Body-worn Cameras Have Arrived;
Now Comes the Hard Part

Jody Weis

Achieving success with well-designed polices, plans, training and technology

They are called "cop cams", "body cams" or "on-officer recording systems" – and they are one of the biggest topics in public safety these days. No longer regarded as another invasive "Big Brother" technique, body-worn cameras are expected to become standard equipment. Views have evolved as police departments and the public alike, now see these devices as part of the solution to improving the often-complicated relationships between police and the citizens they protect and serve.

Recent events around the country have demonstrated that now, more than ever, there is a need to strengthen police-community relations, and wearable cameras can play an important role. But effectively deploying and managing a body-worn camera system is a complex undertaking. A successful program requires well-designed governing polices, usage procedures, and training, supported by strong technology to administer, store and secure recorded information. Without a comprehensive plan to address these needs, the integrity of the system is at risk.

Many agencies are already implementing wearable camera technologies and several large departments, such as New York City, Chicago and Washington, DC, have launched pilot programs. Adoption is likely to increase as law enforcement organizations start to see positive results, using body-worn cameras and the data they capture to:

- Document evidence, provide intelligence, aid investigations, and improve response and training.
- Create a real-time record of police interactions to establish facts, potentially offering protection from allegations of police misconduct, while also ensuring accountability.

- Support police transparency, improving community trust.

If done right, these systems can deliver on these goals, enabling new levels of transparency, trust and accountability, while also supporting higher quality police services and improved safety – benefitting both officers and citizens.

Documenting truth may influence behavior

Body-worn cameras record events in real-time, providing an objective view of police interactions. This holds officers accountable for their actions, providing the transparency and legitimacy communities desire. In turn, officers have some protection from false accusations of misconduct, which can help ease tensions and resolve officer-related incidents more quickly. Ultimately, the number of complaints made against a law enforcement agency may also be reduced.

There is also evidence that cameras can have a positive effect on people's behavior. When officers and civilians are aware their actions are being recorded, both are likely to act in a more civil manner. The Mesa Police Department assessed the impact of body-worn cameras on officer attitudes and behavior, and found 77 percent believed the cameras would cause officers to behave more professionally. [1]

Aiding investigations by uncovering a new layer of intelligence

Body worn cameras support the collection and documentation of evidence, recording what was viewed at a crime scene, witness accounts, interrogations, and arrests. Officers can search video captured before, during and after a crime, providing an opportunity to look for further evidence or clues. Footage of faces and individuals at a crime scene, or a vehicle license plate in the background, may reveal leads or guide police research. Video footage of interviews with witnesses and suspects also creates an accurate record of what was said, which later can be used in court.

Data police record in their day-to-day work can be paired with video analytics to provide real-time intelligence for officers in the field, supporting improved situational awareness, decision-making, and safety. Data that officers capture about vehicles (make, model, color, license plate number), as well as people (physical features to attire), can be geocoded, time-stamped and fed into a central operations data index. Combine this data with analytics and you have a highly effective crime-fighting tool that can facilitate more effective response, identify criminal patterns, and support preventive policing.

Enhancing Training

Use of cameras can benefit training and improve response. Video recordings can be used to simulate real-world incidents to better prepare officers and improve the quality of service. Video can also help departments identify and correct problems and support leadership development.

In light of its undeniable benefits, wearable camera technology has gained the support of groups that are often at odds on police issues, ranging from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and police unions that represent officers. But as the ACLU has said, "confidence can only be
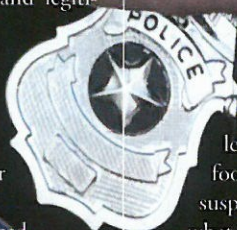
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created if good policies are put in place and backed up by good technology." [2]

Shaping A Policy to Fit the Program

As law enforcement agencies explore body-worn camera programs, important questions arise:

- What policies and procedures are needed to direct the appropriate use of cameras and recordings, while protecting the privacy rights for both citizens and officers?
- What are the protocols to guide when cameras are engaged, the processes for recording, downloading, viewing and controlling how footage will be used?
- What systems are needed to manage, organize and store the enormous volume of data produced, how long will it be retained, what legal compliances must be met for public disclosure?
- What technology is needed to protect the integrity of the system, safeguarding recordings from unauthorized or improper use, manipulation, copying, tampering, or deletion, as well as external threats such as cyber attack?
- What are the training requirements to ensure adherence to guidelines, plus the know-how to interact with technology systems adopted?
- What analytics systems are needed to ensure data is organized to be usable and provide actionable information and intelligence?

The effectiveness of a body-worn camera program depends on how these questions are addressed. The good news is there are solutions to help manage these myriad issues.

Storing and Securing Droves of Data

Body-worn cameras create a vast amount of data that can be used for analysis. But how can departments store, manage and protect it all? Here are some of the solutions:

- **Storage:** There are ways to shrink the amount of footage maintained, decreasing costs and the complexity of storage. Most states also have legal requirements that define mandatory timeframes for retention and destruction of data. Departments may decide to discard data after the legal period expires, or to drastically reduce the data to only what's useful. For instance, retain the five facial photos associated with an officer's interaction.

- **Data Management and Security:** Information management systems are growing more sophisticated, with extensive capabilities to collect and organize data. These systems also offer automated time-saving features and administrative controls to help public safety organizations better manage, access and use information, while providing robust security, permissions, and safeguards.

- **Analytics:** With a vast volume of video footage generated daily, how can agencies manage it all? Human analysis cannot keep up. In fact, it is estimated 99% of video recordings go unseen.[3] The answer is video analytics solutions, which are proving to be a game changer. Providing automatic monitoring and analysis of video streams, these systems are becoming more "intelligent", and incorporating new functions from facial recognition to biometrics, transforming how data can be used for intelligence-led policing.

In addition, these solutions can help shrink data by filtering out footage that has no useful information, for example, does not include faces, movement or sound. This "removal of blanks" significantly minimizes storage requirements, reducing costs.

Protecting Privacy

The increased use of video has fueled privacy concerns, recognizing police cameras would record all interactions, be it with law-abiding citizens, or capturing citizens in the background, unaware they are being recorded. There are also privacy considerations in regard to the storage, use and retention of video footage.

To address privacy issues, law enforcement agencies must develop policies that clearly outline how the department plans to be transparent and accountable, and protect the civil liberties and privacy interests of citizens. The Police Executive Research Forum surveyed 254 law enforcement agencies and found that nearly a third of the agencies using body-worn cameras had no written policy on the devices.[4] These policies must also be backed by technology systems that can administer and protect the data, so it is only used and handled as intended.

A Look Ahead

Just as technology is evolving every day, so are the opportunities for using body-worn cameras to support delivery of higher quality police services, improved crime-fighting performance and officer safety. As body-worn cameras advance, they can be equipped with GPS locational mapping, voice recording and pattern recognition algorithms, and other means to track and monitor situations. The possibilities for building trust, creating greater transparency and accountability between officers and citizens, and fostering stronger police-community relations are limitless.

To fully embrace the power and promise of body-worn cameras, however, police need well-designed policies, training procedures, and systems to administer and secure the technology and data. A clear and comprehensive body-worn camera program can provide tremendous value without significant financial or management burden. Securing public trust, increasing transparency, and better protecting citizens and the officers who serve them, are just some of the many achievable rewards.

References

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Before joining the Chicago Police Department, Mr Weis spent 23 years in the Federal Bureau of Investigations, moving through various roles. Most recently, he held the position of Special Agent in Charge (SAC) for the Philadelphia Field Office, where he oversaw one of the FBI's largest field operations. Prior to that, he worked for the FBI in six cities, assuming roles of increasing responsibility, from Special Agent through Deputy Assistant Director, supervising programs to address terrorism, violent crime, narcotics, organized crime, major gangs, and more. Mr Weis is a frequent guest commentator on public safety matters for local and national media, and also lectures at Loyola University of Chicago, and Northwestern University's School of Continuing Studies. At the start of his career, he served in the U.S. Army, achieving the rank of Captain. He received his bachelor's degree from the University of Tampa.