



# Using BWC Footage to Promote Officer Safety

## Examples from the Field

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The introduction of body-worn camera (BWC) technology has given law enforcement agencies an opportunity to enhance officer safety through different methods. As the technology evolves, so do the ways in which BWC footage is used for training and tactical purposes focusing on officer safety. Brett Chapman, a social science analyst at the National Institute of Justice, noted, "Another benefit of body-worn cameras is their ability to provide law enforcement with a surveillance tool to promote officer safety and efficiency and prevent crime."<sup>1</sup> In this document, we provide examples of how several law enforcement agencies have used body-worn cameras to promote officer safety. While the effects of the practices featured have not been formally evaluated, these examples reflect positive and promising developments in the use of BWCs related to training, policies, and practices to promote officer safety. Furthermore, for agencies to fully realize the potential of using BWC footage, agency leaders should clearly convey to their officers that footage review is not punitive, but rather a tool to enhance tactical preparedness and response, ultimately promoting officer safety.

### TACTICAL AWARENESS

Agencies can use BWC footage to glean valuable information from a previously visited location to inform their responses. For example, using the geotagging feature and mapping capabilities of some BWCs, agencies can search BWC videos to see if officers have previously recorded footage within a specific geographical area. They can then view the videos recorded within that area to see if they can garner information on the location (e.g., the outside or inside of a building) to inform response efforts. This provides an opportunity for tactical teams to view an area or structure (without jeopardizing an operation or going into an unsafe environment) to plan for the tactical responses (e.g., SWAT entry). Additionally, they can ascertain details about what will be within an officer's line of sight prior to entry. For example, video can reveal potential risks or safety hazards, such as barbed wire, guard dogs, no lighting, or blank spots and hidden areas. Officers are also able to review BWC footage after incidents to critique tactical entries and make improvements.

### TRAINING

The incorporation of BWC footage into routine training practices can promote officer safety. For example, the Tempe, Arizona, Police Department developed and evaluated a customized de-escalation training that relied on BWC footage. Officers viewed footage of real-life crisis situations handled by their peers and then discussed how specific tactics provided the best chance for a safe outcome. The footage review can demonstrate to officers how to check for important cues, such as body language, tone of voice, how much space an officer affords a civilian, and the pace at which the situation is occurring.<sup>2</sup> Using footage in this way helps officers experience these crisis situations without actually having to endure them. If an officer does encounter a crisis in the future, these training practices can help them respond in a way that mitigates or prevents harms to themselves or civilians.

The Davidson County, North Carolina, Sheriff's Office (DCSO) administrative personnel regularly review officers' BWC videos as part of their BWC policy compliance process. When reviewing videos, they also assess officers' actions to determine whether they followed all safety procedures. For example, they will evaluate an officer's body position, stance, and situational characteristics when the officer draws their weapon. When issues

<sup>1</sup> Brett Chapman, "Body-Worn Cameras: What the Evidence Tells Us," November 14, 2018, [nij.ojp.gov](https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/body-worn-cameras-what-evidence-tells-us): <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/body-worn-cameras-what-evidence-tells-us>

<sup>2</sup> D. White, M., Mora, V.J., Orosco, C. and Hedberg, E.C. "Moving the needle: can training alter officer perceptions and use of de-escalation?" *Policing: An International Journal*, Vol. 44 No. 3, pp. 418-436. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PIJPSM-08-2020-0140>



are identified, supervisors review the footage, make recommendations to the officers on how to improve (e.g., tighten up the stance), and conduct informal training as needed.

To improve officers' responses, some agencies also use BWC videos in scenario-based training to provide examples of exemplary performance, as well as to identify areas for improvement. When positive behavior is identified, these agencies give commendations for those occurrences. If something questionable is discovered, the agency discusses it with the officer(s), takes appropriate remedial action if needed, and uses the footage to develop real-life scenarios for training.

This practice is already showing promise. In Tempe, Commander Dane Sorensen states, "When someone is not doing a good enough job, we set aside every third Thursday of the month and we have individual training to bring them up to speed on how that situation could have been handled better."<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, officers from many agencies shared they are willing to share videos of themselves with other officers, even in situations where their performance was suboptimal, as they feel it is important to share learning experiences and believe it will increase the safety of their colleagues.

## FTO-RECRUIT FEEDBACK

DCSO also uses BWCs in its academy. Trainees have access to their BWCs and can record and watch their videos after running through a field training. Field training officers (FTO) will review trainees' footage with them and make suggestions for improvements. This approach is useful for trainees to self-evaluate and for FTOs to identify areas of improvement in trainee behaviors and actions. The Camden County, New Jersey, Police Department uses BWC footage to help shape the behavior of trainees. In a recent webinar,<sup>4</sup> the agency highlighted an example in which a trainee exhibited unsafe behavior by jumping into the backseat of a vehicle with a detainee after being provoked. The footage assisted in behavior modification for the officer and served as an learning opportunity for other officers.

## REAL-TIME DECISION-MAKING

Some BWC cameras now offer a live-streaming option. This allows commanders or other agency personnel to see what officers experience in the field. During the protests in the summer of 2020, a few agencies found this feature extremely helpful as it provided them real-time information about what was transpiring. BWC footage helped them identify suspects, make decisions about where to send additional officers, and provide instructions from commanders directly to officers in real time. One agency even used creative placement of a BWC, temporarily affixing a live-streaming BWC to the side of a building. This allowed commanders to maintain a real-time view of the situation, optimizing situational awareness and monitoring officer safety during protests.

## CONCLUSION

BWCs present unique opportunities for law enforcement agencies to increase the safety of their officers. Several departments have developed innovative ways to leverage BWCs in this capacity, including drafting policies that allow officers to view another officer's video for training or instructional purposes; leveraging geotagging and mapping features of BWCs, and utilizing live streaming features of BWCs, in turn for promoting officer safety. While the effectiveness of these approaches discussed have not been formally evaluated, there is anecdotal support for uses including increasing tactical awareness, enhancing training for recruits and new officers, and use in real-time decision making.

To request training and technical assistance,  
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