

CRS Insights

Can Body Worn Cameras Serve as a Deterrent to Police Misconduct?

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Conflicting accounts about what transpired before Michael Brown was shot by Ferguson (MO) Police Officer Darren Wilson on August 9 have raised questions about police accountability and transparency. Requiring law enforcement officers to use body worn cameras (BWCs) has emerged as one idea to deter officer misconduct and reduce the inappropriate use of force, among other things. BWCs are mobile cameras that allow law enforcement officers to record what they see and hear. They can be attached to a helmet, a pair of glasses, or an officer's shirt or badge.

Potential Merits of BWCs

There are several perceived benefits to the use of BWCs by law enforcement officers. One of the primary perceived benefits of BWCs is that they will have a civilizing and deterrent effect on both officers and citizens, resulting in fewer citizen complaints, less use of force by officers, and fewer assaults on officers. [A review of the research on BWCs](#) finds evidence that use of BWCs leads to substantial decreases in each of these areas. For instance, a frequently cited [study](#) on the use of BWCs by officers in the Rialto (CA) Police Department found that following the implementation of the BWC program, citizen complaints against the police decreased 88% and use of force incidents decreased 60%. However, it is not clear whether the decrease in citizen complaints and use of force were the result of improved citizen behavior, improved officer behavior, or other factors. Decreases in citizen complaints could be the result of citizens filing fewer frivolous complaints because they know their encounters with officers were recorded. In addition, in instances where citizens file complaints against officers, research suggests that BWCs may facilitate a quick resolution.

It has also been theorized that BWCs could increase transparency and the perception of police legitimacy. Another theory is that BWCs could provide enhanced opportunities for police training. The research on BWCs, however, has not sufficiently studied these claims.

Potential Concerns about the Use of BWCs

In addition to the potential benefits of BWCs, there are several concerns about expanding their use. Law enforcement agencies must consider [a number of implementation issues](#) before starting a BWC program, including the following:

- When will officers be allowed to record? Will the camera record continuously or will officers have discretion about when to turn the camera on? If the cameras continuously record, does this pose a risk to both officers' and citizens' privacy? If officers have discretion about when to turn the camera on, would it negate its potential to deter officer misconduct?
- Should sworn personnel other than patrol officers (e.g., detectives or tactical team members) wear BWCs? Will officers be required to wear a BWC, or will it be voluntary?
- Will footage from the BWC be made public? If so, under what circumstances? How long will footage be stored? Who will have access to the stored footage?
- How much will it cost to outfit officers with BWCs? How much will it cost to keep the program operational?
- How much will it cost and how much effort will it take for law enforcement agencies to acquire the technological infrastructure necessary to store, manage, and search vast quantities of new data?
- Will officers accept the BWC program as a way to improve their agency's operations, or might they think the sole purpose of the program is to monitor officer behavior?

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) [supports the use of BWCs](#), but it voices some concerns about the potential for BWCs to invade privacy. BWCs could potentially record what officers see when they enter someone's home as well as their interactions with bystanders, suspects, and victims in sometimes stressful situations. The ACLU believes that it is necessary to establish strong policies regarding the use of BWCs so that they do not become another form of public surveillance. Policies regarding the use of BWCs could address the following concerns:

- which encounters with the public must be recorded;
- when to notify people that they are being recorded;
- which recordings will be deleted and when, and which recordings will be retained, and for how long;
- who will have access to recordings, and under what conditions; and
- if, when, and how recordings will be available to the public.

How Many Law Enforcement Agencies Use BWCs?

There are no definitive data on how many law enforcement agencies are currently using BWCs. The Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) surveyed 500 law enforcement agencies about their use of BWCs. PERF found that [25% of responding agencies reported that they used BWCs](#). However, only 50% of surveyed agencies responded, so the results are not representative of all law enforcement agencies.

How Much Do BWCs Cost?

A market survey conducted by the National Institute of Justice shows that BWCs can cost anywhere from [\\$120 to \\$1,000](#). The median price of a BWC included in the survey was \$499. [The capabilities of the cameras](#) (e.g., battery life, video quality, recording limits, and the ability to record at night) vary greatly depending on the cost and use of the device. Standard BWCs are likely to have image quality issues compared to high-end cameras. Beyond the purchase price of the camera, there are also costs for law enforcement agencies to outfit officers with BWCs. For example, there will be maintenance and replacement costs for the BWCs and law enforcement agencies will have to pay to store and manage the data generated by BWCs.

Grants for Purchasing BWCs

Congress has not appropriated funding specifically to help law enforcement agencies purchase BWCs. However, grants under the Department of Justice's [Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant \(JAG\) program](#) can be used for purchasing equipment related to "law enforcement" programs, which might include BWCs. Law enforcement agencies might also be able to use their funding under the Department of Homeland Security's State Homeland Security Grant Program (HSGP) and the Urban Areas Security Initiative (UASI) to purchase BWCs.