

## **An Exploratory Study of the Use of Body-Worn Cameras by Kentucky Law Enforcement Agencies and Importance in Civilian Encounters**

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### **Abstract**

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*The use of body-worn cameras (BWCs) by police officers is a relatively recent advancement in law enforcement. While nearly 75 percent of police departments did not use BWCs in 2013 (NIJ, 2017), the use of this technology has rapidly grown in recent years. Maciag (2016) reports that in a national survey, “Nearly every large police department...said it plans to move forward with body-worn cameras, with 95 percent either committed to body cameras or having completed their implementation” (para Nearly every). Unlike its predecessor, fixed vehicle dashboard cameras, BWCs provide a clearer picture of police-civilian encounters. The purpose of this study was to assess the current use BWCs by Kentucky law enforcement agencies and to determine, from an agency perspective, the importance of these cameras in police-civilian interactions. Data were collected from a random sample (n = 25) of Kentucky law enforcement agencies in 2016. Findings suggest that law enforcement agencies in Kentucky are gradually adopting BWC technology and, among those that already employ it, most view BWCs as “very helpful” in documenting police-civilian interactions.*

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### **1. Introduction**

The use of video technology is not a new approach in law enforcement. According to Nash and Scarberry (2014), the first documented effort to install a fixed camera in a Connecticut State Police cruiser occurred in the 1960s. While the technology was impractical, advancements over the next several decades and advocacy from the organization Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (MADD) resulted in more wide-spread use of dashboard cameras in the 1980s. According to the authors, the Department of Justice and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) initiated the In-Car Camera Initiative Program in 2000 to provide federal funding to state police and highway patrol agencies across the United States. Prior to the initiative only 11 percent of cruisers were equipped; by 2003, that had risen to 72 percent. However, with rapid advancements in technology the use of dashboard cameras is becoming obsolete. Clasen-Kelly (2015) reports that many law enforcement agencies have phased-out dashboard cameras in favor of body-worn cameras (BWCs) for achieving transparency and accountability. There is disagreement when BWCs were first used in the United States. Demetrius & Okwu (2014) report their use first in Rialto, California, in 2012, while Bowman (2017) states they were first used by the Chesapeake Police Department, Virginia, in 2008. However, the technology itself reportedly was first implemented in Britain in 2007 (Bowman).

## 2. Literature Review

### Necessity for Body-Worn Cameras

There are many reasons why law enforcement agencies are transitioning to body-worn Cameras (BWCs). Notably, according to Blitz (2015), public outcry following several police shootings during police-civilian encounters gave rise to conversations whether the use BWCs by the police could reduce these incidents. Pagliarella (2016) contributes the 2014 deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, both African-Americans, by the police to fueling the BWC movement, similar to the expansion of dashboard cameras following the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police officers in 1991. The disputed circumstances surrounding the death of Michael Brown at the hands of a Caucasian police officer “polarized the nation” (Sommers, 2016, p. 1307), and led to then-President Obama’s announcement of the Body Worn Camera Partnership Program—an initiative to purchase 50,000 body cameras for police officers across the United States. Subsequent fatalities of others including Eric Garner (2014), Tamir Rice (2014), and Walter Scott (2015), among others, led reform efforts that “enthusiastically embraced the idea of putting cameras on police officers” (Sommers, p. 1309). Despite some initial resistance by police administrators, a 2014 Pew Research Center poll revealed BWCs have become widely popular, with 87 percent of respondents who think they are a “good idea” (Sommers, p. 1309). As Muth and Jack (2016) so poignantly ask, “If a picture is worth 1,000 words, what is a video worth? Apparently, quite a bit more” (p. 23).

### Body-Worn Camera Technology

The Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA, 2015) explains the technology behind body-worn cameras (BWCs). Officer BWCs are typically small devices that record interactions between the police and community. The camera typically is worn on the officer’s uniform (placed optionally on the shoulder lapel, sunglasses, or hat), with a forward-facing viewable area. Various camera types with numerous options exist including user controls, such as push to record, touch-screen controls, video and audio feed, and playback in field. The video is uploaded and typically stored on a server or through an online, web-based digital media storage platform where it can be encrypted and managed. Unlike their predecessor, dashboard cameras, BWCs are not stationary. BWCs “retain the strengths of the dashboard camera, but they allow the technology to accompany the officer wherever he or she goes. In some instances, using BWCs and dashboard cameras together can be beneficial, documenting an event from two different perspectives” (BJA, p. 2). Nash and Scarberry (2014) note that since only about 10 percent of police activity occurs in front of the cruiser, BWCs provide for measurable benefits not present in dashboard cameras.

### Research on Body-Worn Cameras

The research literature on the effectiveness of body-worn cameras (BWCs) is limited due largely to the infancy of this technology. One of the first studies in the United States to evaluate the benefits of BWCs was conducted by Farrar (2013). The author tested the effect of BWCs on officer self-awareness and socially-desirable behavior. Findings of the study revealed a significant reduction in the total number of incidents of police use-of-force and in citizen complaints involving officers who used BWCs. In a similar study conducted by Ariel, Farrar, and Sutherland (2015), the authors tested the use of BWCs to determine effects on incidents of police use-of-force and citizen complaints. Study findings suggested BWCs reduce the prevalence of use-of-force and citizen complaints against the police. White, Gaub, and Todak (2017), also conducted a study to explore the effects of BWCs on use-of-force, complaints against officers, and officer injuries. The authors observed trends “consistent with a positive effect” (p. 1) in the decline in use-of-force and citizen complaints, noting “statistical significance aside, one could make a persuasive argument about the practical significance of the findings” (p. 8). No significant association was observed between BWCs and officer injury. White (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of the literature to evaluate the benefits and challenges of BWC technology. The meta-analysis included five studies that “represent the entire body of evidence on body-worn cameras” (p. 6). The author identified several perceived benefits of BWCs including an increase in transparency and citizen views of police legitimacy, a civilizing effect resulting in improved behavior among both police officers and citizens, evidentiary benefits that expedite resolution of citizen complaints or lawsuits and that improve evidence for arrest and prosecution, and opportunities for police training.

Problems noted by the author included citizen privacy concerns; police officer privacy concerns; officer health and safety; investments in training and policy development; and commitment of finances, resources and logistics. However, White states, “police departments should be cautious and deliberate in their exploration of the technology given the lack of research” (p. 6). The National Institute of Justice (NIJ, 2017) reports two federally-funded studies currently underway involving the impact of BWCs in the Las Vegas Metro Police and Los Angeles Police Departments.

### **Model Policy and Kentucky Body-Worn Camera Guidelines**

The Kentucky League of Cities (KLC, 2014), has proposed model policy<sup>1</sup> for BWCs. According to the KLC (n.d.), “many of the requests are a result of the Ferguson, Missouri shooting” (para KLCIS Law Enforcement Model) of Michael Brown. The KLC notes that it has supported the use of BWCs for many years, stating that “we have found that cameras have been a benefit to our officers clearing them from false accusations. The cameras also act as a supervisor and provide oversight for Law Enforcement especially in smaller departments” (para KLCIS Law Enforcement Model). The stated purpose of the model policy is “to direct officers and supervisors in the proper use and maintenance of Body Worn Video Recorders (BWV) as well as directing how video will be utilized as a quality control mechanism and evidence” (KLC, 2014, p. 1). The model policy, specifically, states the following:

The policy of this Department/Office is to provide officers with body worn videorecording devices in an effort to collect evidence to be used in the prosecution of those who violate the law, for officer evaluation and training, and to provide accuratedocumentation of law enforcement and citizen interaction. The use of a BWV system provides persuasive documentary evidence and helps defend against civil litigation and allegations of officer misconduct. Officers assigned the use of these devices shall adhere to the operational objectives and protocols outlined herein so as to maximize the effectiveness and utility of the BWV and the integrity of evidence and related video documentation. (KLC, 2014, p. 1).

Inspection of the model policy is consistent with similar model policy<sup>2</sup> developed by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP, 2014). The stated purpose of the policy is “intended to provide officers with instructions on when and how to use body-worn cameras (BWCs) so that officers may reliably record their contacts with the public in accordance with the law” (IACP, p. 1). The model policy states, “It is the policy of this department that officers shall activate the BWC when such use is appropriate to the proper performance of his or her official duties, where the recordings are consistent with this policy and law. This policy does not govern the use of surreptitious recording devices used in undercover operations” (p. 1). Other organizations, such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), have proposed similar model policy<sup>3</sup> for BWCs.

Like many states, Kentucky has yet to enact laws relating to BWCs (Bowman, 2017). However, the State Archives and Records Commission, a statutory agency that has authority to review and approve all records retention schedules of state and local public agencies, established guidelines that require body-worn recordings kept for sixty days and then destroyed, unless there is an active or pending investigation, litigation, or open records request for these records in which the records must be maintained until the activity is completed (KLC, n.d.). Several LEAs including the Louisville Metro Police Department<sup>4</sup> and Lexington Police Department<sup>5</sup> have established policies for BWCs.

### **3. Method**

#### **Sample**

A probability sample (Systematic Random Sample) was drawn from a list of law enforcement agencies (LEAs) in Kentucky. Kentucky has 389 LEAs based on the 2008 Census of State and Local Law Enforcement Agencies, U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, which include state, city, county, and campus/special police. Kentucky is a rural state, therefore, LEAs are predominantly small. The exception is the Louisville Metro Police Department, which is among the 50 largest police departments by number of sworn officers in the United States (Reaves, 2011). Kentucky has less than 200 sworn officers per 100,000 residents.

Of the LEAs surveyed ( $n = 72$ ), the response rate was 35 percent ( $n = 25$ ). Among the respondents, 28 percent ( $n = 7$ ) held the rank of Chief, Assistant Chief (8%,  $n = 2$ ), Sheriff (24%,  $n = 6$ ), Colonel (12%,  $n = 3$ ), Lieutenant Colonel (4%,  $n = 1$ ), Captain (12%,  $n = 3$ ), Lieutenant (4%,  $n = 1$ ), Sergeant (4%,  $n = 1$ ) and Unidentified (4%,  $n = 1$ ). Examination of the surveys returned revealed a cross-representation of LEAs in Kentucky. Of the three census classifications for population (Urban, 50,000 or greater; Urban Cluster, 2,500 to 49,999; Rural, 2,500 or less), 64 percent ( $n = 16$ ) of the LEAs sampled were classified as Urban Cluster, 20 percent ( $n = 5$ ) were classified as Rural, 12 percent ( $n = 3$ ) were classified as Urban, and four percent ( $n = 1$ ) were not reported. All (100%,  $n = 25$ ) of the LEAs sampled were identified as local (versus federal, state, or special jurisdiction) agencies. Sixty-four percent ( $n = 16$ ) of the LEAs were not accredited. A majority (60%,  $n = 15$ ) considered their primary LEA activity as crime prevention (proactive deterrence) compared to 40 percent ( $n = 10$ ) as primarily law enforcement (reactive deterrence). A majority (68 percent,  $n = 17$ ) of the LEAs employed 20 or fewer officers. The mean age of the sample was 47.2 years. Eighty-eight percent ( $n = 22$ ) were Caucasian, and 12 percent ( $n = 3$ ) were African-American. Ninety-six percent ( $n = 24$ ) were male. Slightly less than half of the respondents (44%,  $n = 11$ ) had a college degree. A majority was married (76%,  $n = 19$ ). Ninety-six percent ( $n = 24$ ) of respondents had ten years or more years of experience in law enforcement, and seventy-two percent ( $n = 20$ ) had been employed in their current agency 10 or more years. Eighty percent of respondents ( $n = 20$ ) earned salaries of \$50,000 or higher, which is above the median income of \$43,640 in Kentucky in 2015 (U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, 2017).

## Design and Procedure

This survey study was approved by the Kentucky State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The survey was developed and administered by mailing it to a random sample of administrators among Kentucky law enforcement agencies (LEAs) and included a self-addressed, stamped envelope for return of the survey. A preamble letter was included with the survey to explain the purpose of the study and to obtain informed consent from study participants. The instrument consisted of demographic questions relating to characteristics of the respondents including the LEAs where they were employed. Likert-type questions were included to assess administrators' perceptions concerning the importance of body-worn cameras (BWCs) on police-community interactions. Guided by the literature, the research questions for the study included the following: 1.) To what extent are LEAs in Kentucky using BWCs? 2.) Do LEAs not currently using BWCs have plans to implement this technology? and 3.) How do LEAs perceive the importance of BWCs on influencing police-community interactions? The internal consistency reliability of the instrument was good ( $\alpha = .81$ ), and the instrument appears to have face validity.

## 4. Results

Data were analyzed using SPSS software and consisted of descriptive and nonparametric (due to a small sample size) inferential statistics. Based on the research questions, results revealed the following observations: 1.) A majority of LEAs in Kentucky (64%,  $n = 16$ ) do not currently use body-worn cameras (BWCs), although the reverse was observed for use of dashboard cameras (68%,  $n = 17$ ). Of the 36 percent ( $n = 9$ ) of LEAs currently using BWCs, 78 percent ( $n = 7$ ) have used this technology four or fewer years, compared to 52 percent ( $n = 13$ ) of LEAs that have used dashboard cameras at least five years. 2.) Thirty-two percent ( $n = 8$ ) of LEAs not currently using BWCs have plans to implement this technology. However, only 28 percent ( $n = 7$ ) of them have policy directives to use BWCs, compared to 60 percent ( $n = 15$ ) for dashboard cameras. 3.) Respondents viewed BWCs as a benefit to LEAs by overwhelmingly rating *Helpful to Very Helpful* the following items: *Use of BWCs to Accurately Document Officer-Community Interactions*, *Necessity of BWCs to Accurately Document these Interactions*, *Ability of BWCs to Accurately Document these Interactions*, *Effectiveness of BWCs to Accurately Document these Interactions*, and *Function of BWCs to Accurately Document these Interactions*. A majority of respondents also rated *Helpful to Very Helpful* the *Media's Coverage of Officer-Community Interactions*. The frequency and percentage distributions for respondents' ratings on BWCs and the media's coverage are observed in Table 1.

Table 1.

*Respondents' Views on Body-Worn Cameras and Media Coverage (n = 25)*

Helpfulness Ratings<sup>a</sup>

	1		2		3		4		5		6		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Benefit														
Use	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	4.0	12	48.0	12	48.0	25	100
Necessity	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	12.0	10	40.0	12	48.0	25	100
Ability	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	16.0	9	36.0	12	48.0	25	100
Effectiveness	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	16.0	9	36.0	12	48.0	25	100
Function	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	12.0	10	40.0	12	48.0	25	100
Media	1	4.0	1	4.0	1	4.0	6	24.0	10	40.0	6	24.0	25	100

<sup>a</sup>Rating Scale 1 = Very Unhelpful to 6 = Very Helpful

Nonparametric inferential statistics used included the Man-Whitney *U* and Spearman's rank correlation. To examine group differences in mean ratings for these survey item responses, the Mann-Whitney *U* statistic was used. No significant differences were observed based on Gender. Due to sample sizes, groups were recoded dichotomously (e.g., Education level—College graduate and Non-college graduate) for the remaining variables. No significant differences were observed based on education level, officer rank, agency accreditation, agency function, or patrol activity. A significant difference was observed only in the *Media's Coverage of Officer-Community Interactions* item; Respondents in urban communities view the media's coverage as less helpful or positive ( $m = 3.17$ ) than in more rural areas ( $m = 14.34$ ;  $U = 3.50, p < .05$ ). As nearly all (96%,  $n = 24$ ) of respondents were Caucasian and male, race and gender differences were not calculated.

The Spearman's rank correlation was calculated to determine the relationships between age, number of years employed in law enforcement, number of years employed in the agency, number of officers employed in the agency and the scaled survey items. A positive, moderate, and significant correlation was observed between age and views on the *Media's Coverage of Officer-Community Interactions* ( $\rho(23) = .402, p < .05$ ); Older respondents viewed the media's coverage as more positive than younger respondents. A negative, moderate, and significant relationship was also observed between number of officers employed in the agency and views on the *Media's Coverage of Officer-Community Interactions* ( $\rho(23) = -.475, p < .05$ ); Respondents in LEAs with more officers viewed the media's coverage as less favorable compared to LEAs with fewer officers.

**5. Discussion**

Technological advancements in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have drastically improved law enforcement capabilities. The use of BWCs is one example, and LEAs across the nation, indeed globally, have incrementally embraced the use of this technology. BWCs are a relatively new technology in law enforcement, with the first department in the United States reportedly equipping officers less than a decade ago. In 2013, approximately 32 percent of LEAs used BWCs (Reaves, 2015). While this percentage has assuredly increased in subsequent years, a majority of LEAs still rely solely on other technologies (e.g., dashboard cameras).

A number of explanations exist for the slow adoption of BWCs. Goldstein (2016) states, "body cameras have faced pockets of resistance, from both police reform advocates and some law enforcement agencies and state legislatures. Reform advocates have cautioned that cameras could provide the police with new methods of surveillance that might erode personal privacy, while some law enforcement agencies have balked at the cost of storing so much data..." (para Envisioned as a tool). Despite the trend to equip officers with BWCs in LEAs nationally, some have halted plans to implement the technology or have discontinued their use citing prohibitive costs (Bruttell, 2017; Callahan, 2016). This is particularly relevant in Kentucky where 90 percent of counties can be considered rural (Foreman, 2013), and many LEAs simply do not have to resources to support BWC efforts. According to Kowtowski (2016), each BWC costs between four-hundred to one-thousand dollars, and the costs to store the footage can average one-hundred dollars per month per camera.

For example, a LEA with 200 officers would cost “about \$440,000 in its first year of using body-cameras, plus an additional \$240,000 every year afterward” (Kowtowski, para With 200 cameras).

There are additional considerations as well for rural LEAs. Foreman notes, “Few things are worse than calling for help and realizing no one can hear you. But when you’re in the mountains and wooded valleys of the commonwealth, there’s a good chance technology is going to fail” (p. 46). Yet, the rural-ness of Kentucky and technology challenges faced by many of its LEAs as a consequence is one important reason why BWCs are a good investment. BWCs provide officers with recorded evidence of encounters that can be preserved, an especially important “back-up” given many officers work alone in these areas. Erstad (2016) states, “While mounted police cameras can’t pick up on absolutely everything an officer sees, the video obtained from these cameras can help paint a much clearer picture of what happened... especially in complex situations [that] can be hard... to interpret or visualize” (para A clear). BWCs increase transparency of officer activities and can contribute to improved civilian behavior when confronted by law enforcement—another important benefit to LEAs, whether in rural or urban areas. Survey data from this exploratory study found the use of BWCs in Kentucky to be consistent with national data on the use of BWCs by LEAs. Another 32 percent of Kentucky LEAs have plans to implement this technology in the near future, which is also consistent with national trends.

Respondents reported that BWCs are a benefit to their LEAs in Kentucky. As seen in Table 1, for each of the survey response items, overwhelmingly, LEAs recognize the helpfulness in the use, necessity, ability, effectiveness, and function of BWCs to accurately document police-civilian encounters. Although Lin (2016) states that BWCs “have great potential to improve evidence collection and law enforcement accountability” (p. 348), results of the current study suggest that there is a more pragmatic use of BWCs from officers’ perspectives; they can be used to accurately document all encounters with the general public. Following the tragic deaths of several individuals, such as Michael Brown and Freddie Gray, many law enforcement officers experienced an “indictment” in their every encounter as the media and public closely scrutinized their actions. Citing a Pew Research Center study in 2016, Clement and Lowery (2017) state, “Officers say the high-profile deaths have changed the way they do their job — and have made it harder. More than 7 in 10 say officers have become more timid about stopping to question suspicious people, roughly three-quarters say fellow officers report they are more reluctant to use force when necessary, and more than 9 in 10 say fellow officers have grown more worried about their safety” (para Officers say). This is realized in a number of news articles post-Ferguson involving officers who were afraid to use any force against suspects for fear of negative media and public attention (see, for example, Hawkins, 2016; Pleasance, 2015; and Urbanski, 2014). As seen in the current study, officers in urban areas view the media as less helpful or positive in its reporting of officer-community interactions; understandably, there are more reports of such events in urban versus rural areas and, therefore, a potential for closer scrutiny. This is consistent with the findings of an inverse relationship between a LEA’s size and views on the media (i.e., larger LEAs have less favorable views of the media than smaller ones). Age of respondents, too, relates to perceptions of media support. Older officers tend to have more favorable views than younger officers. A number of reasons may account for these differences, such as older officers’ longevity in the community and familiarity with the media as compared to younger officers. This finding, however, is consistent with Pew Research Center studies that have found younger officers to have less optimistic views in general about their communities than older officers (Morin, Parker, Stepler, and Mercer, 2017). Nevertheless, BWCs, it seems, can lessen fears by officers who are burdened by the “Ferguson Effect,” a term, according to MacDonald (2016), referring to a phenomenon of de-policing (due to fears of backlash by officers of their actions) and resultant increases in crime.

In conclusion, this exploratory study provided useful insight on the use of BWCs by Kentucky LEAs from administrators’ perspectives. Although the design was not rigorous, the study results, nonetheless, contribute to the small number of published research articles on this topic. The use of BWCs has more recently garnered significant attention nationally. BWCs have enabled LEA administrators, as well as the general public, to more fully understand officer-civilian encounters. While more research is needed, including studies that examine the perspectives of both frontline officers and the public on the use of BWCs, as well as a cost-benefits analysis, the results of this study suggest that BWCs offer benefits to LEAs, real or perceived, and are not simply a technological fad that is likely to disappear anytime soon.

**Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup><http://www.klc.org/UserFiles/files/BODYCamModelPolicyDec2014.pdf>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.theiacp.org/Portals/0/documents/pdfs/MembersOnly/BodyWornCamerasPolicy.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>[https://www.aclu.org/files/field\\_document/aclu\\_police\\_body\\_cameras\\_model\\_legislation\\_may\\_2015.pdf](https://www.aclu.org/files/field_document/aclu_police_body_cameras_model_legislation_may_2015.pdf)

<sup>4</sup><http://ftpcontent4.worldnow.com/wave/pdf/LMPD%20Body%20Camera%20Policy.pdf>

<sup>5</sup><https://next.lexingtonky.gov/sites/default/files/2016-07/GO%202015-15%20Body-Worn%20Cameras.pdf>

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