

In-View Commentary: Law Enforcement Use of Body-Worn Camera Footage in After-Action Reviews

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After-action reviews (AARs) are detailed internal examinations following significant events or critical incidents (e.g., protests, civil unrest demonstrations, police shootings, police ambushes). They serve to identify the positive practices and areas of improvement within an organization's response with the goal of improving future responses. The 2020 civil unrest events in the United States prompted several cities and police departments to conduct AARs to evaluate law enforcement's response. Body-worn cameras (BWCs) were integral to these reviews, providing assessors with a firsthand view of the events as they occurred.

This in-view commentary highlights the benefits and considerations of using BWC footage in AARs and provides recommendations for incorporating them in organizational reviews of future significant events. We provide examples of how BWCs were used in AARs from the 2020 protests to support our recommendations.

The benefits of using BWC footage in AARs

Police agencies around the country have conducted numerous AARs on civil unrest and riots over the past two years, and they have utilized BWC footage to assist with identifying promising practices for responses. A review of recent AARs suggests that departments are using the footage to review tactics, use of force, resource allocation, policy and procedures, and communication. Through these reviews, departments can improve their deployment tactics, training, and officer wellness efforts and ultimately improve their future responses.

Assessment of deployment tactics

When using BWC footage in AARs, agencies can evaluate deployment tactics and strategies specific to the event. Christoff and Woodmansee (2021) suggest using BWCs to assess how officers communicated during the event and to determine what worked well (and what did not). BWC footage can also help in assessing use of force and defensive tactic equipment shortages. Further, reviewing BWC footage can help determine whether there was the potential for de-escalation in a given circumstance. Regarding tactics for using BWCs, the Philadelphia Police Department (PPD) AAR suggested:

Overall, PPD officers were not properly equipped for either the violent nature of the demonstrations and civil disturbances that occurred or the dispersal of Chlorobenzylidenemalononitrile [CS] gas. At various times throughout the first three days, officers encountered crowds throwing rocks, bricks, and other projectiles at them.

Unfortunately, not enough shields were available to officers, and officers were forced to take cover in any manner that they could, including hiding behind police vehicles.¹

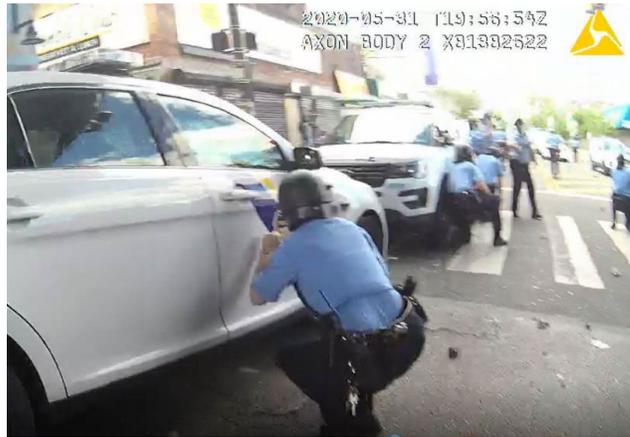


Figure 1. BWC footage of officers taking cover behind police vehicles near the intersection of 52nd Street and Market Street on May 31. (Source: *Philadelphia Police Department's Response to Demonstrations and Civil Unrest*).

BWC footage can provide an assessor with granular-level detail of the circumstances and events in question. The level of detail captured by BWCs can include officer tone and communication style, demeanor, precise language of instruction (by the officer), officers' cross-talk, and visualization of subjects' movements.² The City of Dallas AAR revealed that:

The Body Worn Camera (BWC) video that was recorded during the protests and rioting provided unbiased insight on what officers faced while working in the field. BWC video also provided the ability to provide commanders and front-line supervisors a more accurate picture and review of the events that unfolded to assess options for better deploying resources and the effectiveness of crowd-control techniques. The review also ensured that employees were properly documenting use of force and providing a record of the incidents.³

Footage captured during these incidents is also beneficial for documentation purposes. In Raleigh, North Carolina, BWC video was critical to the 2020 protest assessment because it established a timeline of events for use in ongoing investigations:

An in-depth review of body-worn camera footage assisted in documenting officers' experiences from a first-person point of view and provided an overall timeline of events during this operation. Officers were able to review footage captured by their body-worn cameras to facilitate ongoing investigations. Body-worn camera footage has been and continues to be

¹ Carleton et al., Dec. 2020, *Philadelphia Police Department's Response to Demonstrations and Civil Unrest*, CNA and Montgomery McCracken, <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/philadelphia-pd/1c9150054a00c064/full.pdf>.

² Tom Christoff and Tom Woodmansee, "BWCs in After-Action Reviews," Tech Talks, 2021, <https://bwctta.com/ta/podcasts/bwcs-after-action-reviews>.

³ City of Dallas, *George Floyd Protests After Action Report*, 2020, <https://dfw.cbslocal.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/15909545/2020/08/Final-After-Action-Report-1.pdf>.

compiled for public release, subsequent to court order, in the spirit of full transparency and accountability.⁴

Training

AARs provide an opportunity to identify training issues in response to a significant event. A review of BWC footage can determine whether additional training is needed; whether the training should be conducted for certain individuals, specialized units, or the entire department; and whether the training should be coordinated with other co-responding partners (e.g., police, fire, emergency medical services). The City of Denver's independent review relied on BWC footage to identify the need for an internal training review for command staff, training personnel, and patrol supervisors:

We understand that freeing officers for multi-day crowd control training may be difficult given their other patrol responsibilities. Doing so is critical, however, because crowd control skills are perishable, officers are not normally required to use them during patrol, and the consequences of being caught unprepared can be severe. We believe that the Denver Police Department (DPD) could benefit from an internal training review among command staff, training personnel, patrol supervisors, and officers to ensure that the content and frequency of the DPD's crowd control training strikes the right balance and properly prepares officers for future crowd control events.⁵

Officer wellness

Critical incidents can result in a significant amount of stress to officers, potentially affecting officers' physical, psychological, and emotional wellness during and after a critical event. Although several methods exist to identify officers who were involved in significant danger, stress, and use of force (e.g., other video sources including CCTV, officer interviews, interviews with community members), BWC footage provides a unique lens into the stress that officers endured during a critical incident. Using BWC footage in AARs allows departments to evaluate in much greater detail the level of stress experienced by their officers. Once identified, agencies can follow up to assist with any support or resources that the officers may need.

In the Philadelphia AAR, BWC video revealed that the department should revisit specific in-service training plans for some officers because the stress inflicted during the protests resulted in an emotionally charged response. Though officers were instructed to use de-escalation skills, BWCs captured some officers allowing their emotions to overshadow their ability to employ those tactics.

⁴ Raleigh Police Department Chief's Office, Office of Professional Standards Inspections Unit, *After Action Report. George Floyd Protests and Response. May 30, 2020 – June 7, 2020.*

⁵ Denver Office of the Independent Monitor, *The Police Response to the 2020 George Floyd Protests in Denver, an Independent Review*, 2020, https://www.denvergov.org/content/dam/denvergov/Portals/374/documents/2020GFPRreport_OIM.pdf.



Figure 2. BWC footage of officers having a positive engagement with a citizen (right of screen) while other protesters throw rocks or bricks at the officers (center screen). (Source: *Philadelphia Police Department's Response to Demonstrations and Civil Unrest*).

As a result of the AAR, the Philadelphia AAR team recognized:

Best practices promote and train officers to “not take it personally” when dealing with non-compliant, resistive, and aggressive individuals. Training that emphasizes emotional control not only affects the ability to better diffuse volatile situations and minimize UOF [use of force] but also directly affects officer safety and wellness.⁶

Additionally, using BWC footage to highlight sound police work, especially in difficult scenarios associated with use of force, can validate officers' decision-making, and help mitigate feelings of regret and uncertainty. Stress and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) associated with involvement in critical incidents often stem from officers' beliefs or feelings that they should have done something differently in a critical incident, and BWCs can provide an opportunity to demonstrate the appropriateness of their actions. Focusing on the actions that officers did correctly provides support and validation to the officers and can help to reinforce professionalism.⁷ As a result of the Philadelphia AAR, the department “requested no-cost technical assistance from the Bureau of Justice Assistance National Training and Technical Assistance Center (NTTAC) to conduct a comprehensive review of current PPD officer safety and wellness efforts.”

Communicating with the public

Critical incidents and significant events resulting in AARs create an opportunity to increase transparency and trust with the public. In the aftermath of a critical incident, it is not uncommon for community members to want to understand what happened in greater detail; BWCs can facilitate a deeper level of understanding. Although public release policies vary by jurisdiction, expeditiously providing the public with BWC footage can increase confidence in the involved agency(ies) and improve the community's relationship with law enforcement.

Considerations when using BWCs in AARs

A number of general BWC considerations must be kept in mind while using BWCs to enhance and facilitate the AAR process.

⁶ Carleton et al., *Philadelphia Police Department's Response to Demonstrations and Civil Unrest*.

⁷ Woodmansee and Markovic, “Optimizing Body-Worn Cameras to Enhance Common Police Practices and Field Investigations.”

Managing large volumes of footage

Reviewing BWC footage may be difficult because of the sheer volume of data generated for a critical incident or significant event. For example, during a critical incident or protest, an officer's BWC may be activated during their entire shift. Knowing what is relevant for an AAR can be difficult given that critical incidents are usually time limited but tend to involve a large number of officers. The BWC review process can be slow and time consuming. Critical segments need to be identified and carefully examined, so viewing random portions of videos will not suffice. The critical portions will often have to be viewed using slower speeds to ensure that nothing notable is missed. Though it may be difficult to sift through video to determine what is relevant, having comprehensive data is beneficial.

The Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (LVMPD) demonstrates how their BWCs have facilitated internal affairs investigations of officer misconduct, despite the massive amounts of video footage:

Due to the substantial amount of body-worn camera (BWC) footage associated with each protest, IAB investigators were able to locate all but one incident related to a complaint of misconduct. However, due to the use of a blanket event number for the early protests, a considerable amount of investigative resources had to be dedicated to reviewing BWC video. As of this writing, 13 cases have been closed out as "no policy violation" after a thorough preliminary investigation." Further, "LVMPD responded to 34 protests from May 29-June 13, attended by thousands of protesters. In these protests, 380 arrests were made. Additionally, 19 citizen complaints for officer misconduct were subsequently investigated. None of the excessive use of force complaints had any cellphone, news coverage, or other video to substantiate them....The professionalism of LVMPD officers and partner agencies demonstrated throughout this period of civil unrest was a strength.⁸

BWC equipment

BWCs are also limited by the type of mount deployed by the department;⁹ mounts can be affixed to an officer in several positions, depending on whether the department allows BWC mounting at the officer's discretion. A mount affixed to an officer's epaulet or sunglasses can capture events differently than a mount affixed to an officer's chest or belt. Another limitation associated with BWC mounting is that BWCs can be knocked off during a hands-on encounter with an individual or suspect, potentially rendering the footage unavailable for assessment in an AAR. However, even if BWC footage is limited in a given situation, assessors can use BWC footage as a tool to augment or validate the findings from other sources. The City of Dallas AAR noted:

The Dallas Police Department observed some limitations of the camera and the mounting solutions currently available. This includes when officers' BWC was obstructed by their tactical vest or the camera was unable to be attached to the tactical vest. Also, when officers were deployed for 12 or more hours, some cameras stopped working as the devices lost battery power.

⁸ Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, *Protests and Civil Disorder Incidents. May 29-June 13, 2020. After Action Report (AAR)*, 2020, <https://www.lvmpd.com/en-us/Documents/Final%20AAR%20with%20Cover.pdf>.

⁹ Quin Patterson and Allie Land, "Options for Body-Worn Camera Placement: A Tool for Mount Locations," Body-Worn Camera Training and Technical Assistance, 2022, <https://www.bwctta.com/options-body-worn-camera-placement-tool-mount-locations-0>.

Finally, BWCs do not represent the complete picture of events. BWC footage is limited by the angle and body position of the officer and by the technical sophistication of the video unit (e.g., video quality or the density of video images). BWCs cannot capture activity outside of the camera view shed and thus do not capture the events as the officer perceives them.

Recommendations for use of BWCs in AARs

Consider officer perspectives

When conducting AARs, it is important to remember that BWCs are just one piece of the puzzle. BWCs provide an independent account of incidents as they are captured and are not malleable like the human mind and memory. However, it is equally important to interview the officers who captured the footage because they can provide crucial insight and context as to what they were seeing and thinking as events unfolded. Officers can not only provide context for what was captured on video but can also augment the findings to provide a deeper understanding of the events captured on BWC footage.

Identify an internal liaison for the BWC program

Agencies that deploy BWCs should provide an internal resource who can facilitate the delivery of footage, communicate with the public regarding the agency's BWC program, and assist the assessors with the nuances and intricacies of the BWC program. In many cases, professional civilian staff are a good fit for this work. Some larger departments may have a unit dedicated to the review and audit of BWC footage, but smaller departments may need to identify specific individuals to be responsible for footage review, policy and procedure updates, training applications, and the latest technological developments. Regardless, established protocols and a trained staff should be in place *before* a critical incident occurs.

Establish a clear and comprehensive BWC policy

In their podcast, Christoff and Woodmansee illustrate the importance of having a comprehensive BWC policy in place *before* a critical incident or other significant event occurs. Such a policy should include storage and tagging procedures for ease of retrieval of video footage, as well as guidelines for who is authorized to access the footage. Additional considerations include communicating reasonable expectations of the scope of BWCs to the community and partners, identifying who will be assigned a BWC (including specialized units), ensuring enough BWCs are available to outfit every officer who could be deployed during a significant event, ensuring the charging stations are adequate or that extra cameras can be mobilized in the event of a lengthy shift, and prescribing mandatory activation requirements. The City of Denver's independent review highlights the challenges that arise when a department lacks a clear policy:

There was no specific guidance about BWC usage during crowd control situations in DPD policy and no discussion of BWC activation in the Crowd Management Manual. This may have created confusion for officers about whether to activate their BWCs during the chaos of the protests, and if so, when. On June 1, approximately 150-200 DPD officers were assigned to the George Floyd Protests (GFP), but the DPD produced BWC video from only 38 DPD officers.

Conclusion

By assisting in documenting events, BWCs can increase accuracy and transparency after a critical incident or significant event. Police agencies are increasingly relying on BWCs in AARs to support in-depth assessments, assess deployment tactics, identify training needs, and increase officer wellness. Though BWCs can augment or validate the findings in an agency's AAR, they have some limitations and do not represent the complete picture of events. Careful consideration should be given to all aspects of evidence collection during an AAR, including reviewing BWC footage. Agencies should have a clear and comprehensive BWC policy in place before a critical incident occurs, and they should identify an internal department liaison when using BWCs in AARs.

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