

# Chapter 1

## Body–Worn Cameras: Panacea or Distraction for Increased Police Use of Force Accountability?

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### ABSTRACT

*Police hold a unique and distinctive status compared to any other occupation in society with their authority to use force. With such responsibility, communities expect law enforcement to be held accountable when force is applied. One of the many proposed solutions embraced by authorities and the public to decrease the number of force encounters is body-worn cameras (BWCs). The purpose of this chapter is to examine BWCs as a measure of reducing force by law enforcement, explore the technology as an enhancement to transparency within the context of police-community relations, and offer recommendations for adoption rooted in best practices. For the public, it is imperative to recognize BWCs as just one part of improving law enforcement oversight as opposed to providing an all-encompassing solution that will completely resolve issues of transparency.*

### INTRODUCTION

On July 2, 2017, a police officer in Fort Collins, Colorado encountered a male subject grasping a knife and walking on the sidewalk. The individual matched the description of a person previously reported to authorities as experiencing a mental health crisis and wanting to kill members of his family (Hindi, 2017). After activating a body-worn camera (BWC), the officer exited a patrol car and immediately gave verbal instructions for the man to drop the knife. For more than two minutes, the camera recorded video and audio of the tense and developing situation.

During the incident, the officer is seen backpedaling to increase the distance between the two, while the armed man repeatedly verbalized that he wanted to die. After a second unit arrived at the scene, the

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armed man charged the officers, resulting in a fatal police shooting. The BWC imagery and audio were later released to the public and showed that the first officer responding can be heard ordering the man to drop the knife more than 40 times (2017). The recording was crucial to understanding the incident as it offered compelling evidence that corroborated officer accounts, and aided authorities in ruling the encounter as a justifiable use of lethal force.

Tragically in October of 2019, a BWC documented another fatal police shooting that occurred in Fort Worth, Texas. This incident involved police investigating an open door at a house and shooting a Black resident who was inside their own bedroom after an officer mistook the resident for a burglar (Ortiz, 2019). After viewing the related video and audio, a grand jury indicted the now former officer who was involved in the shooting for murder. In contrast to the Colorado and Texas cases, BWC footage does not always provide sufficient clarity regarding the justification for police in using force. Body cameras are far from the panacea some had hoped in providing sufficient oversight of law enforcement. The mission of this chapter is to examine BWCs as a measure of reducing force by law enforcement, explore the technology as an enhancement to transparency within the context of police-community relations, and offer recommendations for adoption rooted in best practices.

## **BACKGROUND**

Police hold a unique and distinctive status compared to any other occupation in society, with their authority to use force. Despite impressions from present-day media coverage, this power is infrequently evoked yet highlighted as a central concern surrounding police and their existence. Much of the controversy related to this element of policing is concentrated on police brutality and the application of deadly force (Klinger, 2004; Saulnier et al., 2019). Exacerbating the collective unease are concerns of police tactics prompting hostile confrontations and the long-standing conflict between the authorities and racial minorities. Although proven to be effective in reducing crime, strategies for more police-initiated contacts with the public, commonly referred to as proactive policing, have had adverse consequences, especially for minority populations who tend to be the subjects of these frequent stops and encounters (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018).

In terms of force responses by law enforcement, the pressing national issues of disparate and discriminatory policing are also evident in statistics of lethal shootings. For example, *The Washington Post* estimates that 4,931 individuals have been killed by on-duty police officers between 2015 and 2019. With the data collected, numbers show that Black decedents are killed by police at a disproportionate rate as compared to whites. In general, these fatal incidents are costly to both police agencies and their relationship with larger society (Micucci & Gomme, 2005). As a byproduct of highly publicized officer-involved shootings, the nation's police organizations have collectively paid for the unjust actions of others. Further, the current police-civilian relationship has suffered from controversial applications of fatal force, resulting in high tensions and low levels of trust towards the authorities (Culhane et al., 2016; Zamoff, 2019).

One of the many proposed solutions embraced by authorities and the public to address the issues surrounding use of force is body-worn cameras (BWCs). Initial interests in applying this technology to policing began in the early 2000s, but dramatically increased after the controversial death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri (Zamoff, 2019). The Ferguson shooting in 2014 was a catalytic event that amplified reform in the transparency of police actions through the use of cameras. With its character-

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