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# Is Seeing Believing? Public Perception on the Use of Body Worn Video by Police

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## Abstract

Since the tragic events in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, a call for the use of body worn video (BWV) cameras by police has been made. A number of police forces in the USA already use BWV and it is being piloted in various cities across Canada. Initial surveys on this subject focused on police officer views of BWV. Although a small number of public surveys have been conducted to date, none have provided a comprehensive overview of what the public thinks about BWV. Drawing on a sample of Canadian ( $N = 105$ ) and American ( $N = 105$ ) jury-eligible respondents, a survey was administered to provide a better understanding of what people think about BWV.

## Introduction

- The shooting incident in Ferguson transformed how people are thinking about BWV in which BWV by police services went from a being a consideration to a perceived necessity to enhance police accountability and improve public trust in policing.
- The small amount of research on BWV has focused on the opinions of police officers rather than the public (Brown, 2013; Jennings et al., 2014; Todd, 2013).
- Currently, we do not know what the public thinks about BWV, nor do we know if they understand its limitations (e.g., that the camera lacks depth perception; Force Science Institute, 2010). This is important given that BWV footage will increasingly be introduced as evidence in trials concerning police conduct.
- The current survey examines public perceptions of BWV and beliefs that people have regarding BWV. We are particularly interested in whether differences exist (in perceptions and beliefs) between American and Canadian respondents.

## Method

### Participants

- 210 (105 Canadian; 105 American) jury-eligible respondents completed the survey via Qualtrics (Canadian:  $M_{age} = 47.34$ ,  $SD = 13.92$ ; Americans:  $M_{age} = 45.53$ ,  $SD = 14.84$ ). Canadians were 46% men and Americans were 25% men, reflecting a significant difference in gender across groups,  $\chi^2(2) = 10.81$ ,  $p = .005$ .

### Procedure

- The survey consisted of questions/items that were divided into a number of sections. For this poster we will focus on questions/items that related to: (1) attitudes towards BWV and (2) beliefs regarding BWV. Chi-square analyses and  $t$ -tests were used to analyze the responses, as appropriate.

## Results

- Table 1 displays findings related to respondents' attitudes towards BWV. For items 1-15, the rating scale was from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree). For question 16, scores indicate the percentage of respondents who chose particular time categories.
- The vast majority of items were associated with similar responses from both Canadian and American respondents. Both groups indicated a reasonable degree of agreement with many of the statements, although there were some exceptions where relatively neutral responses were provided.

Table 1. Responses to questions regarding attitudes and beliefs about BWV.

Question	CAN	USA
1. I am concerned with police officers wearing a device that could video-record their conduct.	2.78	2.94
2. Police wearing BWV would improve officer behavior.	2.73	2.49
3. Police wearing BWV would improve citizen behavior.	3.10	3.16
4. If police wore BWV, I would feel safer.	3.13	2.91
<b>5. Police should alert people before they record them with BWV. *</b>	3.16	3.96
6. BWV should be recording at all times when police are on duty.	2.96	2.70
7. BWV should only record when police are approaching a possible incident/potential suspect.	3.69	4.09
8. Officers should be able to control when BWV records.	4.52	4.90
9. Use of BWV will make police more accountable for their actions.	2.26	2.26
10. Use of BWV will reduce false misconduct reports against police.	2.23	2.26
11. BWV use by police will provide important evidence to convict criminals.	2.01	2.10
12. BWV use by police violates my rights to privacy.	4.77	4.39
13. Stress of a use of force incident can impact an officer's memory.	3.84	3.65
14. BWV will increase public trust in police.	3.02	3.11
15. I would be willing to pay slightly higher taxes for BWV.	3.77	3.45
<b>16. Police BWV should be stored for a maximum of: *</b>		
Destroyed immediately	1.9%	4.3%
3 months	9.5%	13.3%
6 months	9.5%	10.5%
1 year	12.4%	23.8%
3 years	13.3%	11.4%
5 years	10.5%	15.2%
10 years	10.5%	5.7%
Forever	31.4%	15.2%

- For example, item 2 indicates that American respondents and Canadian respondents strongly agree that BWV will improve officer behaviour. Other items where a high level of agreement (<3) was observed include items 1, 6, 9, 10, and 11.
- Respondents reported less agreement with item 8 (officers should be able to control when BWV records) and 12 (BWV use by police violates my privacy rights).
- Only two questions/items listed in Table 1 produced significant differences between the groups (in bold).
- American respondents ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ) were significantly less supportive than Canadian respondents ( $M = 3.16$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ) with the statement that police should alert people before they record them;  $t(208) = 3.19$ ,  $p = .002$ .
- American respondents also favored storing BWV footage for a shorter period of time compared to Canadian respondents,  $Kruskal-Wallis(1) = 8.92$ ,  $p = .003$ .
- Table 2 displays findings related to respondents' beliefs about BWV (e.g., their limitations), how they would evaluate BWV evidence in court, and how they would interpret discrepancies between officer testimony and BWV.
- Questions 1-3 required a yes/know/I don't know response. Results indicate that many respondents answered 'I don't know' to these questions. When focusing on the yes/no responses, many respondents answered the questions incorrectly (according to the Force Science Institute, 2010). No significant differences existed between the groups for questions 1-3.
- For items 4-8, the rating scale was from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree). No significant differences emerged between the groups. Most responses to these items were relatively neutral with the exception of the high level of agreement observed for item 7 (BWV is more accurate than eyewitness testimony).

Table 2. Responses to questions regarding BWV and camera limitations.

Question	Fact	CAN		USA	
		Yes	No	Yes	No
1. Can BWV capture depth perception?	No	51%	12%	41%	17%
2. Can BWV capture a scene in poor lighting better than the human eye?	Yes	35%	31%	42%	27%
3. Can BWV capture images as fast as the eye can process images?	No	55%	15%	51%	17%
In a court room:		Mean		Mean	
4. BWV is more credible than bystander video.		3.63		3.45	
5. BWV evidence from the prosecution is more credible than BWV from the defense.		3.79		4.03	
6. BWV evidence introduced by the judge is more credible than BWV evidence introduced by either lawyer.		3.66		3.64	
7. BWV is more accurate than eyewitness testimony.		2.53		2.54	
8. BWV consistently produced high quality video.		3.42		3.61	
Is the officer dishonest or mistaken?		Dis.	Mis.	Dis.	Mis.
9. In testimony, officer states bush, video shows mailbox.		17%	67%	11%	66%
10. In testimony, officer states suspect lunged, video shows him walking.		38%	30%	37%	20%

- Questions 9-10 required respondents to indicate whether they believed discrepancies between officer testimony and BWV would most likely reflect dishonesty on the part of the officer or a mistake (e.g., memory errors). Both groups responded similarly to these questions, but the decision regarding dishonesty vs. mistaken was dependent on the question (i.e., on whether the detail was central or peripheral to the incident).

## Discussion

- According to our survey results, both Canadian and American respondents viewed BWV as potentially useful (e.g., for improving behavior and enhancing police accountability). Unfortunately, our results also indicate a general misunderstanding of the capabilities associated with BWV.
- This raises some potential concerns, depending on how BWV evidence is presented in court (e.g., how much weight is put on such evidence, or the degree to which the video is presented as the "absolute truth"). This is especially true given that our respondents appear to place some value on BWV evidence (e.g., they perceive it to be more accurate than eyewitness evidence, and to a lesser degree, bystander video).
- Interestingly, when it came to our respondents interpreting the meaning behind discrepancies between officer testimony and BWV, a different pattern of results was observed across the questions: When discrepancies existed for peripheral details (bush vs. mailbox), respondents viewed the discrepancies as simple errors. However, when the discrepancies related to central features (suspect lunged vs. walked) officers were viewed as dishonest.
- Future research should focus on understanding the implications of these results for police officers and the public. Mock jury research in particular will be important to conduct so that researchers can determine how jurors will evaluate BWV evidence in a judicial context.