



INTERACT

The INTERACT (Investigating New Types of Engagement, Response and Contact Technologies in Policing) project explored the use of new technologies in interactions between the police and public, and how police can build legitimacy with various publics amidst changes to police contact.

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Body-worn Video and interactions with the public: who does it benefit and how is it used?

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Exploring how body cameras may influence people's views of fairness during face-to-face interactions with the police.

Key Points:

- Body-Worn Videos (BWV) are not just a neutral part of a police uniform; they can strongly affect how interactions with the public unfold. Sometimes they help the encounter go smoothly, while other times they make things more difficult.
- Police officers tend to focus on how BWV can help or protect them in an encounter with a member of the public, rather than how BWV can benefit others.
- Generally speaking, official guidance on BWV states that if it is turned on, this needs to be announced at the beginning of an interaction with a member of the public. In our experience, often this did not happen, even in situations when it easily could have. In some of these cases there seemed to be an assumption that the member of the public should be able to 'know' when the camera was recording.
- BWV gives power to an officer in an encounter. Members of the public, if they feel they are not being treated fairly, may try to employ their own power (e.g. camera phones) to redress this balance.
- Many encounters with the public where BWV was used went smoothly – the people the officers encountered did not seem to have an issue with the camera. This was not always the case, however. Treating the public fairly in an encounter and explaining what officers are doing with cameras can help mitigate this by increasing transparency in decision making to ease anxieties.

Background

Body-worn video (BWV, or body-worn cameras) has become a standard feature of the police 'tool box'. BWV has been in use since the early 2000s, but there has been a rapid adoption of the technology in recent years. There are a range of motivations for this:



- Collecting 'evidence' of a crime scene, potentially for use in court proceedings
- Collecting 'evidence' of behaviour from a member of the public, potentially for use in court proceedings or in case of a complaint against a police officer
- To change the behaviour of a member of the public in an encounter with a police officer (i.e., to calm an aggressive person)
- To change the behaviour of police officers (i.e. to encourage them to follow standard procedures and avoid misconduct)

Academic research on BWV is a large and growing field, especially in the USA, since the year 2000, after highly publicised cases of police misconduct. This research has considered several aspects of BWV in policing. These include the effectiveness of BWV, the impact of cameras on behaviour of the public, the impact of cameras on behaviour of the police, and attitudes towards cameras (both police and public).

Far from presenting a clear argument one way or the other for the effects of BWV, research tends to show mixed results. For example, the findings in relation to the impact of cameras on police and public behaviour does not present a clear picture. In some studies behaviour is improved with the use of cameras (less use of violence, for example) while in others there is no clear effect. In a similar vein, there are mixed findings in terms of the effect on cameras in encounters between the police and minoritised communities (Lum et al., 2020; Webster et al, 2022).

Most of the research to date is based on experimental methods (introducing cameras in one area but not in another and then comparing what happens) or uses surveys of the public or the police to gather their views. There is very little research to date on BWV which employs a qualitative, observational methodology to witness police and public encounters where a camera is present to record how the devices are used and effect they have.



What we did

We wanted to see what impact BWV and other mobile technologies have on interactions between the police and the public during in-person encounters. We were especially interested in the impact of these technologies on elements of procedural justice, which refers to the fairness and transparency of the processes used by police, such as how decisions are made, how people are treated during interactions, and whether individuals feel they have been given a voice and treated with respect.

We conducted observational research in three police forces across four sites. Two of the sites were in Scotland (one urban and one rural) and two were in England (one force included the urban site and the other included the rural site). Our researchers, Dr Estelle Clayton and Dr Will Andrews, spent approximately 500 hours in total across the four sites observing police activity with the public and noted what transpired when a camera or other mobile technology was employed. They observed response policing, local policing and traffic policing, and had the full cooperation of each police agency. They were paired with an officer or pair of officers during each observation and accompanied them throughout their shift. Drs Clayton and Andrews were focused on the use of technology in encounters with the public, how technology influences officers' choices, and how the public themselves use technology in the encounter. They would also discuss the technologies with the officers during the fieldwork, to gain deeper insights.



Key findings

BWV used as protection: Most of the officers with whom we spoke indicated that BWV is a powerful tool of protection for the police. This was usually framed as protecting officers in case of a complaint from a member of the public after an encounter. It was also highlighted that video from cameras is now expected as evidence in court proceedings, and so having it protects officers from reprimand in court. However, officers often did not consider that BWV could also protect the public and there were examples of officers not activating their cameras in situations where the footage could potentially be useful to the member of the public (such as for an insurance claim), but not the officer.

BWV changes behaviour: The officers we observed also indicated that BWV is effective in changing the behaviour of a member of the public if that person knows (or assumes) that the camera is on. This is usually framed as calming down an aggressive person. However, we also witnessed occasions where activation of the camera would aggravate the member of the public and in fact make the encounter worse.



BWV is not always announced: To our knowledge, Standard Operating Procedures requires officers to announce when they activate the camera, whenever possible. However, based on our experience, this guideline was followed inconsistently at best. Officers would either forget to announce that the camera was on or would not do so because they felt it was ‘obvious’ that the camera was active. Some officers suggested that the small light on the camera might be sufficient to indicate the camera was turned on, but this was less obvious to both researchers and members of the public. Conversely, there were also occasions where the camera was not active, but the member of the public clearly assumed that it was, and officers would not correct them due to the perceived calming effect of the camera.



BWV as a two-way street: While cameras are the property of the police and controlled by them, members of the public demonstrated a sense of influence over the recording on occasion. For example, a member of the public asked the police officer to turn on the camera to record how upset children were about a burglary in a home. Similarly, people may also ask an officer to turn the camera off if the situation is particularly upsetting or personal. Being recorded is something of which people can be highly aware and will want to control to some degree. This is also reflected in cases where members of the public would activate the cameras on their smart phones to record the officers in an effort to rebalance control in a situation.



Mobile technologies – help or hinderance?: We also observed how other mobile technologies are used, such as mobile data terminals (small, portable computers connected to police systems) and Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) systems (which scan car number plates and check for issues on official databases). We found that while these can be very useful for giving officers quick and easy access to important information, they could also have a detrimental impact on encounters with the public. On some occasions, the data accessed via the device was inaccurate and would lead officers to take actions that were not justified. Officers were aware of some of these limitations and would employ their own workarounds to deal with it, taking up more of their time. Use of mobile data terminals to take notes during an encounter with a member of the public meant that officers had to break eye contact and this could give the appearance that the officer wasn't listening. Technologies were also useful as a scapegoat if officers wanted to avoid blame when dealing with an annoyed member of the public, often saying ‘I'm only doing what the system told me to’.



Implications

- Officers should be encouraged (both in official guidance and in terms of local practice) to always announce that a camera is recording in an encounter with a member of the public.
- Officers who do not have their cameras on should consider if recording a scene or an encounter would benefit the member of the public in some way, even if there is not an obvious benefit to the officer.
- If a member of the public wishes to see the footage in which they feature, being able to do so should be made as easy and as accessible as possible (such as by offering a QR code that the person could scan to get to the correct website to register their request) in order to increase transparency.
- If a member of the public would like a BWV camera turned off or on (as appropriate) and the officer is unwilling to do so, the reason for this should be explained calmly and with sufficient justification. Members of the public do have a right to ask.



- Officers should be made aware that policing technologies are not neutral tools; their presence and how officers use them can have an impact on the people they encounter. Being mindful of this and taking steps to address it, based on principles of fairness and transparency, can help improve interactions with the public.

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