

**EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION****RESEARCH ON BODY-WORN CAMERAS**

# Translating the story on body-worn cameras

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Police body-worn cameras (BWCs) have diffused rapidly and widely in policing, both in the United States and abroad. Results from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (LEMAS) survey in 2016 show that 47% of U.S. law enforcement agencies have acquired BWCs, including 80% of large agencies (500 or more officers; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2018). By the end of 2018, there is little doubt that hundreds (perhaps thousands?) of additional law enforcement agencies have made the decision to start a BWC program.

Just as BWCs have spread rapidly, so too has research on the technology. I published a review of the BWC research base in April 2014, and at the time, there were five published studies (White, 2014). Lum, Koper, Merola, Scherer, and Reieux (2015) published a review in November 2015, which identified more than 40 BWC studies underway or completed. In this issue of *Criminology & Public Policy*, Cynthia Lum, Megan Stoltz, Christopher Koper, and Amber Scherer (2019, this issue) conduct a narrative review of 70 empirical BWC studies, a 14-fold increase since my original review in 2014. Clearly, researchers have worked hard to keep up with the diffusion of BWCs!

Lum et al.'s (2019) article is valuable for several reasons. First, it is difficult for police practitioners and researchers to keep track of the rapidly growing body of research. It seems like new studies are published every week. Some studies are widely publicized and disseminated (e.g., Yokum, Ravishankar, and Coppock's [2017] Washington, DC, study), whereas others only appear in obscure or limited access academic journals. Lum et al. provide a comprehensive compendium of BWC studies as of fall 2018. It is now the go-to resource for the latest in BWC research.

Second, the early BWC studies were focused almost exclusively on the impact of cameras on use of force and citizen complaints, and the findings reported in those studies were unanimously positive. As the evidence base has grown over the last few years, researchers have focused on a much larger set of outcomes, and the findings have become increasingly mixed. Lum et al. (2019) review and critically assess the available evidence, and they note positive findings have emerged in many studies across different outcomes:

*“Officers seem supportive of BWCs, particularly as they gain more experience with them.”*

*“BWCs seem to reduce complaints against officers.”*

*“BWCs may curb some of the worst police behaviors.”*

*“Fears of depolicing from the use of BWCs have not been realized.”*

*“BWCs do not seem to have discouraged most proactive field contacts or officer-initiated activities.”*

*“For their part, citizens are also generally supportive of police using BWCs.”*

*“There is also likely to be a growing expectation among the public that adopting BWCs is a marker of a responsive, transparent, and legitimate police organization.”*

But Lum et al. (2019) correctly suggest the issues involved are highly complex, and the evidence base is by no means definitive. Their article demonstrates how a deeper dive with most of these outcomes raises as many questions as answers. Their conclusion is both measured and skeptical: “BWCs have not had statistically significant or consistent effects on most measures of officer and citizen behavior or citizens’ views of police.... Overall, then perhaps anticipated effects from BWCs have been overestimated.”

In her policy essay, Aili Malm (2019) takes a decidedly more optimistic view of the available evidence. Malm's innovative use of the Effect, Mechanism, Moderators, Implementation, Economic Cost (EMMIE) framework (Johnson, Tilley, & Bowers, 2015) provides an important foundation for explaining and even expecting the mixed findings:

*There are no absolutes. After all, what social science program or strategy is effective 100% of the time? Medications approved by the U.S. Federal Drug Administration (FDA) rarely cure everyone afflicted with a disease, and many medications produce a host of side effects. Programming in criminal justice is no different. Even programs that are considered to have a robust evidence base, such as hot-spots policing, are still vulnerable to implementation issues, dosage concerns, and vagaries of reporting mechanisms. We should not expect any difference with police BWCs studies.*

Malm (2019) also includes useful tables that effectively display the differences across studies. The visuals are simple, efficient tools that both practitioners and researchers can use to assess quickly the evidence on an outcome.

I also believe the body of research on BWCs will continue to grow increasingly mixed. Some agencies will experience significant declines in key outcomes such as use of force and citizen complaints. Others will not. Acceptance and integration of BWCs by officers and external stakeholders will be seamless in some jurisdictions. In other jurisdictions, there may be substantial resistance to BWCs.

The mixed findings across studies (and agencies) will be driven by several important factors, most notably, the “state” of an agency (and community) prior to BWC deployment, and the nature of the BWC planning and implementation process (i.e., did an agency follow available best practices, such as those outlined by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2015). In plain terms, an agency that adopts BWCs in the wake of a misconduct scandal has a much different starting point than does an agency that deploys cameras as part of its continued professionalization effort. Troubled agencies that adopt BWCs may see the Rialto-like declines in use of force and citizen complaints because there is much room for improvement. Highly professional agencies with robust employee selection, training, policy, supervision, and accountability processes will probably not experience those same large declines because there is less room for improvement. Such an agency is already functioning at a high level. In short, there are nearly 18,000 law enforcement agencies in the United States. Although there will not be 18,000 different BWC stories, we can be certain there will be more than one, and in fact, there may be many. The contributions by Lum et al. (2019) and Malm (2019) help to understand those stories.

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