

# Transforming Research into Practice: Holding Police Accountable by Examining Officer's Attitudes Regarding Body Worn Cameras (BWCs) in a Border Community

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**Abstract:** This exploratory study used semi-structured interviews with 11 police officers to evaluate their feelings about body-worn camera (BWCs) while policing in a border community along the U.S.-Mexico border. Four major themes emerged: accountability, control, conflict, and power. Distinctively, the police officers in this study indicated BWCs protected them from inconsequential complaints while holding them accountable for performing their jobs professionally. Reducing the opportunity for frivolous public complaints and enhancing accountability reduces the conflict and power divide, promoting more positive interactions between law enforcement and the communities that they serve.

**Keywords:** Law Enforcement Narratives, Technology, Community Safety

## Introduction

Body-worn cameras (BWCs) have emerged as a valuable tool for law enforcement agencies to enhance accountability, transparency, and community trust (Lum *et al.*, 2015; 2020a). BWCs are small, portable cameras that police officers wear on their uniforms to capture audio and video footage of interactions with the public. By providing an objective record of police-citizen interactions, BWCs have been shown to

reduce complaints against officers and improve the quality of evidence in criminal cases (Lum *et al.*, 2020a). Additionally, they can also be used to enhance police-community relations and build trust between law enforcement and the public.

A primary benefit of BWCs is their ability to provide an objective record of police-citizen interactions. This record can be used to verify the accuracy of police reports and witness statements, which can be especially important in cases where there is a dispute over what happened during an interaction. BWC footage can also be used as evidence in court to support criminal charges or exonerate officers who have been falsely accused of misconduct.

Another significant benefit of BWCs is that they can help reduce complaints against officers. A study by the Rialto Police Department found that officers wearing BWCs received 88% fewer complaints than those who did not wear them (Ariel *et al.*, 2017). This is likely because both officers and members of the public are more aware of their behavior when they know they are being recorded. Furthermore, BWC footage can be used to investigate complaints quickly and accurately against officers, which can help to identify and address potential misconduct.

BWCs can also help to enhance police-community relations by increasing transparency and accountability. By providing members of the public with a clear record of police-citizen interactions, BWCs can help to build trust between law enforcement and the community. This is especially important in communities that have historically had strained relationships with law enforcement, where BWCs can help to increase transparency and improve communication between officers and the public.

Moreover, BWCs can also help to improve officer safety by providing a record of potentially dangerous situations. This footage can be used to identify potential threats to officers and to improve officer training and tactics. BWC footage can also be used to support officer-involved shooting investigations, which can help to ensure that these incidents are thoroughly investigated, and that the public has confidence in the outcomes of these investigations.

For example, in 2022, the Houston Police Department's Chief of Police Troy Finner announced that HPD would release 180 videos which showed officer-involved shootings where lives are on the line and decisions are made in seconds because the Chief expressed that our community needs to see not only what our officers are going through but what other citizens are going through (Diaz, 2022). Releasing additional information like this to the public helps to build trust between law enforcement and the public by increasing transparency and accountability.

Hence, the implementation of BWCs can be viewed as a positive step towards improving police-community relations and ensuring that our justice system is fair, just, and equitable for all. BWCs still represent a relatively new aspect of policing research and few studies have examined their impact on police-community relations in smaller communities like border towns.

Additional research in this area concerning BWCs is vital since utilizing these cameras are one strategy designed to improve interactions between the police and public. A high percentage of research on BWCs has been performed with metropolitan police departments, subsequently in part of cases involving excessive use of force by police officers (Lum *et al.*, 2015; 2020a). Yet, smaller police agencies located in border communities are left out of BWC research, as there is fewer excessive use of force cases reported by these agencies (Loftus, 2015). Recent enhancements in technology, such as increased usage of BWCs, provides a new element to policing research that should be accounted for.

In response to Loftus's (2015) call for criminological research in this space, the current study seeks to investigate how body-worn cameras impact community-policing relations in a community situated along the U.S.-Mexico border. The agency respondents from this study were employed with a law enforcement agency located in a border community comprised of officers in a police agency with jurisdiction along the border.

## Literature Review

With growing public scrutiny over police brutality and excessive use of force, BWCs have been seen as a mechanism to restore public trust in law enforcement and improve police-community relations (Otu *et al.*, 2022). In this study, we will discuss some of the recent studies that support the use of BWCs in policing, but our research is very important, and adds to the BWCs advancement in research, because there is a small fraction of body camera studies that have interviewed officers in a border community to gauge officers' attitudes about how these body cameras help reduce crime in their community and help to maintain healthy relationships for officers and citizens alike.

For instance, one study published in the *Journal of Experimental Criminology* in 2021, conducted by Braga *et al.*, examined the effects of BWCs on use of force incidents by police officers. The study found that the use of BWCs led to a significant decrease in the number of use of force incidents, and that officers who wore BWCs were less likely to use force when compared to officers who did not wear BWCs (Braga *et al.*, 2021). The research suggested that the presence of BWCs may have acted as a deterrent to excessive force by police officers, as they were aware that their actions were being recorded.

Another study, performed by Lum *et al.*, 2020b published in *Police Quarterly* examined the effects of BWCs on police legitimacy and citizen complaints. The study found that the use of BWCs led to a significant increase in police legitimacy, as citizens perceived the police to be more trustworthy and accountable (Lum *et al.*, 2020b). In addition, the study found that the use of BWCs led to a significant decrease in citizen

complaints against police officers, suggesting that the presence of BWCs may have encouraged officers to behave more professionally.

A third study, conducted by Braga *et al.*, 2022 published in the *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* examined the effects of BWCs on police use of force. The study found that the use of BWCs led to a significant decrease in the number of use of force incidents, and that officers who wore BWCs were less likely to use force when compared to officers who did not wear BWCs. Research findings reported by Braga *et al.*, 2022 suggest that the use of BWCs may have led to a culture shift within the police force, encouraging officers to rely more on de-escalation techniques rather than using force.

Based on the studies cited above, taken all together we argue one major area that arises from the implementation of BWCs for both officers and community is conflict. Thus, we utilize Quinney's theory of conflict as our framework to ground participant narratives in this study.

Conflict theory posits power differences between social groups and creates tension by developing an atmosphere prone to criminal behavior. Quinney (1970) argues the definition of crime is dependent on societal perceptions of deviance.

Thus, those with the power create legislation and statutory definitions of crime that oppress those without power. Without this monopolization of power, these regimes would cease to maintain control. This theory relies heavily on sociopolitical factors in determining the nature of crime within a given geopolitical framework. Specifically, the theory postulates that as the power differential between the two groups grows, the odds of the powerless groups engaging in violence vis-à-vis the majority increases as a mechanism of bridging that divide (Quinney, 1977). This is connected to Gurr's (1970) theory of relative deprivation, which expands the power divide to include both actual and perceived deprivations, which could include factors associated with ethnic repression, like political exclusion or restricted freedoms and liberties. The presence of a power gap alone, however, is not sufficient for the onset of conflict.

The gap between expectations and reality is the primary catalyst for violence. Hence, if the expectations are low, even significant deprivation will not likely lead to violence. Consequently, the struggle over power is not a static concept; it is the dynamic product of constant interactions between political actors over time. In this context, it also is easier to comprehend why regimes try to control or manipulate the populace's expectations.

This study relies upon the theoretical frameworks grounded in Quinney's (1970) treatise on conflict theory and *The Social Reality of Crime* inclusive of his explanations regarding power, control, and conflict. Quinney's claims crime is not simply an empirical reality, but also a constructed reality. He proposed a process in which social scientists

and justice actors can better define crime (Belli, 1971; Wozniak *et al.*, 2015). Quinney's (1970) work remains a major contribution to understanding how the criminal justice system problematizes crime and its response to it. Scholars suggest, for example, society's view of justice-involved individuals as "criminals" is a rather narrow conceptualization that disregards how crime is defined by those in power (see e.g., Einstadter & Henry, 2006).

It also presupposes society's response to criminal behavior is "somehow natural or foreordained" (Wozniak *et al.*, 2015, p. 199). Quinney provides a critical lens through which we are no longer able to "ignore that power, group interests, and conflict [a]re a fundamental part of crime and control" (Wozniak *et al.*, 2015, p. 199). While this framework is often applied to macro-level decision-making entities, like governments, micro-level interactions, namely police-community relations manifest the power distributions. To that end, the perception of police legitimacy amongst the public serves as a driver of the power differential. For instance, the 2023 beating death of Tyre Nichols and the 2020 murder of George Floyd at the hands of law enforcement resulted in worldwide outrage over the state of police-community relations in the U.S. The escalation of force against these individuals highlights the power imbalances between the police and citizens as suggested by Quinney (1970). Thus, the police can no longer claim the "serve and protect" motto when the balance of power has shifted from protecting the public to controlling the public's perceived perception of law enforcement agencies.

## Methods

### *Procedure and Recruitment*

Participants for this study were recruited via a purposive sampling procedure. The participants were selected based on their employment with a police agency located in a city that is one mile from the US-Mexico border in South, Texas. In this agency, there are 500 sworn officers and over 80 civilian employees, and the Department serves an estimated 261,000 people covering an area of 111 square miles. The purposive sampling procedure is acceptable when trying to recruit inaccessible populations (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Tracy, 2020), such as police officers who use body-worn cameras (BWCs). The purpose of this study is to evaluate how BWCs affect police-community interactions.

The officers recruited were required to have a minimum of six months experience with BWCs to be included in the study. Individuals received a copy of the informed consent form describing the purpose of the study and expectations for participation. Those who gave voluntary consent were scheduled to complete a 30-minute semi-

structured interview. Utilizing semi-structured interviews afforded participants the opportunity to explain their narratives in fashions which made them the expert, and, as such, natural trends emerged (Bhattacharya, 2010).

Individuals received a \$10 dollar Starbucks gift card for their participation ( $n=11$ ). All interviews were audio recorded on an iPad and uploaded to an online transcription service. The interviews were conducted over a 19-month period between June 2019 to January 2021.

The online transcription service provided written transcripts in the form of a conversation. This procedure provided 136 pages of single-spaced typed information. To ensure efficiency of each transcript, an online transcriber team member from the transcription company, double-checked each transcript against the audio recordings. The online transcriber team member was hired to ensure whether the accuracy of each transcript coincided with the independent audio recordings. Though, interviews were performed in English, participants also had the opportunity to answer in Spanish. However, we did not have any interviews that were completed utilizing Spanish language translation. Pseudonyms are used throughout the narratives to protect the anonymity of study participants.

### *Sample*

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample. The average age of participants was 42 years old. The sample ( $n = 11$ ) included eight males and three females, and all identified as Hispanic (100%). Participants reported an average of 19 years of police experience, with an average of 15 years at their current police department.

Participants resided in Texas for an average of 34 years. The participant's average time wearing a BWC was 3 years. The ranks of the participants were patrol officer (72.7%), sergeant (18.2%), and lieutenant (9.1%). The agency in this study adopted the use of BWCs in 2015, after the Federal government announced Federal funding for law enforcement agencies to purchase body-worn cameras and improve training. As such, the Federal funding needed to be matched by state and local police, so agencies could purchase 50,000 body-worn cameras.

### *Analysis*

Eleven participants participated in this study, and themes were coded until theoretical saturation was met and no new themes emerged. As noted from the work of Creswell (2013), theoretical saturation is attained in qualitative research when the repetitiveness of acquiring new themes is no longer possible. The average interview was 20 minutes. After each interview, the authors engaged in an individual line-by-

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

<i>Variables</i>	<i>%/Mean</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Age	42.55		9.05	25.00	55.00
Gender					
Male	72.73%	8			
Female	27.27%	3			
Race					
Hispanic	100.00%	11			
Rank					
Patrol Officer	72.73%	8			
Sergeant	18.18%	2			
Lieutenant	9.09%	1			
Negative Experiences with BWCs					
Yes	81.82%	9			
No	18.18%	2			
Total Years of Experience	19.23		12.25	3.50	45.0
Total Years at Current Agency	15.14		8.19	3.50	30.00
Years Using BWCs	2.95		1.60	0.50	5.00
Length of Residency in Texas	34.91		15.84	5.00	55.00

line contextual analyses of each participant's interview transcript to identify recurring emerging themes and develop codes in NVivo. Then, the authors met four times to discuss the themes with each session lasting approximately five hours for a total of 20 hours.

At the first two meetings, coding from the team included open-coding presentations. During the third meeting, the team engaged in axial coding because we began constructing the linkages between data to finalize connecting codes to each other and validate themes within our study. Through the coding process, the team outlined written notes to record the decision-making process, improve unclear coding categories, and provide clarity. Implementing this process allowed us as a team to reach a level of consistency in coding the data. In our final meeting, we identified four major themes: (1) accountability, (2) control, (3) conflict, and (4) power.

## Findings

When participants were asked about their experiences regarding BWCs responses were centered around the following four themes: accountability, control, conflict, and power. The implementation of BWCs in the United States was driven by highly

publicized police-citizen encounters in which White police officers targeted and killed unarmed Black men and women (Lum *et al.*, 2015). Scholars point to the killing of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black youth, by George Zimmerman, a self-appointed neighborhood watchman, as the flashpoint that ushered in the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM) (Gabbidon & Jordan, 2013; Lum *et al.*, 2015). In 2014, a White Ferguson, Missouri police officer, Darren Wilson, shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed Black man. The killing of Brown sparked protests in Ferguson as well as across the United States with the public calling for police accountability. Tensions between the police and public were further exacerbated by the in-custody death of Freddie Gray that happened under the watch of the Baltimore Police Department (Lum *et al.*, 2015; U.S. Department of Justice, 2015; Williams, 2017).

Such events were “watershed moments in American policing that spurred the rapid adoption of body-worn cameras” [and] reflect, however, long-incubating concerns in the United States regarding police discretion “as well as about police-community relations” (Lum *et al.*, 2015, p. 94).

As noted earlier in the paper, Quinney’s framework is often applied to macro-level decision-making entities, like governments, micro-level interactions, namely police-community relations manifest similar power distributions. Thus, the view of police authenticity among the public served is a driver of the power gap. The numerous cases where people of color have lost their lives at the hands of the police creating community outrage now created a space where police can no longer state they are protecting the best interest of the public (Williams, 2017). Therefore, these responses by law enforcement agencies in the excessive use of force against people is an example to reference in trying to understand the power imbalance between the two groups (police and community) as implied by Quinney (1970).

Amidst the widespread of police violence and public protests, the public continued to push for the use of BWCs by police agencies. Community and social justice advocates believed BWCs would enhance officer accountability, while police administrators thought BWCs would reduce frivolous complaints against its officers.

## Accountability

During this study, officers were asked to explain their experiences with BWCs and how they impacted their job performance in a border community. Participants noted before BWCs, it was difficult for officers or those charged with a crime to prove or disprove their innocence or guilt. Officer Ramos, for instance, explained that:

*As far as positivity for having a body camera, it would be that it takes you out of allegations. [B]ack in the day, [police] would have allegations from traffic stops and people start complaining that [police] are being rude or not talking to [the individual] correctly.*



*So, now with the body cameras, it shows our actions when we do our traffic stops or make arrests. It pretty much works in our favor.*

Office Lopez paralleling Officer Ramos experiences stated that, *...as far as the body camera goes, it's more positive for me. Just being that I have videos of whatever incidents or altercations I'm in, and I feel it helps me more than anything negative.* Officer Lopez went on to cite additional experiences regarding his BWC and how it exonerated him from a false public complaint. He explained that:

*I can recall a complaint that I got one time. Saying that I was very vulgar, very this, very that. A bunch of stuff, but I recorded everything. I had my body camera recording, and my body camera told a different story. And it told what really happened, and of course, I went to Internal Affairs with that. Then of course, they reviewed my body camera. I think without the body camera, it would have been a lot harder for that case. It would have been kind of, he said, she said type of deal.*

He also discussed how the BWC increased accountability in incidents where he may have had to use force. Specifically, he stated:

*[I]f I must go and use force..., well, at least my body camera is showing everything that's going on. So, any type of excessive force complaints, I can rely on my body camera to help me back up that there was no excessive force.*

Each officer reported that their experiences with BWCs as a technical tool affords officers protection from unwarranted public complaints while also maintaining accountability. Officers' accounts are consistent with the research of White (2014) that shows the use of BWCs increasingly holds officers accountable for performing their job while policing the community. As law enforcement agencies adopt BWCs, research suggests they will see an increase in police accountability, improvements in police-community relationships, and reductions in the use of excessive force, (Lum *et al.*, 2020a; White *et al.*, 2018). BWCs, however, are not a panacea. For example, research also shows "police technology may not lead to outcomes sought, and oftentimes has unintended consequences for police officers, their organizations, and citizens" (Lum *et al.*, 2020a, p. 95).

Yet, without rigorous research including evaluations of officers' experiences with BWCs, justice agency leaders are left to rely on their best guess about the impact BWCs will have on their agencies (Lum & Koper, 2017; Lum *et al.*, 2020a).

Narratives from officers in this study suggest that BWCs are a valuable tool that protects officers from frivolous community complaints. In each of the narratives, when an officer's behavior was called into question, BWCs protected these officers from false allegations while giving the agency a resource to ensure police accountability. As summed

up by Officer Ramos, BWCs have “a very good impact, because it shows our agency what’s really going on or what we are actually doing out there. It records our interactions amongst ourselves and the public.”

The primary benefit of interviewing officers about their experiences of BWCs is the opportunity to understand their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of BWCs. The officers’ accounts in this study, however, indicate officers see the BWCs as advantageous to both the public and police. In other words, the use of BWCs protects the public from police abuses and they are an important tool to increase accountability.

## Control

The power that BWCs have on officers and the community can bridge the gap and reduce conflict between both groups and minimize criminal behavior. During this study, officers were asked to explain their experiences with BWCs and how the cameras help them to reduce crime in the community. In response to this question, Officer Lopez explained:

*I guess you can say in a way it helps fight crime because it helps build stronger cases sometimes. It helps to build stronger cases. That’s where we get lots of evidence, especially dealing with people. Or stuff that happens like right in front of us and our body camera catches it. If we just had...the sound mics, that wouldn’t capture anything like that. So, it would be a lot harder in cases for those type of deals.*

Officer Vazquez also sees the benefits of BWCs for addressing criminal behavior noting that, “When we’re detaining the subject or I’m trying to make an arrest and the body camera catches that resisting arrest. The incident can be easily documented.” Officer Mendoza also agreed that BWCs were an important tool for fighting crime in the community. He stated:

*I know that they’ve been able to either identify perpetrators, or some footage has even been used as evidence of an actual wrongdoing. Because, you know, it’s caught on the camera, whether a dash cam or a body worn. It will help paint a true picture of crime, because, you know, people can say one thing and then the police have the footage now, right? So... yeah.*

Likewise, Officer Espinosa asserted that being able to review BWC footage assisted her in crime control by giving her the ability to more accurately complete crime reports. She noted that:

*There’s been times where I’ve been involved in serious crimes: shooting, stabbing when sometimes it can be very chaotic, very hectic. And just the mere fact that I’m able to go back and review my body camera helps a lot with gathering information that the victim*

*stated, and I was able to go back and retrieve that information or suspect's information as far as what he was wearing and stuff like that. The body cameras are very helpful in that sense, as far as we can review back footage and see what we need in our cases and stuff like that.*

Individuals may feel safer when officers wear BWCs because there is a presumption officers will conduct police-community interactions legally and lawfully since they are being recorded. In turn, individuals are more likely to comply with an officer's request or command during police-community contact because they are aware they, too, are being recorded. Officer Escoto described how the BWCs reduce the likelihood of police-community conflicts including misconduct or criminal behavior. He explains:

*I think the community appreciates that we are using the body cameras too. In, their mind, it's to police us. I think they feel that if we are in front of a camera, we are, going to act accordingly. So, they feel that if we act accordingly, we have the bigger impact on their lives and on criminal activity in general.*

Officers from our study concurred that BWCs offer a tool where officers can combat crime. The BWCs help to ensure an individual's compliance with police commands, and documents both public and police actions during contact (Lum *et al.*, 2020a). The visibility of BWCs reduces the likelihood of an individual's antisocial or criminal behavior as well as unprofessional or criminal behavior of police (Ariel *et al.*, 2017).

## Conflict

Criminal behavior conflicts with the interests of segments of society that have the power to shape policy and administer the law (Quinney, 1970). The less powerful segments of society are more likely to have their behavior criminalized, or, at the very least, scrutinized. In this border town, many of the individuals with whom police interact are immigrants or individuals who cross the border from Mexico to the United States to work legally. Officer Longeria's narrative emphasizes the conflict between the local police and those they police at the U.S.-Mexico border. Officer Longeria explains, for instance, individuals often complain they are the targets of racial profiling by police. She describes a typical traffic stop interaction by stating that:

*[W]e deal with not only your regular crime—but people crossing the border. We deal with, a lot more drugs. Our community is the border bridge to Mexico, and we deal with immigration stuff. It's hard because sometimes you come across people in a traffic stop and you are asking them for identification. Then they try to turn it around and say, "Oh, you are being racist [or you] called border patrol on them." No, the driver could*

*really have identification. You know, it's not because we're saying, "Oh, you are illegal just by the way you look."*

Even so, individuals have the perception they are being racially profiled by the local police, although officers are representative of the community, they police. Although representativeness is touted as a strategy to reduce or eliminate racial profiling (see e.g., Beer, 2015; Maciag, 2015), the views of minority officers on policing often align with those of White officers. In a national survey of police, 72% of both Latino and White officers, indicate fatal encounters of Blacks with police are isolated incidents (Morin *et al.*, 2017). Both groups of officers also report that high-profile police encounters with Blacks makes their job more difficult (Morin *et al.*, 2017). Diversifying police departments, therefore, cannot presuppose this strategy will necessarily put an end to racial bias in policing.

In her comments, Officer Espinosa also spoke about the conflict between the police and those who are policed. She explains that:

*[T]he part of town that I work in, there is a lot of crime and a lot of drug trafficking. For example, I was turning Southwest on my beat. Sometimes we are faced with a lot of civilians who are just...anti-police on this side of town and there's times that we deal with civilians that just don't like us. And they speak to us in a certain way, and they expect us to remain professional at all times. And sometimes...they still feel the need to file informal complaints against us and stuff like that.*

Officers in this study speculate the conflict between police and the community may be the result of individuals viewing police as "race traitors." A race traitor is a pejorative term for a person "who has turned against their race/ethnicity in favor of those who would persecute them," (Ractorhead, 2006, para. 1) such as the police. The officers' speculation about the root cause of police-community conflict is a possible explanation given research shows that communities of color do view officers of color as race traitors (Grote, 2016). Related research indicates people of color believe officers of color treat the communities they police "more harshly" (Weitzer, 2000, p. 317, emphasis in the original).

One officer decries the call to defund the police. He sees it as another instance of police-community conflict about the resources police need to do their jobs. Officer Rodriguez argues:

*[L]ike the perception on defunding the police, is that even realistic? I know this is—No. Because to me defunding the police would limit body cameras, right? I'm totally against defunding the police. And I understand, like I see the news and hear people. I understand that's a big issue, right now, defunding the police. I mean, you want to defund*

*the police, and take away the very basic things they need to prove [a] point? Taking resources away from the city and taking resources away from the police. I think that's a bad idea. A very, very bad idea...because our police do a great job.*

Officer Rodriguez seems to have a fundamental misperception of defunding the police. The defund the police movement supports divesting law enforcement funds and reallocating them to non-policing organizations, such as educational institutions, housing, healthcare, social services, and recreational centers. It often includes infrastructure investments, neighborhood revitalization, and loan forgiveness for minority-owned businesses.

Defunding the police is a reconceptualization of the measures necessary to improve public safety while providing support to the community.

When individuals have a voice in their communities, it reduces conflict. Additionally, defunding the police shifts many law enforcement responsibilities to more appropriate entities. Mental health professionals, for example, could handle calls involving an individual experiencing a mental health crisis instead of police responding with force or arrest. Not all situations require the use of force or arrest. Allowing other agencies to handle situations within their expertise reduces hostilities and conflicts between the community and police because of unnecessary police intervention.

## Power

As Quinney (1970) maintains power between groups can ignite tension and establish an environment that encourages criminal offending. The operation of BWCs reduces the power differential between the public and police. Inferences from officer narratives drawn in this study, indicate that BWCs may have a positive impact on the community's perception of police fairness and equitable treatment by police. This may be especially true when police administrators recognize the importance of creating trust building policies, such as agency transparency following contentious police encounters with the public. For example, Officer Ramos spoke about the importance of transparency in reducing the divide between the public and police perceptions of the use of force. Specifically, he said:

*I think the [BWCs] are going to help us out in the long run. [They are] going to make the department more transparent so the people can see what happens at calls, how calls escalate, and what the officer does to try to de-escalate, so forth and so on.*

Similarly, Officer Diaz expressed the need for transparency to educate the public about the situations police officers faced in the field. Instead of police department administrators attempting to control the narrative of police-community encounters, Officer Diaz argued there was a need for their agency to relinquish control by

disseminating information, including video evidence, quickly. He believed the timely release of BWC footage increased the likelihood of fostering public trust when officers used force. Officer Diaz stated:

*I think the more things that we can provide to the public, so that we can go ahead and take them back to the moment, so that they can see, this is why we were there. This is what we encountered. This is how we tried to ... what's the buzz word now? Deescalate. This is how we tried to deescalate. But how can you deescalate if one just wants to escalate? It takes two people to deescalate. Any tool that can help us, and just say we tried our best. That's the last thing, we tried our best to have a safe outcome for every incident we encounter. Any tool that we can [use], I'm all for it.*

Officer Mendoza echoed the concerns of Officer Diaz about the need for transparency to increase the public's trust in the police. Officer Mendoza suggested:

*Body cameras help the police department [by] bridging the gap between unwarranted complaints against the police. And you feel that if you've seen any of these cases, like they will protect officers. You know, cause there's this big perception that body cameras are needed because, in certain geographic locations, we've seen police misconduct, right?*

Officer Mendoza also argued:

*It's like a double benefit. From the officer's standpoint, it can help refute, disprove any wrongful allegations, right? And at the same time, it's kind of... Well, again, and we've seen it where it just happened, but it kind of keeps us honest, right? Especially in today's times where there's all this, you know, people demanding transparency, and they want to know. So, I think it benefits the public, and then benefits the officer, too, so, it's a win-win situation in my opinion.*

Other officers indicated the failure of their police agency to release videos of police-community encounters reinforced the public's perception that police have something to hide, or they have done something wrong. Officer Longeria, for example, explained the dilemma her agency faced when making decisions about the release of videos involving police-community contact. She lamented:

*We let the investigation take its toll and everything, and then the agency can release the video. But, meanwhile, the video that was taken by the public, that one gets released right away. So, that's the hot topic. The topic is, "Oh my gosh, look, the officers did wrong!" But you're not seeing the whole story. You know? Why do we need to apply pressure points, or do what we must do? So, once everything is over, people already have this mindset that, "Oh my God, the police are corrupt!" And by the time we release our video, the*

*public doesn't want to hear it. They're like, "Oh there is another big news story that has already happened. This was already forgotten." And then our name was tarnished.*

## Discussion

The research on BWCs and police use of force is mixed. Yokum *et al.* (2017), for example, examined a randomized sample ( $n = 2,000$ ) of police officers utilizing BWCs in Washington, DC. They found that BWCs had no statistically significant effect on police use of force or citizen complaints (Yokum *et al.*, 2017). Likewise, in a meta-analysis of 70 studies, Lum *et al.* (2020) found BWCs did not have a substantial impact on reducing incidents involving police use of force. A meta-analytical study conducted by Williams *et al.* (2021), however, concluded the use of BWCs reduced police use of force by approximately 10%. Additional research found BWCs had a deterrent effect on officers' use of force during an arrest (Ariel *et al.*, 2017).

While the extant literature on BWCs is mixed, it provides justification for further investigation into the impact of BWCs on power bridging between law enforcement and community stakeholders. In exploring the connection between BWCs and police-community relations using Quinney's (1970) framework, we posit a few recommendations for practitioner communities.

## Recommendations

Police decision-making should consider localized contexts. Our study shows that demographics of officers in a border community do not necessarily align with those of larger metropolitan areas. For example, in our sample, a primarily Hispanic population was being policed by a largely Hispanic law enforcement workforce. Seeing intra-racial representation within law enforcement could result in enhanced perceptions of legitimacy by the broader public. This stands in direct contrast to other locales that made national headlines, such as Ferguson, Missouri, where inter-racial conflicts sparked international outrage.

When law enforcement reflects on the communities they serve, the power gap as posited by Quinney (1970) would decrease, providing a humanizing component to the framing of the state. Conversely, because officers share the perspectives and values of the community, there is a greater likelihood for broader support and cultural understanding that could lend to more rehabilitative rather than hostile approaches to justice. Despite having a relatively low sample size, the current study provides new insights into the impact of race relations, minimizing the role of inter-racial aggression on perceptions of BWC effectiveness and impact. A recurring phrase in the interviews was referring to 'crime fighting' which directly connects to the power divide as it establishes an othering effect.

Most notably, this phraseology paints a scene of discord, where law enforcement conflicts with the communities they are tasked to serve. Thus, we have the following recommendations as outlined below.

- We recommend that police-community relations may benefit from reorienting this framing away from punitive thoughts to one focused on peacebuilding and community protection.
- This can be achieved by removing the narrative of conflict, because there would be less strain on the power divide as in-group/out-group dynamics would not be so heavily emphasized.
- Also, we recommend it should be noted that multiple law enforcement entities which are operating within the same geographic space work together to maximize the effectiveness of specific policies and operational protocols, such as the use of BWCs, since agencies cannot operate in silos.
- This is especially true given that agencies have varying levels of funding and access to resources, as well as different orientations for tasking because local departments are more oriented toward the community, federal entities are often tasked with national security and the emphasis on state hegemonic power projects.
- This clash can, and often does, lead to a different form of conflict, one that could spill into the arena of public scrutiny.
- So, we recommend and champion a call for the uniform implementation of policies, such as BWCs, would ensure all entities are held to the same accountability and transparency standards within a given geographic area.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, this study found that BWCs resulted in increased perceptions of transparency, which positively impacted police-community relations, noting the significance of intra-racial policing representation. By enhancing police accountability and minimizing the opportunity for frivolous or erroneous complaints against officers, the power divide is diminished, promoting more positive relations between law enforcement and the communities that they help.

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