Journal of Crime and Criminal Behavior
Vol. 6, No. 1, 2026, pp. 209-228

URL: www.arfjournals.com
https://doi.org/10.47509/JCCB.2026.v06i01.10

Police Officer Perceptions of Body-Worn Cameras: A Qualitative Study in a U.S.–Mexico Border Community

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Kimberly D. Dodson, & *et al.* (2026). Police Officer Perception of Body-Worn Cameras: A Qualitative Study in a U.S.–Mexico Border Community. *Journal of Crime and Criminal Behavior,* 6: 1, pp. 209-228.

Abstract: The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine police officers' perceptions of body-worn cameras through in-depth interviews with officers from a U.S.–Mexico border community. Emergent themes from officers' narratives were later interpreted using Routine Activities Theory to contextualise police–civilian encounters involving BWCs. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 11 police officers from a U.S.–Mexico border community, the study explores how BWCs shape police–civilian encounters through the interaction of motivated behaviour, suitable targets, and capable guardianship. Officers generally viewed BWCs as an essential tool that enhances accountability and professionalism, functioning as a form of situational guardianship during police–civilian encounters. Officers reported that the presence of BWCs often influenced civilian behaviour, increasing compliance and discouraging misconduct, consistent with shifts in motivated behaviour under heightened surveillance. Narratives also revealed that officers perceived themselves as suitable targets for complaints or allegations in the absence of functional BWCs, particularly when technological malfunctions occurred. These malfunctions were described as disrupting guardianship and altering the dynamics of police–civilian encounters by increasing uncertainty and perceived

Received : 27 February 2026 • **Revised :** 09 April 2026 • **Accepted :** 20 April 2026 • **Published :** 15 May 2026

vulnerability. Overall, the findings demonstrate how BWCs operate as embedded technological actors within routine policing activities and highlight their role in stabilising police–civilian interactions within contemporary law enforcement.

Keywords: Body-Worn Cameras, Police Officer Perceptions, Police–Civilian Encounters, Routine Activities Theory

Introduction

Tensions between law enforcement and communities of colour in the United States intensified following several high-profile police killings, including Eric Garner in New York City, Michael Brown in Ferguson, and George Floyd in Minneapolis, which were widely publicised through mainstream and social media and shaped national discourse on policing. Sustained public attention and protest increased pressure on law enforcement agencies to pursue reforms aimed at enhancing accountability and reducing the use of excessive force (Adams & Mastracci, 2019; Alaniz-Salas *et al.*, 2023; Ariel, 2016; Lum *et al.*, 2019; Wy *et al.*, 2022). In response, federal, state, and local governments, along with police organisations, increasingly adopted body-worn cameras (BWCs) as part of broader accountability efforts (Hyland, 2018; Koen & Mathna, 2019). Positioned within this reform context, BWCs serve as a central technological approach to increasing transparency during police–civilian encounters (Alaniz-Salas *et al.*, 2023).

While BWCs have been widely adopted as a tool to enhance transparency and accountability, their effectiveness depends in part on how they are perceived and experienced by the officers required to use them (Hyland, 2018; Kim, 2025). Police officers are the primary actors responsible for activating, managing, and relying on BWCs during police–civilian encounters, yet their perspectives remain less visible in policy discussions that often prioritise public or organisational outcomes (Gaub *et al.*, 2016; Hyland, 2018). Understanding officers' perceptions of BWCs is therefore critical, as these perceptions can influence how the technology is used in practice, how policies are implemented, and how BWCs ultimately function within everyday policing.

Despite growing empirical research on BWCs, much of it has focused on organisational outcomes such as use of force, complaints, and public accountability, with comparatively less attention given to officers' lived experiences with the technology (Hyland, 2016; Lum *et al.*, 2020). In particular, fewer studies have

examined how officers perceive BWCs within the context of everyday police–civilian encounters or how technological performance shapes those perceptions (see Demir, 2022; Fallik *et al.*, 2020; Jennings *et al.*, 2014). This research gap is especially salient in border community policing environments, where routine interactions are frequent, highly visible, and shaped by distinct social and institutional dynamics, underscoring the need for qualitative inquiry that centres officer narratives. To address this gap, the present study examines police officers' perceptions of body-worn cameras using qualitative interviews with officers from a U.S.–Mexico border community, with emergent findings interpreted through the lens of Routine Activities Theory (RAT).

Literature Review

Body-worn cameras were introduced as a reform measure intended to enhance transparency, accountability, and public trust in police–civilian encounters. In response to these reform goals, BWCs were increasingly adopted by law enforcement agencies in the United States. Hyland (2018) found that 47% of general-purpose law enforcement agencies (e.g., city police departments and county sheriff's offices that provide full-service policing) had acquired BWCs. Among those agencies that had acquired BWCs, 60% of police departments and 49% of sheriff's offices had fully deployed their cameras (Hyland, 2018). Among large law enforcement agencies, defined as those with more than 500 sworn officers, BWC acquisition rates were substantially higher. Specifically, large law enforcement agencies had acquisition rates of approximately 80% by 2016 (Hyland, 2018). This disparity likely reflects differences in financial resources, administrative capacity, and technological infrastructure necessary to support implementation.

By capturing real-time audio and visual information, BWCs support evidentiary, oversight, and training functions by documenting police-civilian encounters, providing objective records for internal review, and allowing supervisors to assess officer decision-making and adherence to policy. Advocates of BWCs suggest they have the potential to enhance officer safety by documenting encounters and providing objective records during high-risk interactions (Campbell *et al.*, 2018; Malm, 2019). Advocates also argue that BWCs may support crime prevention efforts by increasing perceived oversight during police-civilian encounters, which may influence civilians' behaviour and reduce misconduct (White, 2007; Sousa *et al.*, 2015). In addition,

proponents contend that BWCs can improve post-incident review by preserving visual and audio evidence that helps clarify disputed encounters and reconstruct events following critical incidents (Alaniz-Salas *et al.*, 2023; Campbell *et al.*, 2018; Kim, 2025; Lum *et al.*, 2020; White, 2007).

Empirical research examining the effectiveness of BWCs has produced inconsistent and sometimes contradictory findings, particularly with respect to outcomes such as use of force and citizen complaints. Early experimental work by Ariel *et al.* (2016), conducted in Rialto, California, reported notable reductions in both outcomes following the implementation of BWCs. Officers operating without cameras were nearly twice as likely to use force, and citizen complaint rates declined substantially after cameras were introduced. The authors interpreted these findings as evidence that BWCs may influence behaviour during police–citizen encounters, potentially through increased accountability and behavioural self-regulation.

Subsequent research, however, has not consistently replicated these results. In one of the largest randomised controlled trials to date, Yokum *et al.* (2019) examined the effects of BWCs among more than 2,000 officers in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Police Department. Contrary to earlier findings, the study found no statistically significant differences in officer use of force or civilian complaints between officers equipped with cameras and those in the control condition. These null findings suggest that the presence of BWCs alone may be insufficient to alter officer behaviour or complaint patterns, particularly in agencies with established accountability structures or existing surveillance mechanisms.

Synthesising the growing body of empirical evidence, Lum *et al.* (2019) conducted a systematic review of BWC research and concluded that the effects of BWCs are highly variable across agencies and contexts. While some studies reported reductions in force or complaints, many others documented null or inconsistent effects. Lum and colleagues emphasised that variation in outcomes is often linked to differences in activation policies, levels of officer compliance, organisational culture, and implementation practices. As a result, they cautioned against treating BWCs as a universal or standalone solution to concerns related to police accountability or use of force.

Consistent with this assessment, evaluations summarised by the National Institute of Justice further demonstrate that BWC effects differ across jurisdictions and outcome measures. For example, in Phoenix, the implementation of BWCs

was associated with declines in citizen complaints, yet no significant changes were observed in officer use of force, arrest behaviour, patrol activity, or call handling (CrimeSolutions, NIJ, 2022). Similar patterns of mixed or outcome-specific effects have been documented in other jurisdictions, reinforcing the conclusion that BWC effectiveness is context-dependent rather than uniform. Collectively, this body of research highlights the need to move beyond questions of whether BWCs "work" and toward a deeper examination of how organisational context, policy design, and officer behaviour shape the impact of BWC programs.

To better understand why BWC outcomes vary across agencies and contexts, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the role of officer attitudes, policy compliance, and technological use in daily practice. The extent to which BWCs achieve their intended objectives depends largely on officers' attitudes about BWCs and consistent compliance with departmental policies. Studies demonstrate that when departmental policies allow for officer discretion regarding camera activation, it results in inconsistent activation practices and uneven documentation of police-civilian encounters (Adams *et al.*, 2020; Newell & Greidanus, 2018).

Studies of technological performance demonstrate that BWCs do not operate automatically or uniformly across encounters (Adams *et al.*, 2020; Young & Ready, 2018). Instead, their functionality depends heavily on officers' decisions to activate, continue recording, or deactivate cameras during routine police–civilian encounters. These activation decisions are shaped by situational factors such as call type, privacy concerns, perceived risk, and competing tactical demands, as well as by officers' understanding of departmental policies (Young & Ready, 2018). Legal scholarship further indicates that privacy doctrines and evidentiary rules shape officers' activation decisions, particularly in private residences or sensitive encounters, where concerns about consent, data retention, and post-incident scrutiny influence whether cameras are activated or deactivated (Farden, 2016). As a result, even when cameras are issued and technically operational, variations in activation behaviour can lead to inconsistent documentation of encounters, limiting the extent to which BWCs fulfil their intended roles in accountability, evidence collection, organisational oversight, and transparency (Young & Ready, 2018).

Adams *et al.* (2020) also found that officers' exercise of discretion played a key role in activation rates, but departments with clearly articulated policies increased officers' compliance rates. However, even in agencies with formal policies in place,

officers' subjective concerns (i.e., perceptions of professional autonomy and fear of heightened scrutiny) continued to influence their willingness to activate cameras (Adams *et al*., 2020). These findings underscore the tension between formal policy expectations and officers' lived experiences with surveillance technology. Consistent with this perspective, Lum *et al*. (2020) emphasise that the effectiveness of BWCs is shaped by the clarity and enforcement of activation policies, levels of officer compliance, organisational culture, and broader implementation practices. In agencies where activation is inconsistent or policies allow broad officer discretion, BWCs may have limited impact on outcomes such as use of force or citizen complaints. Conversely, agencies with clearly defined policies, strong supervisory oversight, and consistent enforcement are more likely to observe behavioural effects associated with camera use. Collectively, these studies caution against viewing BWCs as a universal solution to issues of police use of force or accountability, emphasising instead that technological tools must be embedded within supportive organisational structures and policy frameworks to influence policing outcomes.

Technological reliability also shapes officers' experiences with BWCs. Officers frequently report issues such as battery failure, delayed activation, loss of footage, or equipment malfunction, which can undermine confidence in the technology and complicate accountability processes (Katz & Huff, 2023; Lum *et al*., 2019). These malfunctions are particularly consequential during high-stress encounters, where officers may rely on cameras for documentation or protection against complaints. Thus, even when officers intend to comply with policy, technological limitations may prevent BWCs from functioning as intended, reinforcing perceptions that cameras are an imperfect safeguard (Katz & Huff, 2023; Lum *et al*., 2019).

Beyond technical challenges, data storage and management practices significantly influence officers' perceptions of BWCs. Evidence management systems require officers to upload, categorise, and tag footage, often adding administrative burdens to routine duties (Adams & Mastracci, 2019; White & Malm, 2020). Further research indicates officers are concerned about how footage is stored, accessed, reviewed, and potentially released, particularly when recordings are used for disciplinary review or public disclosure (Hyland, 2018; Newell & Greidanus, 2018). Studies examining officer perceptions suggest that these practices can contribute to feelings of heightened surveillance and organisational scrutiny, shaping how officers interpret the purpose and consequences of BWC use (Gaub *et al*., 2016). Collectively, these

concerns influence whether officers view BWCs primarily as documentation tools or as mechanisms of organisational surveillance.

Taken together, the literature indicates that the effectiveness of BWCs is shaped not only by technological capacity and formal policy design, but also by how officers perceive, interpret, and engage with the technology in practice (Lum *et al.*, 2019; White & Malm, 2020). Officers are the primary actors responsible for activating cameras, managing footage, and navigating competing legal, organisational, and situational demands in the field, where encounters are often unpredictable and dynamic rather than routine (Adams *et al.*, 2020; Newell & Greidanus, 2018). Therefore, officers' perceptions of BWCs influence discretionary decision-making, compliance with activation policies, and the consistency with which cameras function as tools of accountability and documentation (Gaub *et al.*, 2016; Young & Ready, 2018). Despite this central role, officers' perceptions remain less developed in empirical research compared to organisation-led evaluations and outcome-based studies (Hyland, 2018; Lum *et al.*, 2019). This gap is particularly pronounced in border communities, where policing occurs under heightened visibility and unique jurisdictional pressures, underscoring the need for research that centres officers' experiences with BWCs in these contexts.

Methods

Procedure and Recruitment

Participants in our study were chosen from a police agency near the US-Mexico border in South Texas. This agency comprises 500 sworn officers and over 80 civilian employees, serving approximately 261,000 people over 111 square miles. We employed a snowball sampling method to recruit officers, recognising the challenge of accessing this particular demographic. This approach proves particularly effective for qualitative studies involving hard-to-reach populations (Creswell & Poth, 2023). This sampling strategy supported the study's purpose of examining police officers' perceptions of BWCs in a U.S.-Mexico border context.

Officers with at least six months of BWC experience were eligible. Those who voluntarily consented underwent a 20–30-minute semi-structured interview. Respondents received a $10 Starbucks gift card for their participation. Interviews were conducted between June 2019 and January 2021, recorded, and transcribed into 136 pages of single-spaced text. Transcripts were reviewed and verified against

the original audio recordings by a member of the research team to ensure accuracy. While interviews were conducted in English, participants had the option to respond in Spanish, although none did. Pseudonyms were used to maintain participant anonymity.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants. The sample (n = 11) had an average age of 42 years, with eight males and three females, all identifying as Hispanic. On average, participants had 19 years of police experience, with 15 years at their current department. They had resided in Texas for an average of 34 years, with an average of 3 years wearing a BWC. Most participants held the rank of patrol officer (72.7%), followed by sergeants (18.2%) and lieutenants (9.1%). The agency began using BWCs in 2015 after Federal funding became available, requiring state and local matching funds for purchasing 50,000 cameras.

Table 1: Sample Demographic Characteristics

Variables	%/Mean	N	SD	Min	Max
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

Analysis

In this study, eleven participants were involved, and themes were coded until theoretical saturation was achieved, indicating no emergence of new themes, as noted in Creswell and Poth's work (2023). The average interview duration was 20

minutes. Following each interview, individual line-by-line contextual analyses of the transcripts were conducted by the authors in NVivo to identify recurring themes and develop codes. Subsequently, the authors convened four meetings, each lasting approximately five hours, totalling 20 hours. The initial two meetings focused on open-coding presentations by the team. Axial coding was then employed during the third meeting to establish linkages between data and validate themes. Throughout the coding process, the team maintained written notes to document decisions, clarify coding categories, and ensure consistency. This systematic approach facilitated consensus in coding. The authors approach this study with professional experience in criminal justice and police-related scholarship. Reflexive memoing and team-based coding were used to minimise individual interpretive bias and strengthen analytic rigour. Analytic rigour was supported through prolonged engagement with the data, team-based coding, iterative consensus meetings, and maintenance of analytic memos. These strategies enhance the credibility and dependability of the findings.

Findings

Routine Activities Theory (RAT) explains how outcomes in public interactions are shaped by the convergence of motivated behaviour, suitable targets, and the presence or absence of capable guardianship (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Although RAT was originally developed to explain criminal events, it provides a useful interpretive lens for examining how officers experience BWCs during police–civilian encounters. Analysis of officer narratives revealed several distinct themes aligned with RAT. First, officers described BWCs as a form of capable guardianship, emphasising documentation, transparency, and accountability when cameras functioned as intended. They also identified moments in which guardianship was weakened due to technological malfunctions or institutional delays in releasing footage. Second, officers articulated perceptions of suitable targets, particularly their own vulnerability to allegations or scrutiny when footage was unavailable, incomplete, or delayed. Third, officers referenced motivated behaviour, describing how civilian conduct during encounters was shaped by the presence or absence of recording, often influencing compliance and interactional tone.

In this study, RAT was used as an interpretive framework, not as an analytic template imposed on the data. Accordingly, the term “motivated behaviour” is

used rather than "motivated offenders" to reflect how officers described situational conduct during police–civilian encounters after themes emerged from the interviews. Officers' narratives did not centre on fixed criminal identities or motivated offender intent but instead emphasised how behaviour unfolded dynamically in response to perceived oversight, documentation, and interactional context. Interpreting these emergent patterns through RAT allows for conceptual organisation without labelling individuals as offenders or implying deductive theory application. Framing the analysis in terms of motivated behaviour, therefore, preserves the inductive integrity of the qualitative design while remaining theoretically consistent with RAT's focus on situational dynamics (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Each element of RAT is interpreted separately and in greater detail in the sections that follow.

Body-Worn Cameras as Capable Guardianship

A dominant theme across narratives is that BWCs function as capable guardianship by creating a verifiable record of encounters. Officers emphasised that before BWCs, it was difficult for officers and civilians "to prove or disprove their innocence or guilt," and that accusations often rested on competing accounts. Officer Reynolds framed BWCs as protective documentation:

> 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… people start complaining [police] we're being rude… when we do arrests. It pretty much works in our favour.

This description aligns with RAT's guardianship element because officers experience BWCs as increasing oversight and reducing ambiguity about what occurred in the encounter. Officer Lopez echoed the same framing, describing BWCs as "more positive" because he has video of incidents and "it helps me more than anything negative." His account illustrates guardianship as both documentation and institutional review, particularly when formal investigations occur:

> I can recall a complaint… Saying that I was very vulgar. I had my body camera recording… I went to Internal Affairs… they reviewed my body camera. I think without the body camera, it would have been a lot harder… 'he said, she said' type of deal.

In RAT terms, the BWC acts as a guardian not simply in the moment of the encounter, but also through its institutional afterlife-internal review, accountability

processes, and evidentiary verification. Officer Lopez further tied guardianship to use-of-force scrutiny:

> If 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.

This statement demonstrates that officers view BWCs as guardianship that protects both officers and civilians by supporting accountability and evaluation of force incidents.

Officer Williams similarly positioned BWCs as a form of capable guardianship grounded in professional standards and accountability, emphasising that cameras help officers meet higher expectations because their conduct is documented and subject to review. Notably, Williams explained that BWCs "do not prevent crime," a distinction that is analytically important rather than contradictory. From officers' perspectives, the value of BWCs lies not in deterring criminal behaviour, but in documenting police–citizen encounters and facilitating review of officer conduct when actions are questioned. Consistent with RAT, guardianship operates by strengthening oversight, reducing ambiguity, and structuring post-incident accountability processes, rather than by eliminating crime itself. In analysing the narratives, it is clear that the officers in our sample view BWCs as tools that enhance transparency and regulate professional conduct through documentation and review, even in encounters where criminal activity may still occur.

RAT also helps explain why officers react strongly to technological glitches and inconsistent recording, as these moments represent a weakening or absence of guardianship. For instance, Officer Lucy noted "technical glitches" and the risk that malfunctions "during critical moments" undermine "the usefulness of footage, especially in legal proceedings." Officer Ramos similarly raised concerns that footage may "cut out unexpectedly," which could weaken evidentiary reliability in court and during review.

When the camera malfunctions, officers perceive a reduction in guardianship that increases uncertainty, increases their exposure as targets, and weakens behavioural regulation.

Officer Diaz's narrative extends the "absence of guardianship" concept beyond malfunction to institutional transparency and the consequences of delayed release. He argued that agencies should "relinquish control" of encounter narratives by

releasing footage quickly, so the public can see context: "I think the more things that we can provide to the public… take them back to the moment…This is what we encountered. This is how we tried to…deescalate." From an RAT perspective, the timely release of a video functions as extended guardianship-it supports accountability and contextual understanding after the encounter. Delays, as Longeria describes, weaken that guardianship and allow partial accounts to dominate.

Officer Mendoza similarly framed BWCs as bridging gaps and reducing unwarranted complaints, emphasising dual benefits: "It's like a double benefit… help refute… wrongful allegations… It kind of keeps us honest… people are demanding transparency… it's a win-win situation…" Mendoza's framing is essentially RAT in applied narrative form. That is, BWCs increase guardianship and oversight, reduce vulnerability to allegations, and shape behaviour through the knowledge that actions are recorded and reviewable.

Officers as Suitable Targets

Officer narratives also reflect how they perceive themselves as suitable targets for allegations, scrutiny, or reputational harm when documentation is absent, incomplete, or delayed. Without BWCs, officers described higher perceived vulnerability to "he said, she said" claims, informal complaints, and allegations of misconduct. Officer Longeria's account, for example, powerfully illustrates how officers perceive increased target suitability when official video is delayed, and public video circulates first. She described a process where the agency waits to release footage while civilian video spreads immediately:

> We let the investigation take its toll… and then the agency can release the video. But, meanwhile, the video that was taken by the public, that one gets released right away… 'Oh my gosh, look, the officers did wrong!' But you're not seeing the whole story… And by the time we release our video, the public doesn't want to hear it… And then our name was tarnished.

Interpreted through RAT, Longeria's narrative illustrates that when capable guardianship is delayed, such as when official video footage is not released promptly, officers experience increased exposure as targets of public scrutiny and mistrust. In the absence of timely documentation, public interpretation of the encounter may shift toward suspicion and reputational harm, even when officer conduct is appropriate.

Officer Espinosa's narrative also reflects increased target suitability in environments where officers anticipate negative reception and complaint filing:

> Sometimes we were faced with a lot of civilians who are just… negative or anti-police… and they expect us to remain professional at all times. And sometimes…they still feel the need to file informal complaints against us with our agency supervisors.

The likelihood of civilian complaints increases officers' sense of being a target. Officers describe BWCs as protective mechanisms that reduce vulnerability by documenting encounters and providing institutional verification.

Officer Lucy also described traffic stops where civilians interpret ID checks through a lens of suspicion:

> 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're being racist [or you] called border patrol'… No, the driver could really have identification.

Within RAT, this narrative speaks to how the border context shapes perceived target suitability for accusations during routine enforcement activities. Officers describe BWCs as valuable precisely because they anticipate heightened scrutiny and potential allegations in these encounters.

Body-Worn Cameras and Motivated Behavior

Officers repeatedly described BWCs as influencing behaviour during police–civilian encounters, which aligns with RAT's proposition that behaviour shifts when capable guardianship is perceived to be present. In the policing context, officers interpret BWCs as a technology that increases perceived oversight and, in turn, alters incentives for misconduct, escalation, or false allegations.

Officer Escoto explained that civilians interpret BWCs as monitoring the officers and, as a result, civilians expect officers to behave appropriately: "I think the community appreciates that we're… using the body cameras too. In their mind, it's to police us. I think they feel that if we're in front of a camera, we're going to act accordingly." This perception of oversight, officers noted, also influences civilian behaviour during encounters.

Officer Lucy similarly described BWCs as producing a "civilising effect," explaining that recording can de-escalate potentially tense situations and reduce the need for force, thereby fostering more professional interactions between officers

and community members. She emphasised that BWCs help maintain a professional atmosphere during encounters. Taken together, these narratives indicate that officers view BWCs as mechanisms of behavioural regulation, in which the awareness of recording increases perceived guardianship and shapes conduct during police–civilian interactions. Civilians may therefore comply more readily with officer requests when they know their actions are also being documented.

Narratives also highlighted the interactional dynamics that emerge during recorded encounters, with Officer Diaz noting the challenges of de-escalation when civilian behaviour escalates despite the presence of a BWC. He explained, "This is how we tried to de-escalate. But how can we de-escalate if one [civilian] wants to escalate?" Consistent with RAT, this account illustrates motivated behaviour shaped by perceived recording rather than deterrence.

Discussion

This study examined police officers' perceptions of BWCs in a U.S.–Mexico border community, interpreted through RAT. The findings indicate that officers primarily experience BWCs as tools of capable guardianship that structure documentation, accountability, and behavioural regulation during police–civilian encounters, rather than as mechanisms for crime prevention. This interpretation aligns with prior qualitative research showing that officers tend to support BWCs when they are framed as accountability and evidentiary tools rather than deterrence technologies or surveillance mechanisms (Demir, 2022; Gaub *et al.*, 2016; White & Malm, 2020).

Officers' emphasis on documentation and post-incident review is consistent with studies demonstrating that BWCs function most reliably as instruments of institutional oversight and verification, not as tools that prevent crime or eliminate the need for officer discretion (Lum *et al.*, 2019). Officers' explicit statements that BWCs "do not prevent crime" reflect an understanding of guardianship that mirrors RAT's conceptual distinction between deterrence and oversight. This perspective helps explain why large-scale experimental evaluations yield mixed findings on the use of force and complaints; expectations that BWCs will produce uniform deterrent effects may be theoretically misaligned with how the technology operates in practice (Ariel, 2016; Yokum *et al.*, 2019).

The findings further demonstrate that officers perceive themselves as suitable targets for public scrutiny, mistrust, and reputational harm when BWC documentation

is absent, incomplete, or delayed. This perception is reinforced by research showing that delayed footage release and inconsistent activation undermine public trust and officer confidence, even when officer conduct is appropriate (CrimeSolutions, NIJ, 2022). From a Routine Activities perspective, delayed or missing footage weakens guardianship, increasing officers' vulnerability to allegations of misconduct, excessive force, or unprofessional behaviour. This insight extends prior research by illustrating how guardianship operates not only during encounters but also through post-incident transparency practices.

Officers' descriptions of behavioural changes during recorded encounters align with RAT's focus on motivated behaviour shaped by perceived oversight. Officers noted that both officer and civilian conduct often became more professional and cooperative when recording was apparent, a pattern consistent with studies identifying a context-dependent "civilising effect" of BWCs (Ariel, 2016; Lum *et al.*, 2019). Importantly, officers framed these behavioural changes as interactional regulation rather than crime deterrence, reinforcing the conclusion that BWCs shape conduct through visibility and accountability rather than by reducing criminal motivation.

Officers' strong reactions to technological malfunctions and inconsistent recording are also consistent with prior research emphasising the importance of reliability and policy clarity in BWC effectiveness (Adams *et al.*, 2020; Katz & Huff, 2023; Young & Ready, 2018). Within RAT, malfunctions represent moments when guardianship is weakened or absent, increasing uncertainty and perceived vulnerability. These findings suggest that technological reliability should be treated as a core accountability issue, not merely a technical concern, in BWC policy design and evaluation.

Policy Implications and Directions for Future Research

The border-community context of this study amplifies the dynamics identified in officers' narratives. Officers described heightened scrutiny during enforcement activities such as traffic stops and identification checks, a finding consistent with research demonstrating that policing context shapes both officer perceptions and public interpretation of police actions (Lum *et al.*, 2019; Wy *et al.*, 2022). In high-visibility environments, BWCs are experienced as especially important forms of documentation and institutional verification. These findings suggest that context-

specific BWC policies, particularly those governing activation, technological reliability, and the timing of footage release, may be especially critical in border and other high-scrutiny policing environments.

Future research should continue to examine officer perceptions of BWCs across diverse policing contexts to assess the transferability of the mechanisms identified in this study. In particular, comparative qualitative research across additional border regions, rural agencies, and speciality units may help clarify how context shapes experiences of guardianship, motivated behaviour under perceived recording, and vulnerability to scrutiny. Longitudinal qualitative studies may also enhance understanding of how officers' perceptions of BWCs evolve as policies, technology, and public expectations change. Incorporating routine activities into future evaluations may further support theory-informed assessments of how BWCs function across organisational and contextual settings.

Limitations

This study is limited by its focus on a single police agency within a specific U.S.–Mexico border-community context, which shapes how officers experience and interpret body-worn cameras. Policing in border regions is characterised by heightened visibility, unique jurisdictional pressures, and frequent public scrutiny, all of which may influence officers' perceptions of BWCs in ways that differ from other policing environments.

The qualitative design and use of in-depth interviews prioritise depth and contextual understanding rather than statistical generalisation. The sample size was intentionally small and purposive, consistent with phenomenological research aimed at capturing lived experience rather than representativeness. As such, findings should be interpreted as contextually grounded rather than universally representative.

Additionally, the study relies on self-reported accounts, which reflect officers' perceptions and interpretations of their experiences rather than objective measures of behaviour or outcomes. However, this focus on subjective meaning is a central strength of qualitative inquiry and aligns with the study's purpose of examining how officers understand and navigate BWC use in practice. Although not statistically generalisable, the findings reveal recurring patterns related to guardianship, perceived oversight, and vulnerability that may help inform our understanding of

officer experiences in other law enforcement agencies that use BWCs to structure accountability and visibility.

Conclusion

This study examined police officers' perceptions of BWCs within a U.S.–Mexico border community, using qualitative interviews interpreted through Routine Activities Theory. The findings demonstrate that officers do not experience BWCs as tools that prevent crime, but rather as situational guardianship technologies that structure documentation, accountability, and behaviour during police–civilian encounters. From officers' perspectives, the primary value of BWCs lies in their ability to provide reliable records of interactions, reduce ambiguity in post-incident review, and support professional standards.

Interpreting emergent patterns through RAT clarifies how BWCs function in practice by illuminating the interaction between capable guardianship, officer vulnerability as suitable targets, and motivated behaviour under perceived recording. Officers described BWCs as strengthening guardianship when footage is reliable and accessible, while technological malfunctions or delayed release weaken guardianship and increase exposure to scrutiny and mistrust. Behavioural changes associated with BWCs were understood as situational and interactional, shaped by awareness of recording rather than by deterrence of criminal activity.

The border-community context of this study underscores the importance of centring officer perspectives in evaluations of policing technologies. In environments characterised by heightened visibility and scrutiny, BWCs are experienced as especially important tools for documentation and institutional verification. By foregrounding officers' lived experiences, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of why BWC outcomes vary across contexts and why expectations of uniform effects are often unmet.

Overall, the findings suggest that effective BWC implementation depends less on the mere presence of cameras and more on policy design, technological reliability, and organisational practices that sustain guardianship. Recognising BWCs as embedded accountability tools rather than crime-prevention devices has important implications for research, policy, and practice. Centring officer perceptions and applying theory-informed frameworks such as RAT can support more realistic expectations and more effective use of BWCs in contemporary policing.

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