents

These goals are not always compatible. Footage useful for accountability may be withheld pending litigation. Deterrence effects depend on consistent activation. Transparency commitments conflict with investigative timelines.

Research Findings

The most rigorous evidence comes from randomized controlled trials, the largest being the Washington DC Metropolitan Police Department study (Yokum, Ravishankar & Coppock, 2019), which found no statistically significant effect on use of force or complaints in a department with strong existing accountability structures.

Earlier studies, particularly Rialto, California (Ariel et al., 2015), showed dramatic reductions in both use-of-force incidents and complaints. The difference matters: Rialto had weaker pre-existing accountability systems and mandatory activation. The DC study had discretionary activation and an already low baseline.

The synthesis from the broader literature:

- Complaints against officers decrease in most studies – the effect is more consistent than use-of-force reduction
- Use of force decreases when activation is mandatory and officers know footage will be reviewed; effect weakens or disappears under discretionary policies
- Officer behavior is influenced more by review and consequence than by the camera itself
- Public trust improvements are real but modest and dependent on footage release practices

Effective Program Design

A BWC program with strong evidence support has five features:

1. Mandatory pre-event activation – camera must be on before any enforcement contact, not activated in response to escalation
2. Automatic activation triggers – cameras that activate when a holster is unsnapped or a vehicle light bar is triggered remove discretion at the critical moment
3. Supervisor review protocols – random and triggered review, not just complaint-driven review
4. Published retention schedule – minimum 180 days for all footage; extended retention triggered by any use-of-force event, complaint, or legal hold
5. Pre-committed release policy – defined criteria for public release, approved before an incident occurs, not negotiated afterward

Common Policy Failures

Most BWC failures trace to the same four problems:

Discretionary activation Policies that allow officers to decide when to activate undermine deterrence entirely. If the camera is off during a critical incident, the accountability function fails at the moment it is needed most.

No review requirement Cameras without systematic supervisor review become evidentiary tools only – useful after something goes wrong, useless as a behavioral intervention.

Inconsistent retention Footage retained for 60 days may be gone before a civil claim is filed. Footage retained indefinitely creates storage and privacy costs agencies have not budgeted for. Most departments set retention by feel rather than by litigation timelines.

Undefined release standards Agencies that have not decided in advance when footage will be released – and said so publicly – face impossible decisions under media pressure following a critical incident. The policy gets made in the worst possible conditions.

The Bottom Line

A BWC mounted on an officer's chest is not an accountability system. The policy around it is. Departments that treat camera deployment as the finish line consistently underperform on every measurable outcome. Departments that treat activation, review, and release as equally important to the hardware itself see consistent reductions in complaints and measurable improvements in public trust. The camera records what happens. The policy determines whether it matters.

HOW TO CITE

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