

Reforming Canadian Policing: Body-Worn Cameras and the Assumed Efficacy

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Abstract

This paper will review how Body-Worn Cameras are implemented across Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. The primary goals of Body-Worn Cameras have been articulated by NGOs (non-governmental organizations), government agencies, and law enforcement, which aim to reduce officer misconduct, promote fairness and equal treatment, and increase public trust in policing through enhanced accountability. This paper will focus on examining the rhetoric and the implementation of Body-Worn Cameras using the Procedural Justice Theory and the Organizational Justice Theory. In doing so, this paper provides a critical examination of current approaches to Body-Worn Cameras alongside plausible reforms that may be considered for enhanced efficacy of said initiative. Outlining areas of consideration, such as costs, ethical and privacy concerns, and the validity of assumptions of increasing public trust, accountability, and deterrence, are key points in this paper.

Introduction

Coupled with technological advancements of this era, Body-Worn Cameras (BWC, hereafter) have emerged as a rising trend in law enforcement across Canadian policing and other international police services. The intent driving the implementation of BWC is to rebuild public trust and confidence by using transparency and accountability methods that the BWC may offer via evidence collection (Edmonton Police Service, 2025). This aligns with the professional era of reform and works in accordance with the theoretical framework of the Procedural Justice Theory that is being implemented across law enforcement agencies within Western democracies (Katz & Maguire, 2020). BWC are used as devices to protect officers and the public with constant surveillance, hoping to deter uses of coercion, excessive use of force and other forms of misconduct. BWC are also implemented to protect officers from false accusations or complaints (Edmonton Police Service, 2025). The main goals of the BWC are aimed at accountability, deterrence, and oversight by independent bodies to increase transparency and legitimacy in policing (Katz & Maguire, 2020). This paper will analyze aspects of BWC using theory and policy to present a nuanced approach and understanding of its current implementation.

Content and Analysis

Origin of Body-Worn Cameras

BWC are devices used to record audio and visual events of an officer while they respond to incidents. BWC had begun to appear in the world of policing, with the earliest known documented pilot project being in the United Kingdom in 2005 (Saulnier et al., 2021). BWC arrived in Canada in 2009 in the Victoria Police Department (Katz & Maguire, 2020). A foundational piece of technology for BWC was dash cams (dashboard cameras). This device

was placed in an officer's vehicle to record encounters. Footage was used as documentation, creating a new method of police technology. Advancements in technology began to filter into policing, leading to the creation of BWC. A camera that is secured to the officer and has the ability to be turned on or off at the officer's discretion.

BWC is in high demand by the public for police to be more accountable and transparent with their interactions than they had previously been. There have been different instances where questions have been raised regarding officer misconduct by means of excessive use of force, inaction or racialization (Saulnier et al., 2021). Due to public outcry claiming police misconduct through various avenues, BWC began to be considered and trialled. Implementing BWC was an attempt at an external policing reform. This implementation of BWC within a Canadian context has not been adopted nationally. If there is a roll-out of BWC, it is at the discretion of the individual department or municipality governing the departments (Saulnier et al., 2021).

Theoretical Framework

The Procedural Justice Framework theory came from Thibaut and Walker's (1978) use of social psychology and was later applied to legal frameworks. The integration into the legal system was designed for the decision-making process, rather than for the results, making fairness, truth, and justice the primary goals of this theory (Thibaut & Walker, 1978). The Procedural Justice Theory is a generalized process for analyzing alternative routes rather than objective facts (Thibaut & Walker, 1978). In law enforcement, the Procedural Justice framework is described as a fair application of authority through social control agents (Katz & Maguire, 2020). Combining these definitions, this framework focuses primarily on reforming public and law enforcement interactions, with emphasis on key principles such as fairness, respectful and dignified treatment, transparency, voice and participation (Katz & Maguire, 2020). Two outcomes can result from using Procedural Justice; in this instance, they are perceptual and behavioural changes among the public social control agents. (Katz & Maguire, 2020).

The Procedural Justice Theory is appropriate to apply to the reform of BWC as it continues to incorporate trust and transparency into policing tactics and policies. This is relevant to continuing to build public trust, as these are newer forms of accountability that are accessible and neutral to social control agents, who may have access to view BWC footage. The integration of accountability through transparency is an effective measure to show public forms of legitimacy that were previously questioned. Accountability through transparency may be done so in various aspects, such as the release of footage and third-party control and storage of footage. BWC, following Procedural Justice Theory, which can encourage respectful contact between officers and civilians, as their interactions are recorded and may be reviewed. This could result in scrutiny or discipline for the officer if misconduct occurs, or offer to dispel any false allegations against an officer (Edmonton Police Service, 2025). BWC footage may be audited for various reasons. Allowing a neutral third party to have control of reviewing BWC footage, storage of footage and release of footage aids in neutrality of decision-making, as this third party should have no influence on their decisions.

The second theory analyzed, which could be partnered with BWC rollout, is the Organizational Justice Theory. It is a reformative initiative that looks inwards at police departments. This initiative is driven by the goal of intradepartmental reform to solidify chains of command and encourage a shift in officer morale (Katz & Maguire, 2020). Organizational Justice theorizes that improvements in the chain of command would boost officer morale by recognizing and promoting officers based on merit, revising whistleblower policies, and fostering better peer relations (Katz & Maguire, 2020). Departmental reform using this theory would result in a fair, respectful, and accountable work environment, creating pride in work and supported by management and consistent policies (Katz & Maguire, 2020). The Organizational Justice theory will be used to explain how intradepartmental reform should be considered hand-in-hand with external policing reform for policy and procedure.

Key traits of Organizational Justice include distributive justice, procedural justice (interdepartmental), interpersonal justice, and informational justice (Katz & Maguire, 2020). This interdepartmental reform is important to better understand the motives behind police culture and officer actions. The Organizational Justice theory has evidence to support that an increased sense of internal validity in the department and trust in fair and equitable distribution of promotion based on merit has been shown to increase officer behaviour and compliance with policies (Katz & Maguire, 2020). If there is an improvement in officer morale, this may lead to an increase in positive interactions with the public, confidence in the policy the police are following, and deterrence of misconduct.

Considerations of Body-worn Camera Implementations

Deterrence of Police Misconduct

Implementation of BWC came after accusations of officer misconduct that related to inaction, racialization and excessive use of force (Glasbeek et al., 2020). BWC in policing is used to ensure that rights and freedoms are consistently upheld and respected (Choi et al., 2023). This has caused studies to be conducted throughout the years since BWC first surfaced. Many studies were used to determine whether BWCs are an effective deterrent to police misconduct.

Regarding Canadian-specific legislation, there is no policy stating when, or if, a BWC is to be turned on or off. Considering the lack of policy, it may cause speculation about the officer's discretion or intent when using their BWC (Katz & Maguire, 2020). Considering this, officer misconduct may not be captured accurately, or at all, if the officer does not activate their BWC at an appropriate time. The ability of officers to tamper with footage through BWCs highlights the need for stronger legislation to be implemented by government agencies or third parties (Bud, 2016). Relating this back to the question of whether BWCs are as effective as once assumed in misconduct deterrence, due to the lack of legislation.

Other concerns regarding BWC are access to footage and its release to the public. Considering the *Freedom of Information and Privacy Protection Act* (FOIP), legislation into BWC implementation creates a wide array of issues. As mentioned, there are concerns about privacy relating to the public and officers. The public who may not be involved in the incident but still recorded police identities or the identity of those directly involved in the incident must be

considered in privacy legislation. Those who have access to view the footage must be mindful and considerate of privacy laws, even if they have yet to catch up with Canadian legislation fully. *The Police Service Act* and the *Freedom of Information Act* are used to mitigate these concerns, yet, issues in this legislation relate to the wording and terms used, such as law enforcement, which is open to interpretation about who it may include (Bud, 2016, p. 118). The right to privacy, informed consent, and the protection of bystanders or vulnerable populations are key issues that need to be considered. Proactive legislation that incorporates technological innovations would address vague legislative policies (Katz & Maguire, 2020). The arguments made regarding officers' discretion of when to record relate to the officer's ability to tamper with what is recorded, playing into roles of privacy, evidence gathering, and allowing officer discretion of when it is, or is not, appropriate to record.

Changes In Officer Behaviour

Research has shown that frontline officers with an activated BWC may exhibit changes in behaviour. This behaviour change may increase tensions between officers and the public if being robotic creates a void of empathy, leading officers to refrain from using their discretion out of fear of repercussions (L'Hoiry et al., 2024). This may strain any trust or public relations that had been built on officer discretion relating to warnings rather than arrests (Katz & Maguire, 2020). Other studies have shown that an interdepartmental overview suggests that fellow officers believe that the presence of BWC may have a minimal effect on police coercion or coercive tactics used by officers (Milidragović & Milić, 2024). This interdepartmental review also noted that officers who participated in the anonymous survey disagreed with the implementation of BWC on influencing officer performance and use of BWC as a deterrent to officer misconduct (Milidragović & Milić, 2024).

With these complications in mind, BWC may not be as effective as once assumed in deterring police misconduct, despite strong political and public support (Katz & Maguire, 2020). While BWC does have various complications, there are also positives that must be considered. BWC have created the ability to have tangible evidence of an officer's conduct to either support a complaint made or support and protect the officer. This has helped improve standards of policing and accountability, which have translated into public trust through either complaints being validated or disproven. Other aspects of BWC include court and proof acquisition. This has helped aid prosecutors' progression in cases and helped to decrease court time for more minor offences (L'Hoiry et al., 2024). Leading to an indirect efficiency change in courts, creating speedier and more effective trials in some cases.

Costs and Data Management

Of the police departments and services that have implemented or trialled BWC throughout Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, the main concerns of BWC relate to cost, privacy (ethical issues), and data storage/management. The cost of purchase and maintenance of BWC is a considerable amount, even when just supplying cameras to front-line officers. To purchase new BWC to supply to 73 law enforcement agencies in 2015, the United States Department of Justice paid roughly \$24 million (Choi et al., 2023). Annual upkeep costs reported by the Toronto Police Service state that their costs for around 100 BWC for front-line

officers result in about \$500,000 (Bud, 2016). This is an incredibly steep price to justify, given that the literature on the implementation of BWC was —and remains— mixed on whether it is successful and what constitutes success. Considering the cost of supplying frontline officers with BWC and the reasonable expectation that they will record most, if not all, interactions relating to incidents, this also incurs secondary costs on top of the upkeep and purchase of BWC.

Data storage and management add to this long list of costs that can seem daunting to departments with limited budgets. Creating places and storage for the footage to be stored for legal amounts of time before being discarded or added to a case creates issues of space, costs and personnel. This concern cannot be short-changed; as mentioned previously, there are vague privacy laws that still need to be considered, and the footage must remain within the chain of evidence (Bud, 2016). All of which have their own price tag. It is hard for police departments and services to seriously consider implementing BWCs when the cost can eat into their annual budgets, especially given the limited literature or evidence suggesting a significant reduction in police misconduct.

Proposed Reforms

What is the future for BWC? Is there a future for them within the current contexts of our society? This section will speak to different ways to implement BWC using the theories previously mentioned. Instead of only using external reforms as band-aid solutions on issues that are deep-rooted and cause for concern (Lippert & Newell, 2016).

Procedural Justice Implementations

Using the Procedural Justice theory to reform policing may create a better long-term solution for how BWC are used as a tool in surveillance (Katz & Maguire, 2020). Using fairness and transparency in BWC (de)activation policy creation will help with consistency and expectations of the police. Implementing mandatory activation policies may mitigate some privacy concerns and help strike a balance between law enforcement and legislation (Bud, 2016).

In creating a better foundation of BWC legislation regarding privacy, there should be consideration given to the oversight of BWC footage (Katz & Maguire, 2020). Replacing sergeants or senior officers to oversee footage with an independent oversight commission would help mitigate biases, which would inherently increase transparency within the organization and reduce the risk of corruption. Having an independent organization do a review of BWC footage may create other risks when reviewing, such as a lack of understanding of the context in the situation or the historical mistrust of the police. This may cause concerns for BWC being able to depict context, such as racism or other historical mistrusts the public may have (Choi et al., 2023). Providing context to independent third-party organizations can be done when organizations like the Special Investigations Unit (SIU) or the Alberta Serious Incident Response Team (ASIRT) are involved. These are third-party organizations that have the capacity to provide full access to incident documents and the context that BWC may not be able to provide. Independent organizations provide impartiality in incident review, which removes the main concerns for corruption that interdepartmental review may not be able to address. Allowing a

third-party organization to perform an incident review would allow the public to have a voice in the matter, which is a key feature in the Procedural Justice theory (Katz & Maguire, 2020).

Lastly, regular audits are a crucial aspect of proper implementation, and active participants in accountability and transparency are traits that are key to the Procedural Justice theory (Katz & Maguire, 2020). Regular audits done on BWC footage, documentation around footage, and footage storage would increase the desired level of accountability and its continuance. Transparency is an immediate trait of regular audits as it highlights any disparities and allows the public to be informed of what they may be. This can lend itself to aid in the restoration of police and community relations. If this is implemented through government legislation, this would create more of a cohesive front from all law enforcement entities and may have the ability to create widespread reform rather than individual departmental reforms at their leisure.

Organizational Justice Reform

The true success of police reform needs to recognize the interdepartmental culture that may be heightening the risk of police misconduct. The Organizational Justice theory aims to reform police culture to incorporate procedural justice, distributive justice, interactional justice, and informational justice. Creating a shift in police culture may make officers more confident in the policies they enforce, allowing for adequate protection of whistleblowers and promoting merit-based promotion rather than connection, likely increasing morale (Katz & Maguire, 2020). Implementing measures to support these positive changes within departments creates an internal sense of validity and legitimacy among officers, leading to confidence in the system in which they operate. An increased sense of security in the system has shown improved citizen interactions and may reduce officer misconduct (Fridell et al., 2021). Interdepartmental reform is a foundational change that should be considered before implementing external reforms to address internal issues related to legitimacy.

Conclusion

BWC is a reformative initiative implemented by police agencies and some governing bodies worldwide, such as Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. This implementation aims to apply deterrence theory to reduce officer misconduct and to enhance legitimacy and accountability within law enforcement agencies. Policy in Canada specifically relies on the individual departments to manage privacy, storage and appropriate use of BWC.

There are large concerns about BWC by tampering via improper (de)activation, privacy laws, costs and data management. Using the Procedural Justice theory, we can implement appropriate legislation that relates to how activation or deactivation of BWC occurs. This would lead to clear and enforceable expectations. Costs are difficult to justify when there is minimal backing data for police misconduct reform, leading to the importance of Organizational Justice theory and the interdepartmental reform it offers. There is a great possibility of reducing officer misconduct through a sense of intradepartmental legitimacy. It is challenging for departments to consider BWC as there are also positives associated with them, such as officer complaints, evidence collection and an indirect decrease in court case times.

Overall, BWC have great potential to hold officers and the public accountable for their actions. This can increase a sense of accountability and legitimacy in policing. Proper reforms need to be considered, as research has still come up inconclusive on the true effects of reducing officer misconduct solely through BWC. Transparency will come with time, as new legislation will set standards for privacy, the activation of BWC, and the release of footage to the public or oversight bodies. Oversight bodies becoming involved will help with accountability, as they would have control over internal investigations or footage reviews. BWC has excellent potential to serve as an external reform when paired with either or both the Procedural Justice and Organizational Justice theories. Acting alone, BWC has yet to be proven effective in deterring officer misconduct and in rebuilding primary public trust.

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