

## RESEARCH IN BRIEF

# Body Worn Cameras on Police: Results from a National Survey of Public Attitudes

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Body worn cameras (BWCs) are small video/audio recording devices worn on police officers' uniforms, usually in the chest area, shoulder, or collar. Although several models are available, all BWCs provide the same basic function. When activated, the BWC is designed to record officers' activities, communications, and other interactions with members of the public.

BWCs offer several potential advantages. BWCs may help protect citizens from police misconduct – and may help protect police from false allegations of misconduct. They can assist in evidence gathering and officer training. In addition, the willingness to have officer actions recorded demonstrates a level of transparency on the part of police agencies. Along with potential advantages, however, there are possible consequences. For example, video and audio recordings made by BWCs can lead to concerns over privacy rights of both citizens and police officers.

Recent cases of lethal injuries involving police-citizen interactions have sparked a great deal of interest in the value of BWCs on officers. These incidents have prompted political pressure to expand the use of BWCs in the United States. As a result, many departments around the US are in the process of acquiring funding and developing policies that will equip officers with the technology.

Given the national interest in expanding the use of BWCs in police work, it is important to more fully understand the nature of public attitudes about the technology. While some recent polls have asked general questions about public attitudes toward BWCs (see YouGov 2015; Pew Research Center 2014), these surveys have not examined the particular contexts in which people support BWCs or their views about the positive and negative consequences of them.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Survey respondents were generally supportive of BWCs on police officers. 85% of the sample thought that police should wear body cameras and similar proportions agreed that police will behave more respectfully toward citizens, that BWCs will reduce excessive force and other forms of misconduct by police, and that BWCs will improve evidence gathering in criminal incidents.
- Nearly half of the sample (49%) agreed that BWCs on police will cause citizens to behave more respectfully toward officers, and 75% indicated that false complaints of police misconduct will decrease.
- A smaller, although still substantial, percentage of respondents acknowledged potential concerns with BWCs on police. About 40% of the sample agreed that victims and witnesses might be apprehensive about cooperating with police knowing that their statements will be recorded. Furthermore, respondents were generally concerned about the availability of recordings: less than one-third of the sample indicated that the media or members of the public should have access to BWC recordings.
- Public opinions varied in terms of how BWCs might impact relationships between police and the community. Although 91% reported that BWCs will help to improve transparency, 61% indicated that citizens will have greater trust in police, and only 36% reported that BWCs will help to reduce racial tension between police and citizens.

This *Research in Brief* summarizes the main findings of a recent national survey on citizen opinions about BWCs on police officers. The survey instrument included items related to the general awareness of BWCs, opinions on their potential advantages, attitudes toward their potential consequences, perceptions of certain BWC policies, and support for BWCs under various circumstances and by different public safety officials.

**Data and Methods**

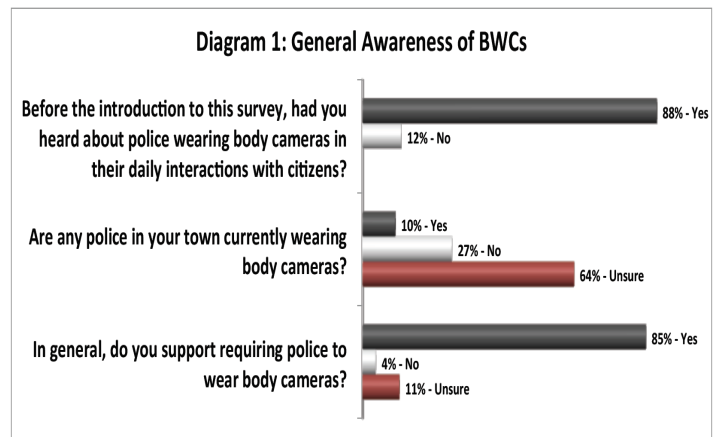
Using Qualtrics, an online survey was administered during May 2015 to a national sample of US residents age 18 years or older. This method yielded a total sample of 635 respondents. Respondents in this sample were primarily male (54%), white (78%), over 30 years old (63%), and had a household income of less than \$50,000 per year (57%).

**Public Awareness and Overall Support for BWCs**

As shown in Diagram 1, most people in the sample were aware of the idea of BWCs on police (88%) and, in general, supported BWCs on officers (85%). Many respondents (64%), however, were unsure if police in their town were currently using BWCs.

**Potential Advantages of BWCs**

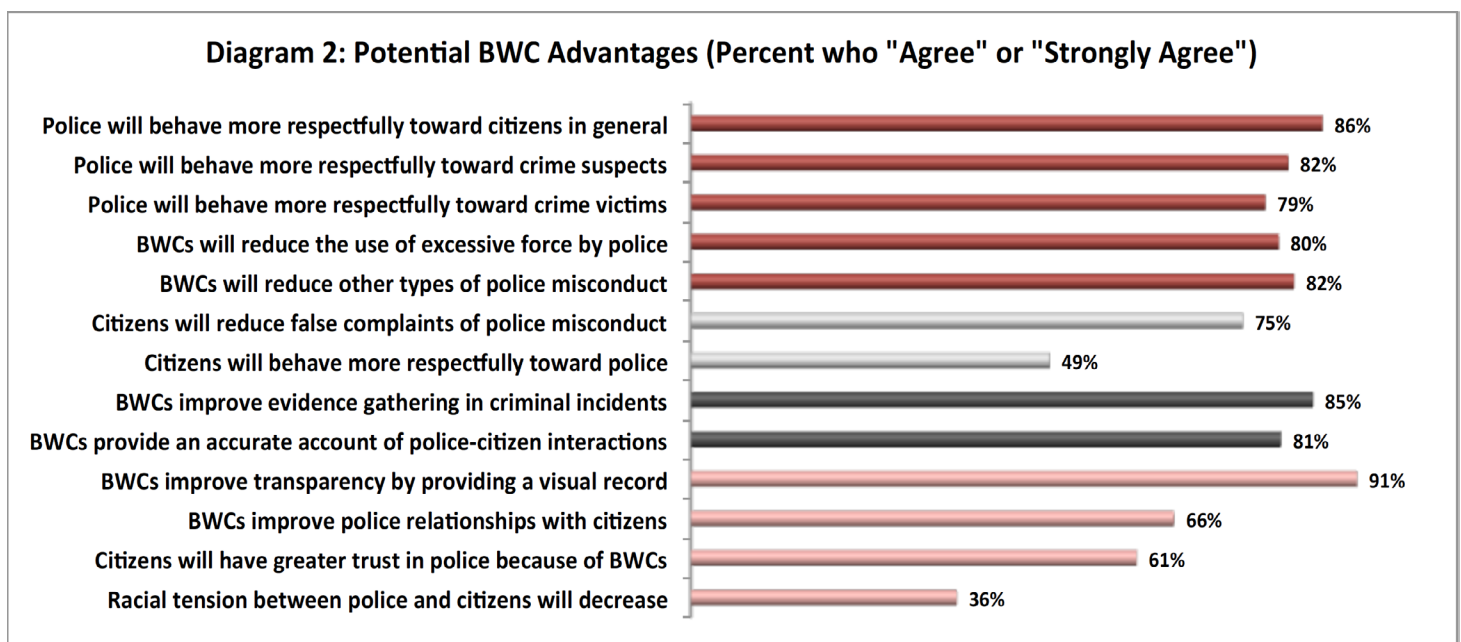
Several survey questions asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about potential advantages of BWCs as they relate to police-citizen interactions. More specifically, the questions asked about how BWCs might impact police behaviors,



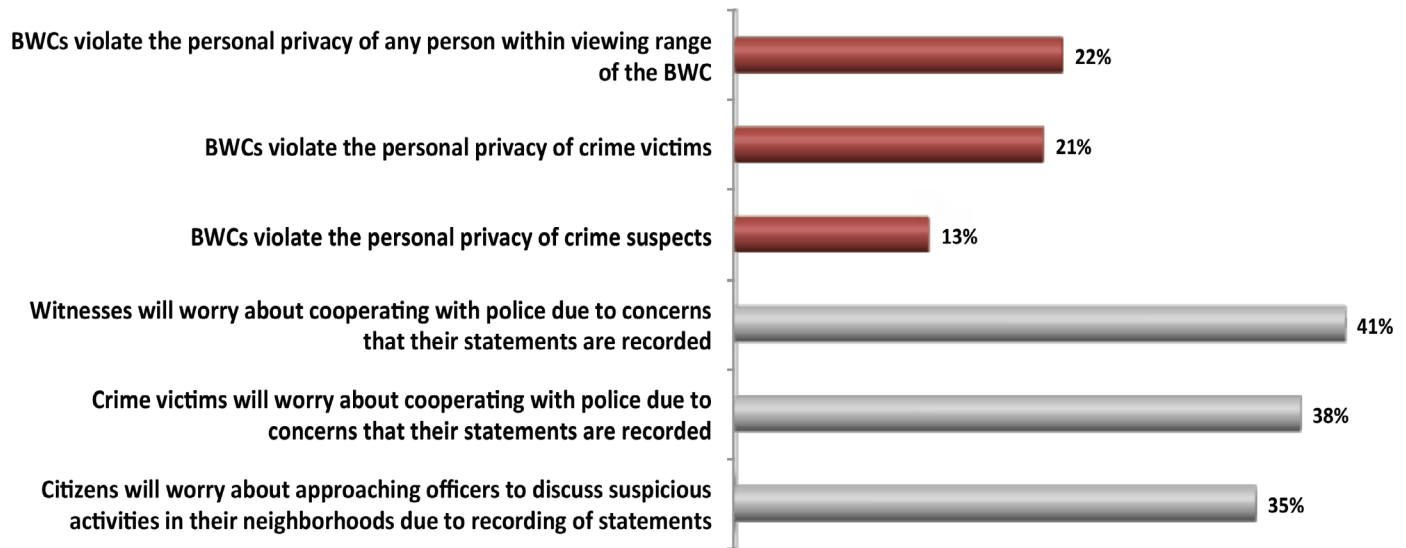
citizen behaviors, information gathering, and overall relationships between police and citizens. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Diagram 2 displays the percent of respondents who “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with these statements.

Respondents generally agreed that police behaviors are likely to change as the result of BWCs – approximately 80% indicated that officers will behave more respectfully and that unnecessary force and other types of police misconduct will decrease (i.e., offensive language, abuse of power, etc.). Nearly the same percentage also agreed that citizens are less likely to file false complaints of police misconduct. Fewer respondents – although still nearly half of the sample – indicated that citizens are likely to behave more respectfully toward police.

Subjects expressed a fair amount of confidence in the recording abilities of BWCs, with over 80%



**Diagram 3: Potential BWC Consequences (Percent who "Agree" or "Strongly Agree")**



indicating that BWCs can improve evidence gathering and provide accurate accounts of officer-citizen interactions. Respondents were less convinced of the impact of BWCs on the overall relationship between police and the community. Although over 90% agreed that BWCs can improve the transparency of police practice, less than two-thirds reported that BWCs will increase citizens' trust in police or improve the police relationship with the public. Furthermore, only about one-third of the sample agreed that racial tension between police and citizens will decrease as the result of BWCs.

**Potential Consequences of BWCs**

Another series of questions asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed with several statements about some potential consequences of BWCs. These consequences relate primarily to privacy concerns about the recording of suspects, victims, witnesses, and citizens in general. Diagram 3 displays the percent of respondents who "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with these statements.

Just over 20% of the sample indicated that BWCs present some concern over the personal privacy rights of crime victims and citizens within viewing range of the BWC. Fewer agreed that BWCs violate the privacy of crime suspects, although over 10% still reported this as a concern. Respondents were, however, more likely to report some concern related to citizens' willingness to approach or cooperate with officers when their statements are recorded by BWCs. Approximately 40% of the sample agreed

that victims and witnesses may be apprehensive about cooperating with the police because of BWC recordings, and just under that percentage indicated that citizens may worry about approaching officers to discuss suspicious activities.

**BWC Policy: Notification, Activation, and Access to Recording**

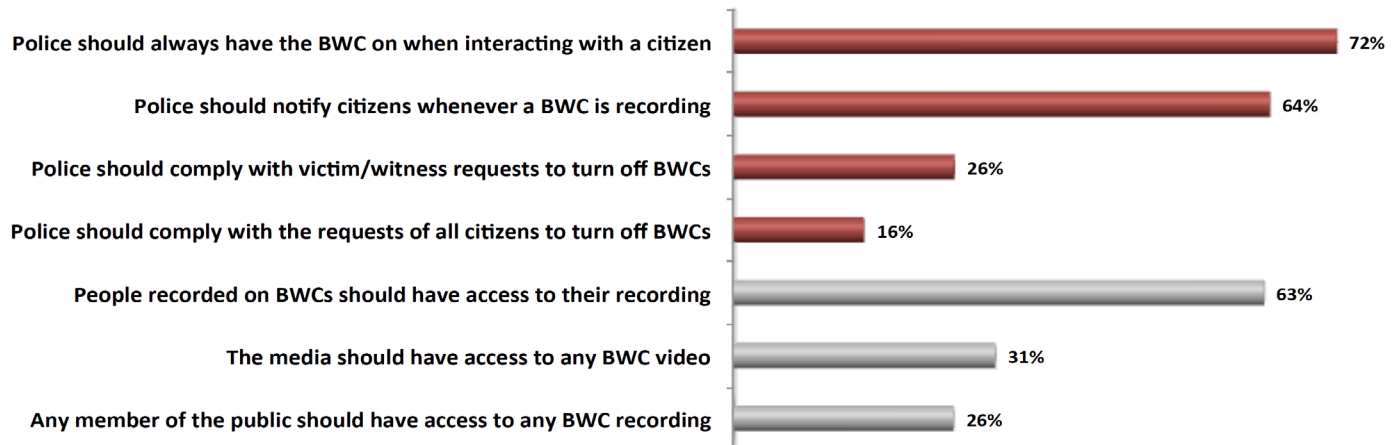
The survey also asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed with statements about several BWC policies. Some of the statements addressed questions about when officers should activate (or deactivate) BWCs and whether officers should notify citizens if they are being recorded. Other statements related to who should have access to video recordings. Diagram 4 displays the percent of respondents who "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with these statements.

As shown in Diagram 4, most in the sample reported that officers should always have the BWC activated when interacting with citizens, and most also indicated that police should notify citizens whenever a BWC is recording. Only 16% agreed that police should comply with citizen requests to deactivate BWCs, although slightly more indicated that officers should grant deactivation requests from victims or witnesses. Interestingly, nearly two-thirds of respondents indicated that citizens recorded on BWCs should have access to their recordings, but less than one-third believed that the media or the public at large should have access to videos.

**Diagram 3: Potential BWC Consequences (Percent who "Agree" or "Strongly Agree")**



**Diagram 4: BWC Policy Questions (Percent who "Agree" or "Strongly Agree")**



**Beliefs about the Necessity of BWCs for Different Policing Activities**

The survey next presented respondents with eight police activities and asked them to indicate the degree to which BWCs are necessary in that situation. Responses were recorded on a 3-point scale ranging from “not necessary” to “very necessary.” Diagram 5 displays the results of this series of questions.

As shown in Diagram 5, respondents were generally supportive of BWCs for most of the police activities that were listed. For seven of the eight activities, 50% or more of the sample considered BWCs to be “very necessary” – and 87% or more considered them to be “somewhat” or “very” necessary.

The one exception involved situations where police assist with medical emergencies. In this case, only 32% of respondents considered BWCs to be “very

necessary,” while 26% considered BWCs to be “not necessary” at all.

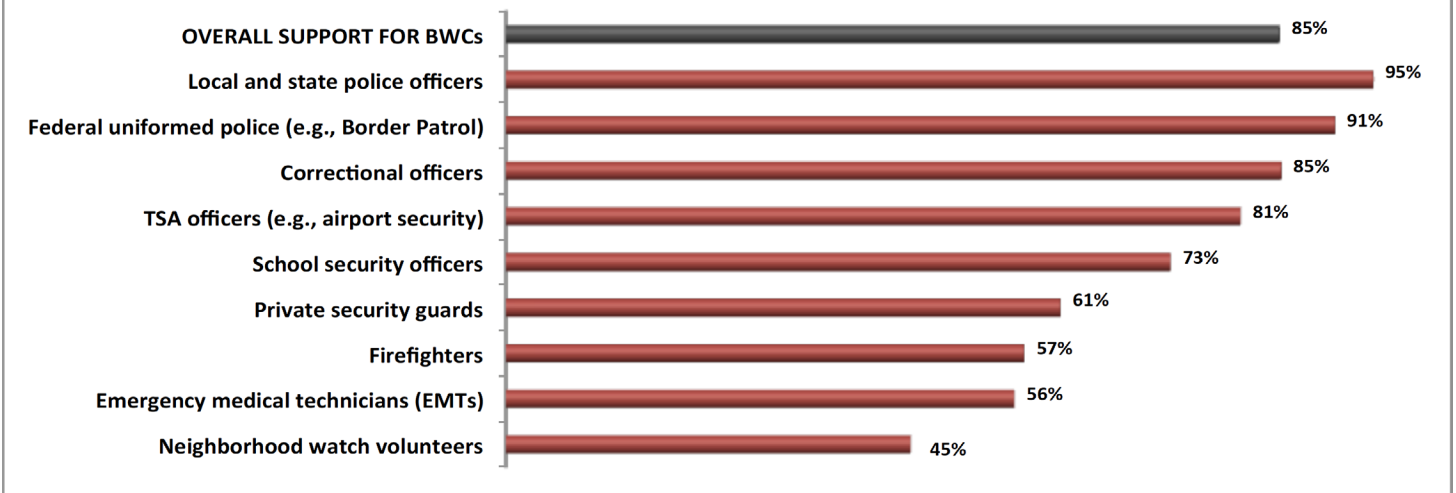
**Support for BWCs for Different Types of Public Safety Agencies**

Finally, the survey asked respondents to indicate their support for BWC usage by different types of public safety agencies. Diagram 6 indicates the percent of respondents who indicated that they have at least some support for BWCs in these different agencies.

Respondents appear generally supportive of BWCs on all types public safety officials. This is especially the case with police officials that citizens are most likely to encounter (i.e., local and state police officers) and other uniformed government officials that have surveillance or detection responsibilities (correctional officers, Border Patrol, Park Rangers, TSA officers, etc.). Respondents were slightly less



**Diagram 6: Support for BWCs by Public Safety (Percent Indicating Support)**



to agree with BWCs on school safety officers or private security guards, although support for BWCs on these officials remained relatively high. Additionally, over half of the respondents indicated some support for BWCs on firefighters and emergency medical technicians. The sample was less supportive of BWCs on neighborhood watch volunteers – this is the only category where fewer than half of the sample indicated support for the technology.

**Discussion**

Overall support for BWCs on police – particularly on local and state uniformed officers – is very high. Although support for the technology varies slightly based on the type of activity that police perform, survey respondents generally agree that BWCs will result in more police respect toward citizens, fewer incidents of police misconduct, and more effective information gathering by police. Although fewer agree that citizen respect toward officers will increase or that the relationship between police and citizens will improve as the result of BWCs, most believe that false complaints of police misconduct will decrease because of the technology.

Despite the general support for BWCs, a small but considerable percentage of respondents reported some potential concern over the technology. Approximately 20% of the sample worried about the personal privacy of crime victims and those within the viewing range of a BWC. About one-third of the sample indicated that citizens might be apprehensive about approaching officers with information about

suspicious activities in their neighborhoods – and even more agreed that victims and witnesses might worry about cooperating with officers knowing that their statements will be recorded. Although most respondents indicated that officers should always have the BWC activated when interacting with citizens and that officers should notify citizens of the activation, over one-quarter of the sample reported that police should deactivate the BWC at the request of victims and witnesses.

The data also reveal other information about public opinion of BWCs that is seemingly contradictory. For example, most of the sample reported that BWCs will help to improve the transparency of police practice, but many are concerned about allowing the media or members of the public access to video recordings. Also, respondents reported that BWCs are very necessary for certain police activities that are relatively rare (such as high risk operations), but for some police activities that are much more common (such as assisting with medical emergencies), BWCs are considered to be much less necessary.

While the public appears very much in support of BWCs on police, the potential concerns of some respondents highlight the need to proceed cautiously in terms of equipping officers with the technology. Issues regarding activation, deactivation, and access to recorded data appear particularly important to the public. Police agencies should therefore carefully consider these issues in formulating policies. Furthermore, future research should consider the potential consequences of BWCs in terms of interactions between police and citizens.

## **Limitations**

The main limitation of this research relates to the sampling design. Although the Qualtrics method provides a national sampling frame, respondents are restricted to those who have access to these online surveys. However, when compared to other recent surveys on citizen views about BWCs (YouGov 2015; Pew Research Center 2014), the level of public support for body cameras is of a similar high magnitude, providing some evidence for the generalizability of the results.

We also note that this survey was conducted shortly after several high-profile cases involving deaths of citizens while they were interacting with police or while they were in police custody. These cases generated a great deal of national publicity and a push toward greater police accountability. Thus, the political climate surrounding BWCs and police accountability may have impacted survey responses.

## **References**

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## CENTER FOR CRIME AND JUSTICE POLICY

### STATE DATA BRIEF SERIES

This report is part of the “Research in Brief” series produced by the Center for Crime and Justice Policy at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. The Center is housed in the Department of Criminal Justice, which is located in the Greenspun College of Urban Affairs. Research in Briefs are modeled after the Bureau of Justice Statistics’ Special Reports and Bulletins.

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