



An Examination of Body-Worn Camera Digital Evidence Management (DEM) Strategies

2nd Edition

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June 2024



This report was supported by Grant No. 2019-BC-BX-K001 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) to the CNA Corporation with Arizona State University (ASU) as a sub-recipient. BJA is a component of the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs. Points of view or opinions contained herein do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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Executive Summary

Over the last few years, thousands of law enforcement agencies in the United States have adopted body-worn cameras (BWCs), and they have subsequently had to deal with the tremendous amount of digital evidence generated by the technology. Digital evidence management (DEM) is the process by which an agency manages, stores, shares, and integrates the data generated by BWCs and other imaging devices (e.g., dashboard cameras, license plate readers (LPRs), cell phones). Addressing DEM is a critical feature of a successful BWC program.

To explore how agencies handle DEM, we conducted an online survey of agencies receiving federal funding for BWCs through the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) BWC Policy and Implementation Program (BWCPIP). We asked the agencies approximately 30 questions related to DEM, including questions about basic program management, internal use of footage, external sharing of footage, challenges, and future developments. In the first edition of this report published in 2022 ([accessible here](#)), we presented results from 68 agencies that completed the survey. This second edition of the report includes results from an additional 22 agencies, for a total sample of 90. The primary findings are as follows:

- Most responding agencies routinely monitor the flow of footage into their organization. Most of the agencies regularly track storage use (69 percent), uploads (60 percent), and activations (43 percent). Most responding agencies also have a process to review untagged footage (83 percent).
- More than half of agencies (56 percent) indicated that they have a specific BWC management unit. These units perform all BWC-related tasks, from camera assignments and maintenance to audits and redaction.
- Nearly all agencies use BWC footage to accomplish an internal objective, whether that be investigating uses of force and citizen complaints (99 percent), monitoring BWC use (i.e., activation compliance; 85 percent), or conducting performance evaluations (44 percent). More than one-quarter of agencies (29 percent) examine metadata to inform their BWC program.
- About three-quarters of responding agencies (74 percent) share BWC footage with the public. Among those that do, nearly all have a policy in place to govern that public release process.
- Most agencies also share the footage with external stakeholders, including city and county prosecutors, public defenders, private attorneys, and other law enforcement agencies. Agencies use several methods to share footage, including providing direct access to cloud storage, secure email links, and physical copies (USB devices). Sharing methods vary notably based on who is receiving the footage. Agencies generally reserve direct access to cloud storage for prosecutors (48 percent have provided access to their prosecutors).

- The primary DEM-related challenges are associated with costs, staffing, and resources (28 percent); storage and infrastructure (19 percent); and video redaction (13 percent). Agencies also identified these same issues as areas for future development. Most of the identified future developments were internally focused (i.e., things that the departments themselves can or should do to address challenges). Very few responding agencies mentioned future developments involving the vendors or others outside their agency.

Managing the digital data of BWC recordings is difficult. To successfully manage a BWC program, agencies must show substantial commitment (financial or otherwise), and DEM is a central feature of that commitment.

An Examination of Body-Worn Camera Digital Evidence Management (DEM) Strategies

I. Introduction

Over the past several years, thousands of law enforcement agencies in the United States have deployed body-worn cameras (BWCs). As agencies have deployed these cameras, they have been forced to confront the complex realities of managing a BWC program. Buying the cameras and deploying them to officers is relatively easy. However, meeting the cost, resource, staffing, and data storage requirements to properly manage a BWC program is more daunting. It is also difficult to ensure everyone in the organization understands the technology and adheres to policy. Digital evidence management (DEM) is one of the most critical features of a successful BWC program.

DEM is the process by which an agency manages, stores, and transmits information from different devices or technologies, such as cell phone information, digital photographs, digital voice recordings, and BWC footage. BWCs produce a tremendous amount of digital evidence that law enforcement agencies must handle. BWC footage is often evidentiary, and as such, agencies must address issues including chain of custody, processing, access, and storage (including permanent storage in some cases). BWC footage has unique value for agencies internally. It can provide evidence to resolve citizen complaints about officers' actions (including use of force) as well as data to enhance officer training and inform supervisors' performance evaluations. Moreover, external entities often request BWC digital evidence, including prosecutors, defense counsel, other law enforcement agencies, citizens, and the media. To respond to these external requests, agencies must manage additional storage and security matters.

Although law enforcement agencies are deriving clear evidentiary value from BWCs and other devices that generate digital footage, basic operational research into DEM processes has not kept pace with the rapid adoption of these technologies and the sheer volume of digital data they generate.

We still need to know more about how law enforcement agencies handle and leverage BWC digital evidence. Do agencies monitor the flow of footage into their organization? Do they use the footage for internal purposes, such as investigating complaints and completing performance evaluations? How do agencies share BWC digital evidence with external requestors? What are the primary barriers to achieving effective BWC DEM? Few efforts have sought to answer these questions (for an exception, see Uchida et al., 2021). To address this knowledge gap, we conducted an online survey of agencies that received federal funding for BWCs to better understand DEM issues. The first edition of this report published in 2022 described results from 68 agencies.¹ This second edition includes results from an additional 22 agencies, for a total sample of 90.

¹ We acknowledge the contributions of Dr. Janne Gaub and Dr. Craig Uchida to the first edition of this report.

II. Methodology

We deployed a survey via Qualtrics to all law enforcement agencies that have received federal funding to purchase BWCs through the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) Body-Worn Camera Policy and Implementation Program (BWCPIP). We sent the survey to all grantees, current and former, from fiscal years 2015–2022 (n=589). The survey (see the appendix) captures information related to DEM basics (e.g., BWC deployment and implementation, BWC program management, DEM characteristics), internal and external uses of digital evidence, DEM challenges, and future directions for DEM.

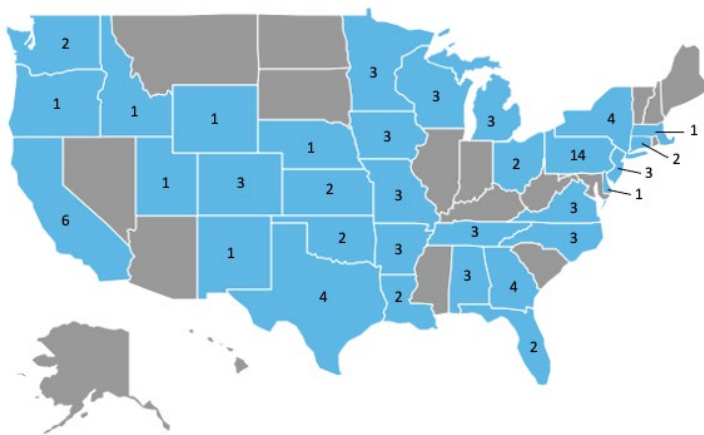
We sent the survey to each grantee’s point of contact on record. In addition to the initial survey invitation, we sent three follow-up and reminder emails to the same contact. We received 90 completed surveys (response rate of about 15 percent) from agencies in 32 states (see Figure 1). Although the sample contains considerable geographic diversity, Pennsylvania is overrepresented with 14 respondents (15.6 percent).

Of the 90 responding agencies, the majority (n=64; 71 percent) were municipal police departments, 17 (19 percent) were county sheriff’s departments, and 9 (10 percent) were classified as other, including correctional agencies, university police departments, or tribal law enforcement agencies. We also captured the size of the jurisdiction in terms of population, which varied considerably:

- Fewer than 10,000 (12 percent)
- 10,000–49,999 (32 percent)
- 50,000–99,999 (16 percent)
- 100,000–249,999 (20 percent)
- 250,000+ (20 percent)

Overall, 54 responding agencies (60 percent) serve jurisdictions with fewer than 100,000 people.

Figure 1. Survey respondents by state



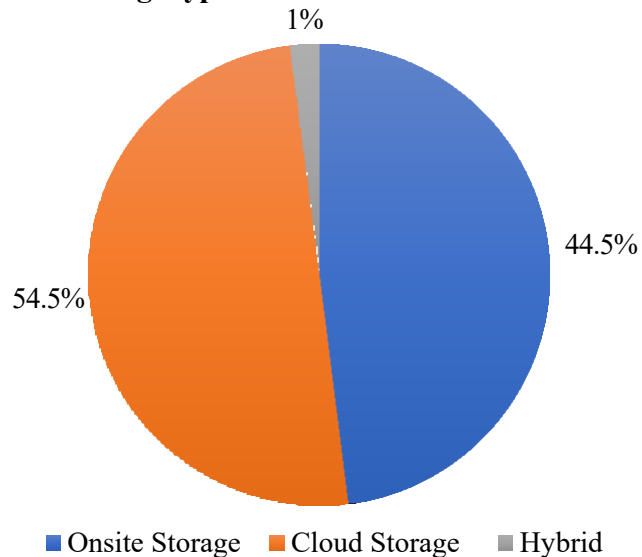
III. Results

Basic Elements of BWC DEM

We asked agencies about the number of BWCs that they currently deploy, and that number ranged dramatically from 3 to 8,000 (mean=309, median=44). About one-half of the responding agencies have deployed Axon BWCs (49 percent), and one-quarter have deployed Watch Guard (28 percent). The remaining 23 percent are split across a half-dozen smaller vendors.

We asked the agencies to describe their DEM storage system, annual costs, and data tracking procedures. Storage use varied among the agencies. Figure 2 shows that agencies are relatively evenly split between cloud storage (vendor-provided; 54.5 percent) and local, onsite storage (44.5 percent), with a small number adopting a hybrid approach (both local and cloud; 1 percent).

Figure 2. Storage type



Costs associated with DEM varied considerably among the agencies, and many respondents said they could not isolate those costs from other aspects of BWC program management.

A handful of responding agencies (11 percent) reported no annual costs associated with DEM (e.g., server is fully paid for), and 52 percent reported annual costs at \$50,000 or less (mean = \$14,700). One large agency reported an annual cost exceeding \$2.3 million for DEM. Notably, 20 percent of the agencies reported being unaware of annual costs because these expenses are written or bundled into larger contracts.

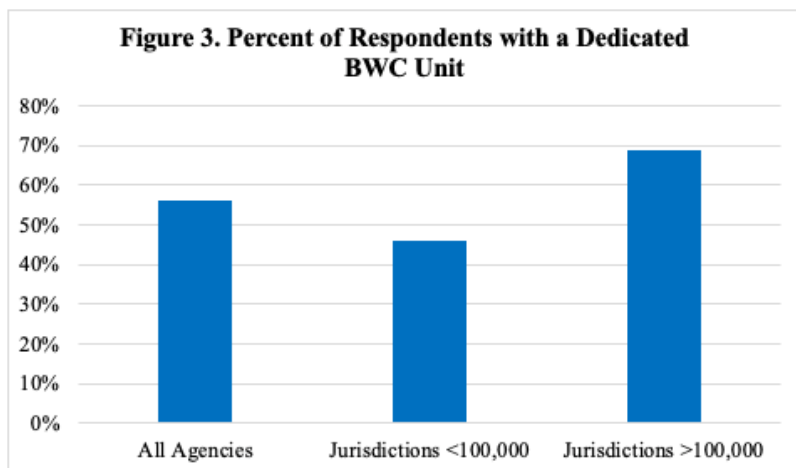
We also asked agencies about the day-to-day management and monitoring of their BWC systems (and related DEM). The results were as follows:

- 43 percent track the number of activations
- 60 percent track the number of videos uploaded
- 69 percent track storage use
- 83 percent have a process to review untagged footage

This kind of routine monitoring is less common among smaller agencies. Agencies serving populations <100,000 are less likely to track activations (33 percent), video uploads (44 percent), or storage use (53 percent). This finding may reflect the resource burden associated with managing DEM among smaller agencies.

BWC Program Management

We also asked agencies for specifics about managing their BWC programs. Notably, more than half of the responding agencies (n=50; 56 percent) indicated having a dedicated BWC unit.²



Our findings show that as agency size increases, so does the likelihood that an agency has a dedicated BWC unit. For instance, Figure 3 shows that 46 percent of agencies with jurisdictions of fewer than 100,000 people have a dedicated BWC unit, compared with 69 percent of agencies with jurisdictions of more than 100,000 people.

Responding agencies said they had staffed their BWC units with a combination of sworn and civilian employees (see Table 1). Most of these agencies had at least some sworn officers assigned to the unit (80 percent)—typically two or fewer officers (60 percent of those with a unit). More than half of agencies (54 percent) also had at least one civilian employee assigned to the unit.³

Table 2 shows the diverse tasks that BWC units undertake. These units handle nearly all aspects of a BWC program, from malfunctioning BWC hardware (92 percent) and software (90 percent) to liaising with the BWC vendor

(92 percent). Most units also serve as liaisons to other criminal justice agencies (86 percent) and city and county IT departments (78 percent). Other typical responsibilities include conducting audits and compliance checks for internal purposes (80 percent), handling footage requests from other justice agencies (78 percent), redacting footage (74 percent), coordinating camera assignments (72 percent), and handling public requests for footage (70 percent). This diversity of tasks did not vary significantly by agency size or program maturity.

Table 1. Staffing for BWC units (n=50)

<i># Assigned</i>	<i># Sworn</i>	<i># Civilian</i>
0	10 (20%)	23 (46%)
1	15 (30%)	14 (28%)
2	15 (30%)	2 (4%)
3	4 (8%)	6 (12%)
4	1 (2%)	2 (4%)
5+	3 (6%)	3 (6%)

² We did not define or specify what it meant to have a designated BWC unit. We allowed the responding agencies to answer the question from their perspective.

³ Two agencies provided the number of civilian staff but did not specify the number of sworn staff.

Table 2. Responsibilities of specific BWC units (n=50)

<i>Responsibilities</i>	<i>N (%) of Agencies</i>
Conduct auditing and compliance for internal purposes	40 (80%)
Coordinate camera assignments	36 (72%)
Handle footage requests from other criminal justice agencies	39 (78%)
Handle malfunctions and problems with hardware	46 (92%)
Handle malfunctions and problems with software	45 (90%)
Handle public requests for footage	35 (70%)
Handle redaction of footage that has been publicly requested	37 (74%)
Serve as liaison to city and county IT	39 (78%)
Serve as liaison to other criminal justice agencies	43 (86%)
Serve as liaison to the BWC vendor	46 (92%)
Other	5 (10%)

Internal Uses

Agencies reported using digital evidence to assist with a host of internal tasks, including the following:

- Reviewing footage for internal investigations (99 percent)
- Reviewing footage to investigate both citizen complaints and officer use of force (99 percent)
- Reviewing footage to monitor BWC use, especially activation compliance (85 percent)
- Reviewing footage to assess officers’ general performance (44 percent)
- Reviewing BWC metadata (29 percent)⁴

The agencies that reported reviewing metadata cited a range of reasons for doing so, including to track complaints, identify BWC malfunctions, assess policy compliance (e.g., matching metadata to a computer-aided design (CAD) system and records management system), ensure proper tagging and classification of videos, ensure correct data retention periods, and assist with program auditing.

We found clear associations between program maturity and metadata use and between jurisdiction size and metadata use. For instance, older programs are more likely to use metadata. Of agencies that started BWC programs in or before 2017, 34 percent analyzed metadata, compared with 18 percent of those that implemented BWCs more recently (after 2017). Larger agencies also analyze metadata more frequently, with 42 percent of agencies serving jurisdictions of more than 100,000 people analyzing metadata, compared with 19 percent of agencies serving populations of under 100,000.

External Uses of DEM

We asked agencies about their processes and policies for sharing digital evidence with external entities. This data sharing is common, and agencies typically share evidence with county

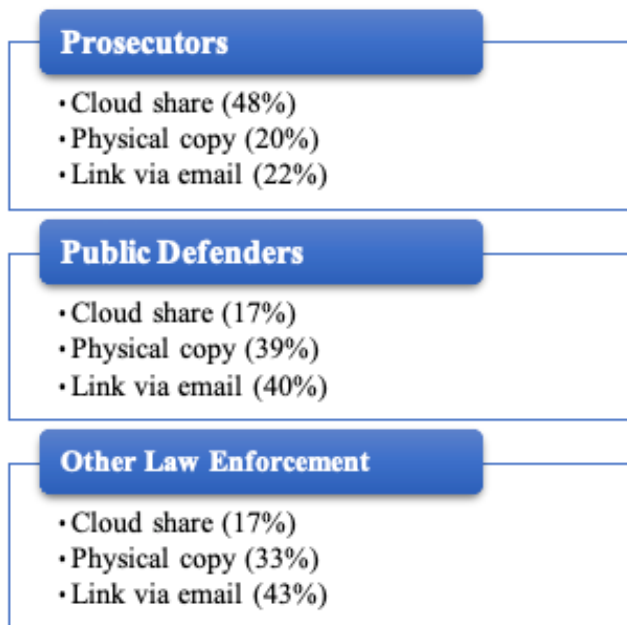
⁴ *Metadata* are “data about data” (Martain et al., 2021). Metadata provide summary information about a BWC video, such as the incident category, the date and length of an encounter, specific aspects of the video (e.g., use of force), and the location (GPS coordinates). The BWC may capture this information automatically, or the officer may enter it.

prosecutors (79 percent), city prosecutors (40 percent), other law enforcement agencies (42 percent), public defenders (12 percent), and private attorneys (6 percent).⁵

Sharing Footage

Responding agencies share BWC footage in various ways, although clear patterns exist based on who is receiving the footage (see Figure 4). For example, they can give an external entity its own access to the cloud-based storage system. This approach is a standard method for sharing footage with prosecutors (48 percent), but agencies use it less frequently to share with public defenders (17 percent) and other law enforcement agencies (17 percent). Responding agencies said they are much more likely to send secure links via email to public defenders (40 percent) and other law enforcement agencies (43 percent), or to share physical copies (e.g., DVDs or thumb drives) with public defenders (39 percent) and other law enforcement agencies (33 percent).

Figure 4. Methods of Digital Evidence Sharing to External Agencies



Public Release and Redaction

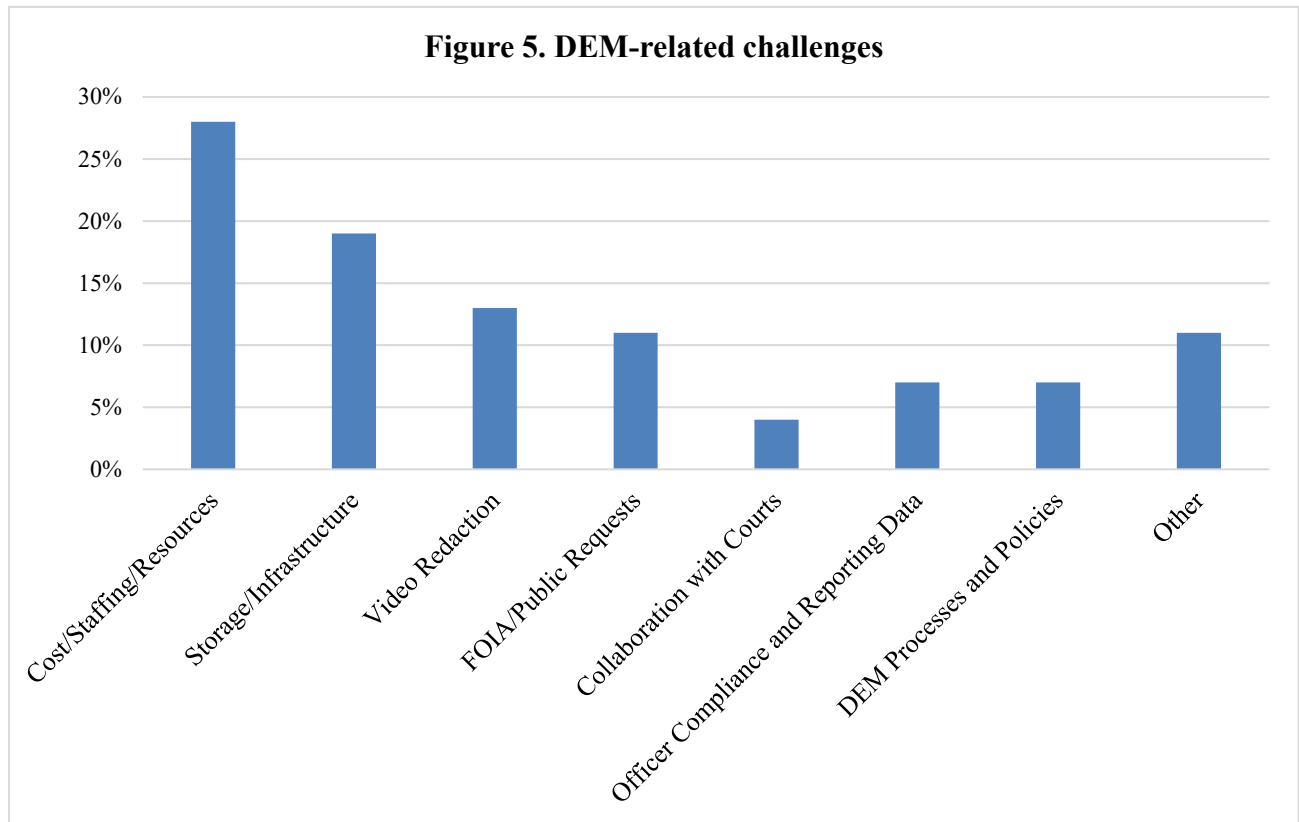
We asked agencies about sharing footage with the community, and 74 percent indicated that they release BWC footage to the public. Of the agencies that release footage publicly, nearly all (98 percent) have a policy governing the release of digital evidence. The few agencies that lack this element in their BWC policy rely on their general policy governing public records requests. Moreover, 97 percent redact their own videos, although about half (55 percent) charge requestors a fee for doing so.

DEM-Related Challenges

We asked agencies to identify their most pressing challenges from a list of well-established barriers associated with BWC programs (and DEM). Figure 5 details the perceptions of the responding agencies. The most common reported challenges included cost, staffing, and resources (28 percent); storage and infrastructure requirements (19 percent); and video redaction (13 percent). Agencies also cited the need to meet requirements in the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and to respond to public requests for BWC footage (11 percent).⁶

⁵ We designed this question as “select all that apply.” Twenty-one percent of agencies did not select county prosecutor, which seems unusual. This result may be explained, in part, by the fact that prosecutors in smaller jurisdictions have different roles and responsibilities. We were unable to get more detail on this finding.

⁶ We also examined the identified challenges by agency size. With few exceptions, size did not matter. The challenges varied little, except that agencies serving larger jurisdictions were slightly less likely to identify storage as a challenge (16 percent versus 20 percent for agencies serving smaller jurisdictions) and were slightly more likely to identify DEM as a challenge (14 percent versus 2 percent for agencies serving smaller jurisdictions).



Future Directions

We asked responding agencies to share their perceptions about the most important future developments in managing BWC digital evidence. Unsurprisingly, agencies identified future developments that closely aligned to the challenges they identified in the prior section, such as the need for better staffing, more efficient methods to respond to public records requests, better CAD integration, and more efficient processes for redaction and video sharing. Other agencies focused specifically on expanding their BWC program in terms of cameras and staff.

Notably, most of the identified future developments were internally focused (i.e., things that the departments themselves can or should do to address challenges). Very few responding agencies mentioned future developments involving the vendors or others outside their agency.

IV. Conclusion

We surveyed current and former BJA BWCPPIP grantees to understand how they are managing digital evidence and handling issues that arise. Five key themes emerged:

1. Most responding agencies routinely monitor footage flow into their organizations. The majority regularly track uploads, storage use, and activations. Most responding agencies have a process to review untagged footage.

2. About half of agencies have a dedicated BWC unit staffed by both sworn and civilian personnel. These units tend to handle all aspects of BWC use, including routine maintenance, camera assignments, redaction, and auditing. It is unclear how agencies without a dedicated BWC unit handle these tasks.
3. Most agencies use the footage to accomplish internal objectives, such as investigating uses of force, resolving citizen complaints, or conducting performance evaluations.
4. Most agencies share footage with the public and external agencies, although how they share this footage varies considerably by who is receiving the footage. About half of the agencies provide prosecutors with direct access via cloud-sharing.
5. The primary DEM-related challenges are associated with costs, resources, and infrastructure. Managing the digital data of BWC recordings is difficult. To successfully manage a BWC program, agencies must show substantial commitment (financial or otherwise), and DEM is a central feature of that commitment.

We stress that the reader should keep the limitations of this study in mind while considering these themes. Our survey sampling frame was a nonrandom group of agencies using BWCs. The respondents were likely not statistically representative of the entire population of US law enforcement agencies or even the smaller population of agencies that have received federal grants for BWCs. The response rate to the survey was just over 15 percent. Consequently, our results may not reflect the experiences in other jurisdictions. They do, however, highlight the current issues, challenges, and practices regarding DEM and BWCs that agencies are likely to encounter.

V. Policy and Research Implications

This report provides an important snapshot of DEM issues among agencies that deploy BWCs. The report demonstrates that small, medium, and large policing agencies are monitoring and tracking compliance with activation, uploads, and categorization of video footage. These agencies are using footage to address important public policy concerns—including investigating use of force and resolving citizen complaints—and to inform performance evaluations. They are also releasing footage to the public. These actions show that agencies are responding to the need for accountability and transparency.

However, agencies are now grappling with bigger questions about digital evidence. Because law enforcement agencies have purchased thousands of cameras during the last decade, the amount of footage and evidence has increased exponentially, meaning that law enforcement and criminal justice agencies must plan for a continuous growth in footage. Many agencies acknowledge the internal challenges that they face, and more than half (56 percent) have created special units to manage the footage. Larger agencies are more likely to have a special unit than smaller agencies. It is likely that these smaller agencies lack the staffing or other resources to assist in this effort.

The report also shows that prosecutor and public defender offices are receiving digital evidence in some way—via the cloud, a disc, or email.

These findings demonstrate that future research is needed to understand how agencies of all sizes are dealing with the tsunami of digital evidence being generated by BWCs. These processes may be different among small, rural, and tribal law enforcement agencies, and their needs may be more acute. Additional research would help us better understand how downstream criminal justice entities, including prosecutors' offices, defense attorneys' offices, and courts, are using digital evidence. Outreach to those organizations is important to obtain a fuller picture of the issues and challenges of managing digital evidence.

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Appendix: DEM Survey

Agency Characteristics

1. Agency name: _____
2. Where is your agency located? [dropdown menu with all states and territories]
3. Type of agency:
 - a. Municipal police department
 - b. County sheriff's office/department
 - c. State law enforcement agency
 - d. University/school district agency
 - e. Correctional agency
 - f. Other (please describe): _____
4. Jurisdiction population:
 - a. Less than 10,000
 - b. 10,000 to 49,999
 - c. 50,000 to 99,999
 - d. 100,000 to 249,999
 - e. 250,000 to 499,999
 - f. 500,000 to 999,999
 - g. 1 million+
5. Number of full-time sworn employees (as of today): _____
6. Number of non-sworn (civilian) employees (as of today): _____

BWC Deployment and Implementation

7. When did your agency begin deploying BWCs?
 - a. Before 2015
 - b. 2015
 - c. 2016
 - d. 2017
 - e. 2018
 - f. 2019
 - g. 2020
 - h. 2021
 - i. Other (please describe): _____
8. What BWC vendor do you currently use?
9. How many body-worn cameras are currently deployed in your agency?

Body-Worn Camera Program Management

10. Do you have a specific unit assigned to manage your BWC program?
 - a. No (skip to Q16)
 - b. Yes

11. How many sworn staff are assigned to the unit?

12. Are sworn staff assigned to the unit full time, part time, or both?
 - a. Full time
 - b. Part time
 - c. Both full time and part time

13. How many civilian staff are assigned to the unit?

14. Are civilian staff assigned to the unit full time, part time, or both?
 - a. Full time
 - b. Part time
 - c. Both full time and part time

15. What are the primary responsibilities of the staff assigned to the BWC unit? (select all that apply)
 - a. Coordinate camera assignment
 - b. Handle malfunctions/problems with hardware
 - c. Handle malfunctions/problems with software
 - d. Serve as liaison to the BWC vendor
 - e. Serve as liaison to the city/county
 - f. Serve as liaison to other criminal justice agencies, such as prosecutors, defense, and courts
 - g. Handle footage requests from other criminal justice agencies
 - h. Handle public requests for footage
 - i. Handle redaction of footage that has been publicly requested
 - j. Conduct auditing/compliance for internal purposes (BWC policy compliance, untagged videos, etc.)
 - k. Other (please describe):_____

DEM Characteristics

16. What type of BWC digital evidence storage do you use?
 - a. Local server
 - b. Cloud server serviced by the vendor
 - c. Hybrid of local and cloud servers
 - d. Other (please describe):_____

17. What is the estimated annual cost for data storage per year?

18. Do you track how many calls for service each year would require BWC activation according to the written BWC policy?
 - a. No
 - b. Yes
19. Do you track the total number of BWC activations each year?
 - a. No
 - b. Yes
20. Do you track how many BWC videos are uploaded to your storage system each year?
 - a. No
 - b. Yes
21. Do you track how much storage you use for BWC footage each year?
 - a. No
 - b. Yes
22. Please list the categories that are available to your officers when they tag BWC videos.
23. Do you have a process for reviewing untagged or improperly tagged BWC videos?
 - a. No
 - b. Yes

Internal Uses of BWC Footage

24. In calendar year 2020, for what proportion of incidents did your officers activate their BWCs, among incidents when activation was mandatory? In other words, what was your agency's BWC activation compliance rate? If you do not track activation compliance, please write "do not know."
25. Does your agency review BWC footage when conducting internal investigations, such as investigating citizen complaints or officer uses of force (including deadly force)?
 - a. Yes, citizen complaints
 - b. Yes, officer use of force
 - c. Yes, both citizen complaints and officer use of force
 - d. No, my agency does not review BWC footage when conducting an internal investigation
26. How many citizen complaints did your agency receive in calendar year 2020?
27. How many use of force incidents did your agency experience in calendar year 2020?
28. Does your agency regularly monitor proper BWC use, including activation compliance?
 - a. No

b. Yes

29. Does your agency use BWC footage for general officer performance review?

- a. No
- b. Yes

30. Does your agency review BWC metadata? If yes, for what purpose?

- a. No
- b. Yes (please describe): _____

BWC DEM and External Agencies

31. Which of the following criminal justice actors have agreements with your agency regarding BWC footage viewing or sharing? (Select all that apply)

- a. City prosecutor
- b. County prosecutors/district attorney
- c. US attorney
- d. Public defender
- e. Private attorneys
- f. Other law enforcement agencies
- g. Other (please describe): _____

32. How do you share BWC footage with external agencies?

- a. Prosecutors (please describe)
- b. Defense (please describe)
- c. Other law enforcement agencies (please describe)

Media and Public Requests for BWC Footage

33. Do you release BWC footage to the public?

- a. No
- b. Yes

34. If yes, do you have a policy for public release?

- a. No
- b. Yes

35. Who is responsible for managing requests for public release?

- a. Chief of police
- b. Public information officer (PIO)
- c. City attorney
- d. District attorney

e. Other (please describe): _____

36. Is your agency responsible for redaction of BWC before public release?

- a. No
- b. Yes

37. In an average year, how many public requests for BWC footage does the agency receive?

38. Do you charge a fee for the public release of BWC video? If yes, please indicate the cost.

- a. No
- b. Yes (please describe): _____

Challenges and Future Developments

39. What is the biggest challenge for your agency regarding BWC digital evidence management?

(select one option)

- a. Storage/infrastructure requirements
- b. FOIA/public information requests
- c. Collaboration with prosecution and courts
- d. Officer compliance and reporting data
- e. Cost/staffing/resources
- f. Digital evidence management (DEM) processes and policies
- g. Video redaction
- h. Training (civilian and sworn personnel)
- i. Other (please describe): _____

40. What are the most important future developments in BWC digital evidence management for your agency?

41. Would your agency be interested in engaging in additional discussions with us regarding digital evidence management?

- a. No
- b. Yes