



How Body-Worn Cameras Influence Officer and Civilian Behavior

Key Takeaways

- Officers equipped with body-worn cameras (BWCs) generated significantly fewer citizen complaints and use of force reports than officers without cameras in a rigorous Las Vegas randomized controlled trial.
- BWC officers also made significantly more arrests and issued more citations than their non-BWC counterparts—evidence that BWCs do not dampen proactive officer behavior and an unanticipated consequence that the authors say warrants attention from department leaders.
- Complaints against BWC officers were resolved an average of 15.5 days faster than complaints against non-BWC officers, suggesting that video evidence speeds up the internal affairs process and reduces costs.

Why This Matters

Police departments across the United States have adopted BWCs at a rapid pace, largely in response to public concerns about use of force, misconduct, and the quality of police-community relations, as well as their contributions to evidence collection and incident closure. Despite widespread adoption, research on the impact BWCs have on officer behavior, police-civilian encounters, and enforcement patterns has been fragmented and sometimes contradictory. Police and corrections agencies largely moved forward without strong scientific evidence to guide their policies.

Several earlier studies found that BWCs reduced complaints and use of force incidents. A randomized experiment in Rialto, California, found a 90 percent reduction in complaints and a 50 percent reduction in use of force reports among officers wearing cameras. A quasi-experimental study in Phoenix found a 62 percent reduction in complaints against BWC officers. However, a multisite randomized experiment involving more than 2,000 officers across eight departments found no overall reduction in use of force and even an increase in assaults on officers wearing cameras.

A few studies examined proactive policing activities—in terms of arrests and citations—and fewer still used the most rigorous research design available. This study addressed that gap by conducting a randomized controlled trial with more than 400 Las Vegas officers, testing BWC effects on both the civility of police encounters and officer enforcement activity.

How the Study Worked

The study took place within the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (LVMPD). We randomly assigned a total of 416 BWCs to volunteer patrol officers—such as through a coin flip—to either wear a BWC (218 officers) or not (198 officers) for a 12-month period beginning in 2014. Researchers tracked civilian complaints, use of force reports, arrests, citations, and call responses using official LVMPD records and computer-aided dispatch data covering both the 12 months before the experiment and the 12 months during the experiment.

The researchers used a difference-in-differences approach—a method that measures how much each group changed from before the experiment to during it, then compares those changes across the two groups. This is more reliable than a simple before-and-after comparison because it accounts for trends that would have happened regardless of the cameras. The randomization ensured that BWC and non-BWC officers were comparable at the start, so that differences in outcomes during the experiment could be attributed to the cameras themselves.

What Was Learned

- **BWC officers had significantly fewer civilian complaints.** The share of treatment officers who received at least one complaint dropped by 16.5 percentage points, compared with a 2.5 percentage point drop for control officers—a 14 percentage point difference in favor of BWC officers. Proportionally, BWC officers were about 30 percent less likely than control officers to receive a complaint.
- **BWC officers generated significantly fewer use of force reports.** The share of treatment officers with at least one use of force report dropped by 11.5 percentage points, while the share of control officers with at least one use of force report increased by 1.0 percentage point—a 12.5 percentage point difference. Proportionally, BWC officers were about 41 percent less likely to generate a use of force report.
- **BWC officers made more arrests and issued more citations.** Controlling for pre-intervention trends, BWC officers generated 5.2 percent more arrests and 6.8 percent more citations per call event than control officers. Over the 12-month study period, this translated to an additional 471 arrests and 1,125 citations issued by BWC officers compared to control officers.
- **Complaint investigations were resolved faster for BWC officers.** Allegations against BWC officers were resolved an average of 49.3 days after being filed, compared with 64.8 days for control officers—a statistically significant 15.5-day difference. Additionally, fewer allegations against BWC officers were formally sustained (14.9 percent versus 19.9 percent).

What This Means in Practice

BWCs can meaningfully reduce complaints and use of force—and speed the resolution of internal investigations—but they also appear to increase enforcement activity, and that tradeoff deserves attention. Reductions in complaints and use of force may be especially valuable for improving police-community relations in neighborhoods where trust between residents and officers has eroded. The faster resolution of complaint allegations is an added operational benefit for internal affairs units.

The authors caution that the increase in arrests and citations is an unanticipated consequence that may affect community perceptions of policing. They note that enforcement strategies emphasizing increased arrests and summonses have raised concerns about racial disparities in other jurisdictions and that it is unknown whether the increased enforcement activity observed in this study fell disproportionately on communities of color. The authors also note that because the study relied on officer volunteers—and participation was not mandatory—the findings may generalize most directly to other LVMPD officers rather than to all police agencies. The authors call for departments to monitor both the intended and unintended effects of BWCs carefully as implementation continues.

Source article

Braga, A. A., Sousa, W. H., Coldren, J. R., Jr., & Rodriguez, D. (2018). The effects of body-worn cameras on police activity and police-citizen encounters: A randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 108(3), 511–538.

Briefs as part of this series are produced with the assistance of generative AI. All content is reviewed and verified by CNA research staff and authorized by the original authors.

For more information, contact Chip Coldren, Senior Fellow (coldrenj@cna.org).

About CNA

The CNA Corporation (CNA) is a not-for-profit analytical organization dedicated to the safety and security of the nation. Nearly 700 CNA scientists, analysts, and professionals provide data-driven, innovative solutions to complex problems. It operates the Center for Naval Analyses—the Department of the Navy's federally funded research and development center (FFRDC)—as well as the Institute for Public Research, which supports federal, state, and local government officials advancing national and homeland security.

CNA's Center for Justice Research and Innovation (JRI) is a nationally recognized leader in justice system improvement that partners with hundreds of agencies across the country. Through research and evaluation, training and technical assistance, and organizational innovation, JRI develops actionable, evidence-based solutions that strengthen law enforcement, corrections, and other justice institutions. For more information, visit <https://www.cna.org/centers-and-divisions/jpr/jri>.

CNA® is a registered trademark of The CNA Corporation and may not be used without prior written authorization.