In-View: Using Auto-Triggers to Enhance Officer Activation During Calls for Service

Background

Over the last five years, police implementation of body-worn cameras (BWCs) has steadily become routine practice. With the number of high-profile police incidents occurring throughout the country, the public has begun to expect digital evidence to be captured and disseminated to the community in a timely manner. The growing demand from the public has placed increased pressure on police agencies to ensure that officers' BWCs are activated during calls for service. To assist officers in this process, police agencies have increasingly begun to implement automatic-activation triggers (also called auto-triggers) to make sure that BWCs are activated during public encounters. In this in-view, we provide examples of how law enforcement agencies have used auto-triggers to offset any human error and increase the likelihood that an event is captured. We further explore some of the benefits and challenges associated with implementing this technology.

Features

While an officer is pursuing or interacting with a suspect, many factors can inhibit or slow their ability to manually activate their BWC. Auto-triggers are a perceived tool that can help overcome these factors and increase the likelihood of BWC video being created when an officer cannot manually activate the camera. Auto-trigger technologies can activate one or more BWCs using different keying mechanisms. Typically, a BWC is automatically activated in the following ways:
•   When an officer pulls a weapon from a holster
•   When a cruiser moves faster than a certain speed
•   When a cruiser runs with lights or siren
•   When multiple BWCs are in proximity to an activated camera (geolocation)
•   When a cruiser door is opened
•   When an officer is running
•   When an officer issues specific verbal commands
•   When an officer enters a specific geographic area

Examples from the Field: Benefits

Agencies have become increasingly invested in ensuring that their officers are maintaining appropriate levels of BWC activation when responding to calls for service or interacting with the public. Accordingly, within the last five years, the perceived value of automatic triggers has steadily risen among practitioners. Across the country, police departments continue to learn that "the court of public opinion is no longer willing to accept a lack of footage." As a result, agencies are discovering the benefits of providing their officers with extra parameters that can increase the likelihood that an event is captured by their BWCs. These added layers of protection help agencies gather evidence that they might not have otherwise been able to collect during a high-profile incident and provide tangible evidence that agencies can provide to their communities. In Atlanta, Georgia, police administrators have seen auto-triggers improve and sustain activation rates and are seeking to provide dispatchers with the ability to activate

an officer's camera to achieve a near 100 percent activation rate. As agencies continue to adopt this technology, they are constantly evaluating the various ways to automate processes and reduce procedural burdens on officers.

Examples from the Field: Challenges

As the necessity of BWCs continues to grow, agencies should be mindful of some of the challenges associated with integrating auto-triggers. Although auto-triggers offer produce tangible benefits, one of the primary concerns expressed by practitioners is the number of false positives (or false activations) experienced. The City of Atlanta, Georgia's Police Department shared that firearm and taser holsters can be sensitive to sudden movements if not mounted correctly, triggering an erroneous activation. With the hundreds of officers that the city employs, the number of accidental recordings can quickly multiply, resulting in wasted storage. Digital evidence managers must then engage in a time-consuming purge of the material, which can take time away from other tasks that could be considered more productive. Bluetooth connectivity can also be a challenge in field; in the Millington, Tennessee Police Department, officers experienced failures with their ability to connect their Bluetooth devices and holster activation. Although those instances were infrequent, the agency experienced some downtime before those cameras were available. In addition to the costs for maintenance, agencies should be aware of the costs associated with implementing auto-triggers into their BWC program. The additional technologies that can be integrated into an agency's program can get expensive, and agencies would benefit from having detailed conversations about the added measures they would like to take to protect officers in the field.

Conclusion

As the importance of BWCs has increased in the last few years, the need to ensure officer activation has equally risen. The use of auto-triggers for BWCs could improve officer activation, contribute to agency transparency, and help provide more accountability. Although there are many benefits associated with using the technology, there are also concerns that adopting agencies should be aware of, such as false activations and costs. Overall, the use of auto-triggers on BWCs has the potential to significantly improve the effectiveness and accountability of law enforcement agencies while assisting in increasing trust and transparency between officers and the communities they serve.