



# LRO SNAPSHOT

*A policy brief from the Legislative Research Office*

## New research challenges police body camera consensus



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People usually behave better when they think they are being watched. That's the common sense assumption behind the explosion in police body cameras across the country. The idea is that the mere presence of body cameras fundamentally changes the dynamics of law enforcement encounters for both police and the public. Proponents believe body cameras will prevent violence, promote accountability, and improve judicial outcomes. To this end, the federal government has given police departments more than \$40 million to invest in body cameras, and state and local authorities have spent many millions more.<sup>1</sup> One-third of American law enforcement agencies have already deployed body cameras to some or all of their officers, and another 50 percent currently have plans to do so.<sup>2</sup>

### **Omaha's Body Camera Program**

The Omaha Police Department (OPD) began conducting trials with body cameras in 2013, long before many of the high profile shootings that later accelerated the adoption of body cameras nationally. However, it was not until 2016 that OPD began actually deploying body cameras on

officers in the field. According to Omaha Police Lieutenant James Pauly, who oversees OPD's body camera program, by the end of January 2020, all uniformed patrol officers will be equipped with cameras. A state law passed in 2016, Neb. Rev. Stat. sec. 81-1453, requires any law enforcement agency with a body camera program to adopt formal written policies governing their use. OPD worked closely with the Kansas City Police Department to develop its policy, which directs officers to turn on their body cameras for any public encounter, no matter how minor. The policy does allow for some degree of officer discretion, particularly in regard to medical emergencies and sensitive witness interrogations. There is also automatic activation on certain cameras. For example, when an OPD officer activates a cruiser camera, his or her body camera is programmed to activate automatically.

At the end of an OPD officer's shift, the body camera is docked to recharge, while the footage is uploaded to a cloud storage system. The time period footage is retained before deletion is based on its evidentiary value and the statute of limitations on any cases in which the footage may serve as evidence. For example, data is retained for 3 years in felony cases and for 1.5 years in misdemeanor cases. Non-evidentiary video is still retained for 120 days. To put all

1. Ripley, A. (2017, October 20) *A Big Test of Police Body Cameras Defies Expectations*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/upshot/a-big-test-of-police-body-cameras-defies-expectations.html>

2. Police Executive Research Forum (2018, April) *Cost and Benefits Of Body-Worn Camera Deployments*. Retrieved from: <https://www.policeforum.org/assets/BWC-CostBenefit.pdf>



this in perspective, OPD now collects over 500 hours of raw footage every day and is currently paying a cloud storage contractor to store 250 terabytes of raw video. This amount of data management has necessitated the hiring of three full-time specialists onto the force, the so-called DREAM Team (Digitally Recorded Evidence Access and Management).

## Letting Go of Body Cameras

Many police departments, especially in smaller jurisdictions, have begun shutting down body cameras due to high costs, usually related to data storage. A local example is the police department in Wahoo, Neb., which ended its program in January 2017. At the time, Wahoo officials cited the 2016 law (which requires video to be stored for at least 90 days) as the primary reason for shutting down the program. The state requirements would have cost Wahoo an additional \$15,000 per year — a substantial cost for a force of only five officers. One might expect Wahoo law enforcement officials would be annoyed at politicians in Lincoln saddling them with burdensome regulations. Surprisingly, the Wahoo police did not mind letting go of body cameras: “The cameras made even me kinda lazy,” Wahoo Police Chief Ken Jackson said at the time. “I don’t take as good as notes anymore or write as detailed reports. The truth is, prosecutors and attorneys are not going to sit down and watch hours and hours of body-camera video.”<sup>3</sup>

## New Research on Outcomes

Given the high costs associated with body cameras, it is worth examining the impact this technology is actually having in practice. Despite the strong national consensus by policymakers on both sides of the aisle, little academic research exists on the outcomes of body camera programs. A few studies have shown positive results. For example, a body camera evaluation conducted by the Rialto, CA Police Department, found that use-of-force incidents and citizen complaints were reduced by 50 and 90 percent respectively

after the implementation of body cameras.<sup>4</sup> This research is often cited by body camera manufacturers as evidence of the technology’s benefits.

However, this study was limited by its small sample size. A much larger, more methodologically rigorous study was conducted in Washington, DC a few years ago. The results of this program evaluation were surprising. The researchers found no difference in use-of-force incidents, citizen complaints, police activity, or judicial outcomes between the control and treatment groups. In other words, the presence of cameras did not have a statistically significant effect on any of the areas that policymakers care about most. The researchers conclude that “this experiment suggests that we should recalibrate our expectations of body-worn cameras.”<sup>5</sup>

## Body Camera Policy Alternatives

One interesting option is to deploy body cameras to only a fraction of the force. By limiting the volume of footage being recorded, fewer resources have to be spent on data management. In the same way researchers are able to draw empirical conclusions using sampling techniques, law enforcement agencies may be able to “sample” their communities using a

limited number of body cameras. Cameras have become small enough to be virtually invisible, so it is possible the public will be unaware of which officers do, and do not, have body cameras on. Thus, the “civilizing effect” of the technology will, theoretically, remain undiminished.

Several police departments have already had success limiting costs using this approach. For example, the Phoenix Police Department currently has 350 cameras deployed to approximately 10 percent of its on duty personnel. The costs of the cameras, their maintenance, and video storage are bundled together for flat annual fee. Footage is processed by a relatively small five-person civilian unit. Phoenix’s limited deployment strategy has reduced the total cost per camera, per year to \$2,883, one of the smallest budgets for a body camera program in any major American city.<sup>2</sup>

**OPD has spent over \$2 million on their body cam program since it began, about two-thirds of which is spent simply storing the digital evidence.<sup>6</sup>**

3. Manna, N. (2017, January 15) *Police department stops using body cameras after legislation*. Retrieved from: [https://journalstar.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/police-department-stops-using-body-cameras-after-legislation/article\\_05a4e7d3-2239-5a15-94c5-9b612fe71b2b.html](https://journalstar.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/police-department-stops-using-body-cameras-after-legislation/article_05a4e7d3-2239-5a15-94c5-9b612fe71b2b.html)

4. Barak, A., Farrar, W. & Sutherland, A. (2014, November 19) *The Effect of Police Body-Worn Cameras on Use of Force and Citizens’ Complaints Against the Police: A Randomized Controlled Trial*. Retrieved from: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10940-014-9236-3>

5. Yokum, D., Ravishankar, A., Coppock, A. (2017, October 20) *Evaluating the Effects of Police Body-Worn Cameras: A Randomized Controlled Trial*. Retrieved from: [https://bwc.thelab.dc.gov/TheLabDC\\_MPD\\_BWC\\_Working\\_Paper\\_10.20.17.pdf](https://bwc.thelab.dc.gov/TheLabDC_MPD_BWC_Working_Paper_10.20.17.pdf)

6. Kipper, J. (2019, January 30) *Storing body cam footage isn’t cheap, but Omaha Police says it’s worth it*. Retrieved from: <https://www.3newsnow.com/news/local-news/storing-body-cam-footage-isnt-cheap-but-omaha-police-says-its-worth-it>