

Body Worn Cameras: Beneficial or Burden to Law Enforcement

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Abstract

The current environment in our country, coupled with a unified voice, is screaming for increased accountability of our law enforcement agencies and police reform. The leaders of our law enforcement organizations make critical and tough decisions every day regarding operational matters to protect the communities that they serve. Those vital decisions can affect the organizations and the community either positively or could be detrimental. Specifically, the increased pressure for law enforcement agencies to obtain body-worn cameras (BWC) is a significant challenge for some agencies. Those agencies that do not have BWC face increased external pressure and scrutiny by the same politicians and community activists pushing for this very reform. We will examine how those agencies that currently manage a BWC program have assisted with reform versus those that do not, a cost analysis, and the effects of incidents captured on a BWC versus those that were not.

Body Worn Cameras: Beneficial or Burden to Law Enforcement

As a team, we determined that the body-worn camera (BWC) debate was a topic that is impacting law enforcement in our country and arguably all over the world. Based on the current environment, this issue seems to be exploited by the news media, social media, politicians, and community activists. The one common denominator is a unified voice that wants police reform and wanted it yesterday. Law enforcement is always under the microscope, but it seems now more than ever that the unified voice is scrutinizing agencies and their officers even louder. We heard the community and politicians are taking action by using their powers to enact many policing reforms- some of which are currently underway across the country. This policing

reform is being forced onto law enforcement by law. Some agencies make changes themselves. They are visionaries who understand their communities and want to build trust and transparency. One of the tools that we used for police reform is the use of body cameras. But is this emerging technology beneficial or a burden to law enforcement? We will examine. Candice Norwood (2020) reported the data from the 2013 Rialto Police Department study showed an 87.5 percent decline in citizen complaints against officers who wore Body-Worn Cameras (p 1).

The leaders in law enforcement face many challenges to either maintain an already existing BWC program, implement a new program, or determine whether to use or not to use the cameras. In addition, sheriffs and police chiefs around the country face both internal and external pressure to implement Body-worn Cameras. Finally, the fiscal challenges to a BWC program and understanding the risk management involved also outweigh the needs of their communities and the impacts of a program on their employees.

Our team is comprised of Lieutenant Ronald Smith with the Roswell Police Department in New Mexico. Lieutenant Smith is very familiar with the BWC as his agency implemented a BWC program six years ago. The Roswell Police Department was mandated by law to have a BWC program. NMLEA Section 29-1-18 - Requiring certain law enforcement agencies to use body-worn cameras while on duty; adoption of policies and procedures governing use. In contrast, Captain Richard Oubre with the Saint Charles Parish Sheriff's Office in Louisiana has just learned that his office will be implementing a BWC program this week. Captain Kevin Balser with the Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office, also in Louisiana, was informed that his office is currently researching the BWC program. Thus far, in Louisiana, there are no state laws that mandate a BWC program. However, it seems that there is a movement by some Louisiana state lawmakers who are considering the impending police reforms and are preparing to have a law or

policy in place soon. According to Crisp (2019), "At least 31 other states have adopted legislation to guide how body cameras are used or how information from them is made available, based on figures compiled by the National Conference of State Legislatures." (p.1)

Social Impacts

One of the most important relationships any law enforcement agency can have is with the community they serve. Developing relationships with our communities is building trust at the same time. No one person can place a value on trust. Trust is priceless. Leaders of any credible law enforcement agency will explain that the trust factor is primarily one of the essential factors in building relationships within their organization and the community they protect. ("Building Police", nd), When communication and trust deteriorate, tensions build between the community and police and undermine their shared goal of safer communities (p 1). The implementation of a BWC program could have significant impacts on the community and the agency. It is obvious a BWC program will undoubtedly establish more accountability and transparency for the agency. Having defined policies and procedures will reinforce in the community that law enforcement has taken ownership and is serious about their actions. The community, in return, will care about law enforcement, and they will trust us to be a law enforcement agency that they can count on each day. Today's servant leaders in law enforcement our communities want to see the transparency video cameras provide. A police leader has to care about his profession genuinely, the team he serves, and most importantly, their community (Long, 2021).

As noted in a June 2020 news article that references a man being shot to death by deputies with the Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office, local politicians weigh in on this very issue. According to Rodney Lyons and Kyle Green (2020), "To the death of Modesto Reyes, if we had body cameras during that chase, we would know exactly what happened, we would know what

the camera saw." "Whether the shooting was justified or not, if we had had the use of body-worn cameras, you can simply go to the tape". "It's recorded." Lyons further states, "In the light of what's going on now in this country, it's a statement to say here, we're going to show you how well we do our jobs," Lyons said. "We're going to show you how we protect you. We're going to show you the integrity of this department."(p.1)

However, establishing a BWC program could negatively affect a trust that may have already been established or broken? Some may argue that implementing a BWC program could be detrimental to their communities because they do not want to be video recorded while interacting with an officer. Would the citizens question being recorded in their own homes? Citizens may be less likely to come forward with information if they know that they are on a camera recording. According to an article from PEW Research Center (2020), a BWC program implemented in Washington, D.C., began with 400 cameras in 2014 and grew to 2,800 cameras two years later. During this time, it was the largest deployment of body cameras in the country. Charles Allen, a council member who chairs the public safety committee in Washington, D.C., said that "Instead of engendering the type of transparency and trust that we would want this program to have, it has had the complete opposite effect"(p.1).

Additionally, the officers that wear a BWC could call into question the trust of the department's leadership. They may believe that they do not embrace their confidence to do the job effectively. The perception of BWCs could potentially impact the department's overall morale if not clearly stated by the leadership 'Why' (Sinek, 2017), the department has chosen to implement a BWC program. These same leaders can effectively communicate how and what the cameras will be used for, just as Simon Sinek reports in the Golden Circle on leadership (2017). The officers must believe first in the purpose of the BWC program and buy into it. Establishing

good policies and procedures will combat any fears the officers have. Not effectively communicating and implementing policies and procedures will burden the agency and the leaders.

Risk Management

When we speak of risk management, having a BWC during a critical incident is undoubtedly important and beneficial. Not having a BWC during a critical incident can be burdensome for an agency and will induce stress for the leaders of the organizations and, more than likely, the most problematic and reoccurring. The filing of wrongful death lawsuits and excessive use of force lawsuits will always occur, but perhaps how we train and equip our officers regarding the use of force will reduce the number of suits filed. The reduction of those cases should always be paramount for any law enforcement agency. The decrease in cases may be accomplished by outfitting the officers with a BWC. Suppose a critical incident was captured on a BWC, and the evidence supports that lethal force is justified. In that case, this certainly leaves no room for public outcry and leads to far less civil liability. Mistakes can happen, but if we can use the BWC from a risk management standpoint to counter challenges made by civil litigants or outspoken civilian activists, any law enforcement agency will be in a better position financially.

Equally important, the BWC can serve as a training tool. Risk management considers several components that require review and analysis to adequately assess the risk while the officer is engaged in the activity (Harrington, 2021). Body-worn cameras as a training tool will better serve our officers and frontline supervisors, assisting them and developing ways to improve our techniques, thus reducing risk. The BWC essentially is doing most of the work

while the leaders in the organization can analyze the information that the BWC captured. The video-recorded information gives leadership and trainer an advantage.

Intelligent leadership includes researching and having all the information to disseminate when researching and deploying any new equipment. Body-worn cameras are no different. Police One (2014) published the findings when Force Science Institute came up with ten limitations of the body-worn cameras.

1. A camera doesn't follow your eyes or see as they see.
2. Some important danger cues can't be recorded.
3. Camera speed differs from the speed of life.
4. A camera may see better than you do in low light.
5. Your body may block the view.
6. A camera only records in 2-D.
7. The absence of sophisticated time-stamping may prove critical. (Meta Data is captured on most devices)
8. One camera may not be enough.
9. A camera encourages second-guessing.
10. A camera can never replace a thorough investigation.

In 2020 the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) stated again, "agencies should be aware of the limitations of body-worn cameras. An officer's or deputy's eyes can pinpoint focus on something and could look in a different direction than the camera is pointing. Additionally, in 2021 the Britannica ProCon group published a list of pros and cons when it comes to utilizing BWCs:

Pro

- Police body cameras improve police accountability and lower reports of police misconduct.
- Police body cameras are a powerful tool in domestic violence cases.
- Police body cameras are a good police reform tool and have strong support from members of the public.

Con

- Police body cameras are too expensive and unreliable for many police departments.
- Police body cameras invade the privacy of citizens, potentially exposing victims and subjecting citizens to facial recognition software.
- Police body cameras decrease the safety of police officers and negatively affect their physical and mental health.

Financial

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2018), about 80% of large departments with 500 or more full-time officers had body cameras in 2016. In comparison, only about 31% of small police departments with part-time officers did. Additionally, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2018) reported that among those police agencies that did not have the cameras, the primary reason given was cost, including video storage/disposal, hardware costs, and ongoing maintenance.

The Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office is a large agency with approximately 1,500 employees. Jefferson Parish is currently seeking to purchase just under 1,000 cameras to include body-worn and in-car cameras that will cost several million dollars. Some of this cost will consist of maintenance and data storage. In contrast, the Roswell Police Department is a 100 sworn officer agency with 70 BWC at the cost of \$102,000.00 to include maintenance and data storage. The St. Charles Parish Sheriff's Office has approximately 275 sworn officers that just purchased and deployed 125 BWC at the cost of roughly \$700,000.00.

As noted, all of these agencies are unique in their way, from staffing to their needs and wants. The sheriff's and chief of police have to be visionaries and utilize powerful leadership techniques to effect the change to include emotional intelligence to effect the change. They also have to understand their communities' needs and be respectful of those demands, as some seem impossible to accomplish. Those leaders empower their teams to develop solutions to satisfy both the community's wants and the organization's needs. Often this includes finding a funding source. These sources are by grants, seeking local government funding, and often these agencies look to and have to make crucial budget adjustments to an already existing budget.

Conclusion

According to a news report published by PEW in June 2020, the push for police body cameras started following several high-profile police shootings, including the 2014 death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. The rise of video sharing on social media added to the momentum, and in 2015 the Obama administration handed out more than \$23 million in federal grants to help agencies of all sizes purchase body-worn cameras. By 2016, nearly half of U.S. law enforcement agencies had body-worn cameras, according to a Bureau of Justice Statistics survey. In addition, one-third of the sheriffs' offices and local police departments that didn't have cameras said they were likely to consider acquiring them within the year. Lawrence (2020), stated, "We're at the point now where it's just expected. Community members expect that officers will have the cameras on them," (p.1).

Should law enforcement just be expected to have BWC because that is what the community activist or politicians want, or do law enforcement leaders have input or value in those decisions? The fact remains that these leaders have to make very difficult decisions considering many factors such as social implications, risk management, and financial

considerations to sway them to implement a program, delay, or not even consider a BWC program for their agency. The financial burden is unique to each agency and to that specific community and no easy undertaking.

Change is difficult no matter who you are, or whatever your profession. There is a natural feeling of fear when change is imminent, or when it does occur. It can also be difficult for the leader that has to implement that change for the organization. Law enforcement naturally resists changing the most and often wishes to look the other way when we recognize a potential problem and know that something different must occur to solve that problem effectively. Policing is notoriously rigid because we are guided by the law, coupled with our strict policies and procedures. But we are ever evolving because of the criminal elements in our society using new tactics to facilitate their activities. Like the criminals, law enforcement leaders have to implement change within the organization to combat those crimes from taking place. And like deploying new tactics, the same leaders have to institute change internally within their teams, effectively communicate why the change has to occur and the steps that will take place to implement that change.

Doctor Larry Long (2021) discusses the difference between incremental change and initiating deep change in the organization. Dr. Long describes the incremental change as a rational analysis process for the desired goal and a set of steps to achieve the change. In contrast, deep change is very challenging to achieve. This change requires unique ways of thinking. It can be risky, and it often will be irreversible once the change is complete. This deep change is very difficult to achieve in law enforcement because we are trained, and trained, and then trained again to be a certain type of law enforcement officer. It is cyclical and dynamic; change has to occur. The incremental change would be the most effective way of doing that. But when leaders

have to be bold, they do take the risk and attempt deep change. They are often overworked, and the deep change takes a tremendous amount of energy. These policing leaders have to be driven. The leaders have to understand the organizations' structure and be critical of those potential challenges. The deep change usually has never been experienced by anyone in the organization, making it a much more difficult feat. Police legitimacy in today's environment is requiring a deep change in individual agencies and policing as a whole. The Body-worn Cameras in each agency are, in effect, a deep change.

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