[Editorial Forward: William J. Lynch was, at the time of submission of this article, the training coordinator for the Elkhart County Sheriff’s Office; he has now returned “to his small town roots” by joining the Middlebury Police Department. His research demonstrates that Indiana police agencies may enjoy all the benefits of body worn recording devices at relatively minimal costs, particularly small departments. This thought provoking article is well worth the read, not only for management personnel but also for rank-and-file officers who might be hesitant.]

Body-Worn Cameras and the Benefits to Police and the Communities They Serve.

by

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Body-worn cameras are being implemented in police departments across the United States and many countries around the globe. Research data shows strong support across the United States for police to use body-worn cameras in the course of daily job duties. Data also indicates increased trust in police, reduced use of force incidents by police, and reduced citizen complaints against police officers when body-worn cameras are used by officers. Even though police officers reported increased duties and time taken away from other tasks during their shifts with the implementation of body cameras, the data shows police officers perceive use of body-worn cameras as a benefit relative to obtaining convictions in cases and supporting the officer’s version of their encounters with the public. The cost of implementing and maintaining a body-worn camera policy for police departments can be challenging, but community support for body worn camera policies for police officers impels serious consideration despite the cost.

**Research Data**

The Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department Body Camera Study (Braga, 2018) found a statistically significant reduction in police use of force and complaints when body-worn cameras were in use. A statistically significant increase in arrests and citations for officers with body-worn cameras versus officers without was also noted. The Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department study showed a 12.5% reduction in use of force incidents, a 14% reduction in citizen complaints, arrests increased by 5.2%, and citations increased by 6.8%. This study was conducted using 416 patrol officers. A voluntary group of 218 officers used body worn cameras while the control group of 198 officers did not use a body-worn camera.

The City of Orlando Police Department/USF Body Worn Camera Study (Jennings, Lynch, and Fridell, 2015), stated: “wearing a body-worn camera did positively influence officer behavior and lead to significant reductions in resistance to response and serious external complaints.” The study was conducted over a 24 month period with the first 12 months being pre-body-worn cameras and the second twelve months with the body-worn cameras being implemented. The study included pre-body-worn camera officer surveys and officer surveys after the body cameras were issued and in use for a 12 month period. The post study survey results indicated the majority of officers felt body-worn cameras should be issued to all front line officers. The post study surveys found “30-40% of officers were in agreement that BWC’s had impacted citizen behavior, de-escalated confrontations with citizens and themselves in the community, and had impacted the behavior of their fellow officers.” The study surveys indicated 2 out of every 3 officers wanted to continue wearing a body-worn camera after the study had concluded.

The Rialto Police Department’s Body-Worn Camera Experiment (Farrar and Ariel, 2014) found there was an 87.5% reduction in officer complaints in a two year period from February 2011 to February 2013. There was a 59.01 % reduction in officer use of force in the same time period. Somewhat curiously, the study also found there was an increase in officer contacts during the experiment. The study showed an increase in case filings and convictions due to video evidence, as well as an impact on domestic violence cases.

 The study “Evaluating the Impact of Officer Worn-Body Cameras in the Phoenix Police Department,” (Katz, Choate, Ready, and Nuňo, 2014) showed a 17% increase in arrests and a 23% decline in complaints against officers who were issued, and used, a body-worn camera. Officers who received a complaint were significantly less likely to have the complaint substantiated against them compared to officers who were not issued a body-worn camera. The research data showed an increase in filing of charges for domestic violence cases and increased guilty pleas or verdicts for domestic violence cases.

**The Benefits and Problems of Body-Worn Cameras**

The research studies conducted list numerous benefits and problems associated with the implementation of a police worn-body camera program. The most common benefits noted were a reduction in use of force incidents by officers, a reduction in use of force complaints against officers, an increase in arrests, and an increase in the number of contacts an officer would have during their shift. The studies noted filing of criminal charges increased along with conviction rates for those cases.

Some of the problems listed in the research studies with implementing a body-worn camera system were officers’ reluctance to use a body-worn camera, lost time to download the body-worn camera images, and added tasks in relation to maintaining their body-worn camera, which officers felt took time away from other tasks.

Financial Concerns for Implementing a Body-Worn Camera System

The initial cost of implementing and maintaining a body-worn camera program may be significant. Part of the challenge is in the high cost of storing the recorded video. In 2015, the City of Baltimore estimated the implementation cost of an officer worn-body camera program between $5,501,674.00 and $7,938,275.00, and the one year cost to maintain the program at $1,747,000.00. The Police Executive Research Forum investigated the financial investment of officer worn-body camera programs for various departments. (PERF, 2018). The report states the Mesa, Arizona, Police Department has body-worn cameras deployed to 44% of their personnel at a cost of $725,340.00 annually to maintain the program. Further, the Phoenix, Arizona, Police Department has body-worn cameras deployed to 10% of the personnel which costs the department $1,306,349 annually to maintain the program. Also, the Dallas, Texas, Police Department has body-worn cameras issued to 30% of the personnel which costs the department $1,125,000 annually to maintain the program. The report states smaller departments have an average cost of $5,000 annually to maintain their body-worn camera systems, and attributes the lower annual cost for a smaller department to fewer officers and selectively issuing body-worn cameras to select, but not all, personnel.

There are other factors to consider when determining ‘cost versus benefits’ of officer worn-body camera programs. One factor is the cost of these programs compared to savings in litigation and claims paid for excessive force lawsuits. Factors such as this are yet to be determined due to lack of data from only short periods of program implementation.

**Summary**

In recent years, departments nationwide have implemented officer worn-body camera programs. With the few research studies having been completed, valuable data on the costs and benefits associated with these programs is beginning to emerge. Although these programs are proving to be costly, the research conducted so far has shown this technology is undoubtedly valuable to law enforcement in numerous ways. There has been a push by the public and various groups for law enforcement to adopt programs which implement body-worn camera programs for the benefit of their communities. The public wants transparency from the police departments that serve their communities, and the public expects transparency with the technology that currently exists. By utilizing existing technology, law enforcement officers can more effectively perform their duties and at the same time fulfill a public need. Body-worn cameras benefit everyone.

**[Note: charts, graphs, and tables omitted by editor]**