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Chris Pagliarella
Yale Law School

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Police Body-Worn Camera Footage: A Question of Access

Chris Pagliarella*

Introduction

When President Obama closed 2014 by requesting $263 million to support the deployment of 50,000 body-worn cameras (or BWCs) for state officers,¹ he was endorsing an idea whose time had come. The deaths of Michael Brown² and Eric Garner³ provided names and faces to a growing call for police accountability that would eventually develop into the broader Black Lives Matter movement.⁴ Brown’s parents themselves vigorously campaigned to place body cameras on every law enforcement officer,⁵ at the same time that polling suggested greater white outrage over Garner’s death than Brown’s—quite likely, commentators noted, due to the fact that the former was filmed.⁶

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While police body-worn cameras (BWCs) are a promising tool for police accountability, expanding body camera use will come at a serious financial cost, and will require municipalities adopting these programs to make hard choices.\(^7\) In particular, decisions made about retention time and disclosure breadth will be crucial to the financial feasibility of any program. While the ideal program would retain BWC footage for months or even years, the cost of video storage can become prohibitive very quickly. Further, if police footage is treated as a traditional public record under state FOIA laws, departments may be faced with a choice between costly redaction, risking the release of sensitive footage, or scuttling a program altogether.

This Comment asserts that footage access policies can be designed to both serve the public interest and safeguard legitimate privacy interests without breaking the bank for municipalities. The guiding principle I offer is that BWC programs must provide full footage access to the victims of suspected undue police violence and their families—allowing for an accountability baseline and setting victims’ rights as paramount. Public record policies should not impede this core goal by imposing public access where the associated costs could stymie such programs altogether.

In Part I of this Comment, I provide an overview of the storage approaches taken within police departments implementing camera programs. In Part II, I discuss some differing approaches taken regarding public disclosure of BWC footage, touching on the financial and privacy concerns raised. In Part III, I offer three policy recommendations to offer a baseline of officer accountability without incurring undue financial or privacy costs in the name of general transparency.

1. **Body Cameras Today: The Experimentation Phase**

Just as concern for police bias predates recent cases, so does the demand for increased video monitoring of police. Similar outcries were made after the 1991
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beating of Rodney King and the 2009 killing of Oscar Grant. Dashboard camera use was expanded from the 1980s onward out of concern about racial bias in policing. A 2002 DOJ-sponsored study found that such cameras led both to more professional behavior on the part of officers and to speedier resolution of complaints regarding officer professionalism, often due to voluntary withdrawal. In recent years, New Orleans, Seattle, and New York City have all consented to preliminary use of body cameras following allegations of police abuse.

Initial studies on the impact of BWCs are tentatively encouraging. Popular media often cite a study from Rialto, California, where officers wearing cameras were the objects of 88% fewer complaints and cut their total use of force by


12. Van Brunt, supra note 5.


50%.77 Asked if this indicated better behavior by police or by citizens, Rialto Chief William Farrar ventured that it was “probably a little bit of both.”18 Subsequent studies in the United States19 and the United Kingdom20 have also shown a drop in complaints and in use of force when BWCs are in use.21 Police administrators have expressed satisfaction with the financial savings derived from fewer complaints22 and the reduced time spent filing incident reports.33

Despite initial savings in administrative costs, storing significant amounts of video footage is extremely costly over the long term, and current methods of storage pose security risks and evidentiary issues as well. New Orleans anticipates that its BWC program will cost $1.2 million over five years, the “bulk of which will go to data storage.”24 Whether litigation savings will always offset such costs remains an open question, depending on the scope of storage.35 Lieutenant Vern Sallee of Chula Vista estimates that even a single daily hour of footage per officer in mid-size Chula Vista would produce thirty-three terabytes

21. See, e.g., MILLER ET AL., supra note 18, at 5-6 (quoting chiefs from Topeka and Greensboro, among other officers).
23. See WHITE, supra note 15, at 24 (noting that a U.K. office shaved, on average, fifty minutes off of every nine-hour shift).
24. MILLER ET AL., supra note 18, at 32.
25. See Developments in the Law, Considering Police Body Cameras, 128 HARV. L. REV. 1794, 1809 (2015) [hereinafter Developments in the Law], which briefly discusses costs and raises litigation savings as a possible answer depending on the given department. This piece only mentions two municipalities (Oakland and Chicago) with particularly high litigation costs. See id. at 1809 n.97.
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of storage every year, suggesting that internal servers alone cannot serve a fully BWC-outfitted department. Yet many cloud providers may not offer the necessary security to safeguard this information, especially under the strict chain-of-custody evidentiary expectations held by courts and police departments. Put simply, with physical storage, it is easier to assure a judge or jury that no party has tampered with the footage. The Electronic Frontier Foundation has expressed concern that no federal standards exist for the safeguarding of data. In the interim, Evidence.com has become the sole “market leader” competing with in-house storage despite “working out its real-world procedures on the fly.”

II. Public Records and the Law Enforcement Exception

In addition to the high costs of video storage, broad public disclosure laws regulating BWC footage pose another difficult financial choice: pay for redaction, sacrifice privacy, or cut a program altogether. While individual departments take varied approaches to public disclosure, state and federal laws appear in text to protect the right of law enforcement agencies to keep footage private by providing exceptions to disclosure for ongoing investigation, personal privacy, or general law enforcement needs. The federal Freedom of Information

26. Sallee, supra note 9, at 42. To give the reader a sense of size, desktop-class external hard drives—generally the largest for personal use—top out at six terabytes as of January 2016, meaning over five separate drives for one officer’s minimal use even if the most expensive commercial drives are purchased. See Laarni Almendrala Ragaza & Joel Santo Domingo, The 10 Best External Hard Drives of 2016, PC MAG. (Jan. 20, 2016), http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2400958,00.asp (discussing the capacity for personal use externals).

27. See, e.g., IACP, supra note 10, at 49-50, app. ii-1 (discussing the certification of digital police footage).


29. Siegel, supra note 28. See also WHITE, supra note 15, at 33 (discussing a Department of Justice report that only offers Evidence.com and in-house storage as options for officers).

30. Martin Kaste, As More Police Wear Cameras, Policy Questions Arise, NAT’L PUB. RADIO (Nov. 7, 2014, 12:01 AM), http://www.npr.org/2011/11/07/142016109/smile-youre-on-cop-camera (“While police videos are generally considered public records, in practice, they’re often difficult to obtain. Most cities refuse to turn over footage that is part of an investigation, and some are now instituting restrictions based on privacy concerns.”).
Act (FOIA) exempts public disclosure for law enforcement records where disclosure could threaten effective enforcement or cause “unwarranted invasion[s] of personal privacy” or other harms.31 State freedom of information laws generally copy FOIA’s structure or adopt a blanket exception for law enforcement.32 The DOJ advises police departments that most BWC footage may also be withheld under state exceptions for materials related to ongoing investigations or private agency personnel files.33 Yet the strength of these exceptions is dependent on court deference, and as discussed infra, not all courts have deferred to law enforcement requests for withholding other surveillance film, such as dashboard or security camera footage.

Police departments vary in their disclosure practices. On the extreme low end of the privacy spectrum, some have posted embarrassing videos of citizens online for public ridicule;34 on the other end, others have hesitated even to let officers view their own footage.35 The underlying law alone may not be decisive. For example, Greensboro police have internally interpreted North Carolina law to protect footage from public disclosure unless the filming officer consents,36 while Charlotte-Mecklenburg police applying the same law allow some defense attorneys access and discretionary “public interest” release.37

Even if body camera footage contains some information exempt from disclosure, police departments may be required by statute to redact and disclose the resulting product when practicable. Under FOIA, an agency is compelled to release “[a]ny reasonably segregable portion of a record . . . after deletion of the

33. MILLER ET AL., supra note 18, at 17-18.
34. Weiner, supra note 16 (describing an example from Laurel, MD).
35. Kaste, supra note 30 (setting out an example from Oakland, CA).
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portions which are exempt.” Many states either mirror that language in relevant part or mandate that exceptions should be construed narrowly.

What constitutes “reasonably segregable” with costly editing procedures is unclear, and police departments have taken a variety of approaches to the issue. Placing a high value on privacy and resource constraints, Oakland will not attempt to disclose traffic stop footage where a driver’s license or insurance card is shown, claiming insufficient resources for redaction.

By contrast, while professing concern for the same values, Houston will redact and release when possible, in the interest of deferring to cost constraints by limiting storage retention times. Seattle’s police departments almost eliminated the city’s BWC program entirely due to their financial inability to redact and review enough footage to comfortably comply with a single citizen’s broad disclosure request. Though a compromise was reached with the citizen, police expressed their intent to seek legal limits on expansive requests. Chief Dean Esserman of the New Haven Police Department has reported that his department has slowed its rollout of body cameras while it evaluates the “recurring cost” of storage and redaction in light of Connecticut’s “very open” Freedom of Information laws.

A preference for redaction has been echoed not only by law enforcement but also by privacy advocates concerned that private actors could abuse collected footage for the purposes of stalking or identity theft—especially mass collection services like Evidence.com, discussed above. The disruptor in Seattle


39. See, e.g., CAL. GOV’T CODE § 6253(a) (incorporating language similar to that of the Freedom of Information Acts); GA. CODE ANN. § 50-18-72(b) (“This Code section shall be interpreted narrowly . . . .”); R.I. GEN. LAWS § 38-2-3(b) (including the same, but limited to “public inspection” and not release).


41. MILLER ET AL., supra note 18, at 33-34.


44. Sullivan & Miletich, supra note 42.


46. See, e.g., Jesse Campbell, New Bill Could Change Records Policy on Police Body Cameras, WATAUGA DEMOCRAT (July 17, 2015, 3:05 PM), http://www
claimed concern for “deploying cameras without thought to privacy,”47 which the American Civil Liberties Union has echoed48 despite tentative support for body-worn cameras.49 Concerns about general surveillance by police, heightened in an era of facial recognition technology,50 would naturally be magnified when any citizen could view the “panopticon” as well.51

While no court has yet considered body cameras squarely, courts have examined other forms of police surveillance under FOIA. This body of precedent raises questions about whether the general discretion of officers to limit broad public access will always be respected. State courts in Arizona and New Jersey, for example, have limited municipalities’ ability to withhold security and dashboard camera footage without specific, articulable safety concerns—which might not extend to a generalized privacy concern for the public.52 At least one trial court has rejected police concerns for privacy on behalf of a third party where a dashboard camera captured a public arrest (along with an invocation of the criminal investigation exception).53 However, one state appellate court has

47. Sullivan & Miletich, supra note 42.
51. See Siegel, supra note 28 (discussing privacy advocates’ concern with the “modern panopticon”).
52. See Gilleran v. Twp. of Bloomfield, 114 A.3d 780, 784-85, 786 n.3 (N.J. App. Div. 2015) (finding a request to withhold footage of a public area on safety grounds insufficiently specific, though noting that body cameras might pose broader privacy concerns); KPNX-TV v. Superior Court In & For Cty. of Yuma, 905 P.2d 598, 602 (Ariz. Ct. App. 1995) (rejecting a similar request regarding a crime scene videotape, though upholding the withholding of footage of a nonpublic area found to be a possible burglary target).
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indicated that where lengthy footage is reasonably believed to contain material exempt from disclosure, police may be able to withhold the footage altogether rather than undergo an extensive redaction process, based on resource and practicality concerns alone.\textsuperscript{54}

In all of these cases, the right to police footage is the exclusive creation of statute and department policy.\textsuperscript{55} Unlike constitutional decisions, then, lawmakers have the power to change the conclusions of the courts by changing the underlying public records law. This Comment now offers some suggestions to them.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above discussion, I now turn to which adjustments may be necessary to allow for affordable BWC programs that serve victims’ families and respect privacy. I offer three recommendations for lawmakers and law enforcement officials overseeing BWC implementation.

1. Recognizing victims’ rights as the highest value in a BWC program, any department implementing BWCs must make footage available for a reasonable time—including provision of a personal copy—to the citizen who was engaged in the filmed encounter (or his/her representative)\textemdash\textit{even if} others in the video, including the officer, do not consent. While privacy—and the treasured “anonymity [of] crowds”\textsuperscript{56}—deserves protection, such protections must be circumscribed to the need to avoid mass surveillance, not to allow individual moments of embarrassment to trump victims’ rights—\textit{even if} victims’ families choose to publicize their videos once obtained to encourage outcry. However, to reduce the resource burden and address privacy concerns, police departments should
announce and set a reasonable window of time—say, two months—after which unflagged recordings will be deleted.\(^57\)

2: Legislatures should affirm law enforcement discretion regarding broader public access when a) the request comes from parties other than actual complainants or their representatives and b) the department reasonably believes redaction to be costly. Often, police objection to sharing an unredacted recording—for example, footage of officers caring for victims of trauma\(^58\)—is prudent.\(^59\) If public access would require costly redaction, officials may either choose to control the conditions of the viewing (say, in-camera review at the station) or withhold the footage altogether. Alternatively, as suggested by the Yale Media Freedom and Information Access clinic, fee-shifting provisions might be adopted by states to reduce the cost to departments of complex redaction, especially those posed by “abusive requests.”\(^60\)

3: Finally, centralizing hundreds of departments’ file storage with a single private third party increases the risk that employees with that organization—or unscrupulous hackers—may misuse the collected storage for commercial data-mining or worse.\(^61\) State and federal government alike should encourage market competition in the secure storage cloud market to avoid centralized risk.\(^62\)

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57. See STANLEY, supra note 49, at 4 (suggesting that footage be stored for times measured in “weeks not years” so long as the retention period is disclosed).


59. Some of these conflicts might be resolved by policies on when cameras should be turned on and off. For further discussion of this question, see Waleska Suero, Lessons from Floyd v. City of New York: Designing Race-Based Remedies for Equal Protection Violations in Stop & Frisk Cases, 7 GEO. J. L. & MOD. CRITICAL RACE PERSP. 139, 143-45 (2015), and Howard M. Wasserman, Moral Panics and Body Cameras, 92 WASH. U.L. REV. 831 (2015).

60. JOSH DIVINE ET AL., MEDIA FREEDOM & INFO. ACCESS CLINIC, ABRAMS INST. FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, POLICE BODY CAM FOOTAGE: JUST ANOTHER PUBLIC RECORD 24 (Dec. 2015), http://isp.yale.edu/sites/default/files/publications/police_body_camera_footage_just_another_public_record.pdf. Divine et al.’s white paper is more bullish on public disclosure than this Comment, for two key reasons. First, it asserts that “the public supported bodycams because they expected public access to body cam footage,” which I believe wrongly highlights general transparency over specific justice for victims. Id. at 12. Second, it suggests that technological innovation such as “auto-blurring” technology will obviate some of the costs of redaction over time. Id. at 23-24. I agree that if such technology becomes widely available, it will change the cost calculus here in favor of disclosure.

61. Siegel, supra note 28.

62. Microsoft, for example, has entered the market and has adapted its prior experience with secure cloud computing to meet FBI security requirements. The
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Conclusion

Resolving the issues around access to BWC footage, while only dealing with one facet of body-worn camera programs, may help us better focus on the question: Who is this policy meant to serve? I have argued for prioritizing future victims of suspected undue police violence as individuals deserving of personal justice, not full public transparency into policing practices broadly. Perhaps our technology will evolve such that our surveillance policies can render that debate obsolete by making redaction available. For now, public servants should first remember the actual injustices that prompted this latest push for accountability.