



Law Enforcement  
Management Institute of Texas

# Body-Worn Cameras in Texas



MEMBER THE TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM™

## Body-Worn Cameras in Texas Police Departments: Utilization and Policies in 2020

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### INTRODUCTION

Emerging technologies within law enforcement agencies—such as body worn cameras (BWCs)—have captured the attention of the general public, the media, law enforcement professionals, and lawmakers. In 2015, Senate Bill 158 (SB158) was introduced during the eighty-fourth regular Legislative Session. This was passed into law on September 1, 2015 and requires training for police officers employed by agencies using BWCs and includes provisions for changes to the Open Records Act.

On September 23, 2020, staff of the Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas (LEMITE) and the SHSU College of Criminal Justice (COJ) initiated a project to explore current BWC practices, procedures, and policies in Texas. As a result of this project, the following data are presented to enhance current understandings about the use and status of BWCs by police departments in Texas.

We recognize and appreciate the large numbers of police departments that responded to this survey. The number of survey responses is impressive and allows for an understanding of some aspects of BWCs. The survey results offer a timely understanding of BWC use and may contribute to improvements.

### BACKGROUND

BWCs continue to receive attention in the hopes that increased transparency and video evidence will bring about changes regarding complaints, excessive force situations, and police legitimacy and trust in the police. There has yet to be widespread,

systematic information collected on BWC utilization in Texas and this study intended to begin filling this knowledge gap.

In collaboration with a Texas senator and staff knowledgeable about BWC legislation and police, the LEMITE research team created a survey to measure the number of proportion of agencies that utilize BWCs, the number of BWCs the agencies deploy, approximate BWC program costs, policy elements that regulate BWC utilization by officers, and disciplinary actions. The survey was distributed to police departments in Texas via e-mail. In addition, a small number of BWCs policies were obtained and characteristics of those policies were summarized.

### METHODS

In order to reach our target audience of Texas law enforcement agencies, we utilized a contact list of Texas police chiefs maintained by LEMITE. Police chiefs fulfill professional development credit hour requirements by participating in LEMITE programs so the LEMITE contact list is comprehensive. The contact list included email addresses for 1,191 Chiefs of Police in Texas, including chiefs from municipal, ISD, University, and special district police departments. The initial email message described the study background and included a link to the Qualtrics survey. The survey consisted of 19 items and covered a variety of topics (see **Appendix 1**). The initial email was distributed over four days, beginning Monday, November 9th and ending Thursday, November 12th. One follow-up, reminder email was sent to each chief the following week.

Email invitations to complete the survey were sent over four days, rather than in a single day, because of technological restraints that limited the number of messages that could be sent during a single day. On Monday, November 9th a total of 250 initial emails were distributed, on Tuesday, November 10th 250 initial emails were distributed, on Wednesday, November 11th 300 initial emails were distributed, and on Thursday, November 12th 391 initial emails were distributed. A reminder email, con-

taining the same information as the initial email, was distributed over three days, beginning Tuesday, November 17th and ending Thursday, November 19th. Reminder emails were sent to all 1,191 chiefs, regardless of whether they had previously completed the survey. On Tuesday, November 17th 300 reminder emails were distributed, on Wednesday, November 18th 300 reminder emails were distributed, and on Thursday, November 19th the remaining 591 reminder emails were distributed. We received 749 completed surveys, producing a response rate of 62.9% (749 / 1,191). As seen below in **Table 1**, while we have 749 surveys according to our responses from Qualtrics, only 733 agencies submitted answers to at least the first question of the survey asking whether the agencies had BWCs or not. If considering the 733 surveys where at least the first question was answered, then the response rate becomes 61.5% (733/1,191) rather than our above mentioned 62.9%.

To better understand practices in Texas, we obtained a set of BWC policies from 8 departments and summarized a set of key policy elements using the Bureau of Justice Assistance BWC scorecard (see **Appendix 2**). In the future a larger sample of BWC policies will be obtained and summarized using the scorecard.

## RESULTS

More than 85% (n = 625) of agencies that responded to the survey reported using BWCs as of November 2020 (see **Table 1**). **Table 2** presents information about the utilization and adoption of BWCs only among the 625 agencies that reported having BWCs. Approximately two-thirds of responding agencies that use BWCs have 50 or fewer cameras. A large majority of agencies (a little over 95%) that use BWCs deploy them to over 75% of officers. This suggests that BWCs are likely not confined to use in a limited number of divisions or units within departments. When asked about the divisions or units to which BWCs are deployed, the most common responses were patrol, investigations, and school resource officers. Agencies throughout the state began implementing BWCs as early as 2005, however most agencies began adopting BWCs after 2014, with a spike in 2014 and 2015. Nearly one quarter of agencies that responded to this survey question reported adopting BWCs in 2014 or 2015.

**Table 1. Prevalence of Body-Worn Cameras**

	N	%
<b>Agency had BWCs</b>	733	100.0
Yes	625	85.3
No	108	14.7

**Table 2. Adoption and Utilization of Body-Worn Cameras**

	N	%
<b>Number of BWCs the agency uses</b>	<b>619</b>	<b>100.00</b>
1 – 5	135	21.8
6 – 10	138	22.3
11 – 20	124	20.0
21 – 50	126	20.4
51 – 100	50	8.1
101 – 150	15	2.4
151 – 200	16	2.6
201+	15	2.4
<b>Percentage of patrol officers that wear BWCs</b>	<b>605</b>	<b>100.00</b>
1% – 25%	8	1.3
26% – 50%	6	1.0
51% – 75%	14	2.3
76% – 100%	577	95.4
<b>Year the agency started using BWCs</b>	<b>563</b>	<b>100.00</b>
Pre 2010	46	8.2
2010	21	3.7
2011	23	4.1
2012	39	6.9
2013	34	6.0
2014	65	11.5
2015	82	14.6
2016	66	11.7
2017	52	9.2
2018	74	13.1
2019	38	6.7
2020	33	5.9

**Table 3** presents information about BWC policies and costs. In regard to policies, nearly 80% of agencies reported reviewing their BWC policies for modifications or updates in 2019 and 2020. More than 91% of agencies indicated they had delivered or an external training provider had delivered BWC training to their officers. Most respondents (68%) indicated they believed BWCs aided in reducing the number of citizen complaints. Additionally, most of the respondents (76.5%) indicated they had not sanctioned an officer for violating any part of their BWC policy in 2019 and 2020 and a similar portion indicated they had not sanctioned an officer in 2020 for violating policy about when to activate or deactivate their BWC. In terms of funding, most agencies (almost 77%) did not have grant funding to purchase their BWCs. The average annual cost for running a BWC program, according to responding agencies, was \$48,213. The highest annual BWC program cost was estimated to be \$2.4 million, while some agencies reported having zero annual costs associated with their BWC program.

The survey asked respondents whether their agency would be willing to share their BWC policy with the research team for a future BWC policy content analysis. Nearly 400 agencies responded affirmatively. For this report, we reviewed 8 publicly available BWC policies. In the future, we intend to report summary information about a larger set of policies. **Table 4** presents summary information about key elements of the 8 policies we reviewed. All 8 policies included information that specified when officers needed to activate their BWCs. It was also common for the policies to include elements that address prohibited recordings, guidance on when and how officers are to deactivate their BWCs, and mandatory training for officers who wear BWCs. Six out of the eight agencies' policies provided directives or procedures on directives about documenting the existence of a BWC recording and also addressed violations of state statutes on reasoning for deactivation of an officer's BWC. Five agencies' policies include directives for auditing BWC footage for performance review and policy compliance. Finally, the least common policy items include discretionary BWC activation, specific conditions when an officer can choose to not activate, guidance on recording victims or sensitive populations, and discretionary BWC deactivation or non-activation.

**Table 3. Body-Worn Camera Costs and Policies**

	N	%
<b>In what year was your body-worn camera policy most recently reviewed for modifications and updates?</b>	<b>561</b>	<b>100.00</b>
Pre 2015	8	1.4
2015	13	2.3
2016	15	2.7
2017	22	3.9
2018	56	10.0
2019	145	25.8
2020	302	53.8
<b>Has the agency or an external training provider delivered BWC training to officers?</b>	<b>578</b>	<b>100.00</b>
Yes	528	91.3
No	50	8.7
<b>To the best of your knowledge, have BWCs reduced citizens' complaints?</b>	<b>564</b>	<b>100.00</b>
Yes	386	68.4
No	178	31.6
<b>To the best of your knowledge, has an officer been sanctioned for violating any part of the BWC policy in 2019 or 2020?</b>	<b>575</b>	<b>100.00</b>
Yes	135	23.5
No	440	76.5
<b>Agency has disciplined an officer for violating BWC policy about when to activate or deactivate cameras in 2020?</b>	<b>574</b>	<b>100.00</b>
Yes	114	19.9
No	460	80.1
<b>Were any BWCs purchased with a grant?</b>	<b>573</b>	<b>100.00</b>
Yes	132	23.0
No	441	77.0
<b>Agency is willing to provide a copy of the BWC policy?</b>	<b>520</b>	<b>100.00</b>
Yes	398	76.5
No	122	23.5
<b>Approximate total annual cost of the BWC program?</b>	<b>Range</b>	<b>Average</b>
N=478	\$0-\$2,400,000	\$48,213

**Table 4: Policy Comprehensiveness**

	Yes	No
Does policy specify when officers are to activate the BWC?	8	0
Does policy specify circumstances when recording is prohibited (e.g., locker room, supervisor/officer conversations, strip searches)?	7	1
Does policy provide guidance on appropriate BWC deactivation (when and how to deactivate)?	7	1
Does policy specify mandatory training requirement for participation in the BWC program?	7	1
Does policy specify/require that officers document existence of BWC recording?	6	2
Does the policy specify sanctions for officers who do not document reasons for deactivating or failing to activate the BWC?	6	2
Does policy specify process for auditing of BWC footage for performance review or policy compliance?	5	3
Does policy provide guidance on BWC recording of crime victims and other sensitive populations?	3	5
Does policy provide guidance on requirement for discretionary deactivation/non-activation of BWC (citizen request for non-recording)?	3	5
Does policy specify if officers have discretion on when to activate BWC?	2	6
Does policy specify circumstances/conditions when officers can choose to not activate?	1	7

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## CONCLUSION

Given legislative attention to police BWC policies and deployment in Texas, a research team from The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas created, distributed, and collected information that would answer a number of questions about police BWC usage and policies. Responses from over 700 police departments revealed 85% have BWCs and a large majority of agencies with BWCs deploy 50 or fewer cameras. When agencies deploy cameras, large percentages provide training and large percentages of officers in the agency use a BWC. Many respondents (68.4%) believe BWCs have reduced citizen complaints and the majority of agencies reported not disciplining any officer in 2019 or 2020 for violating their BWC policy. Approximately three-quarters of responding agencies agreed to share their BWC policy with the research team. For this report the research team reviewed BWC publicly available policies from 8 agencies and summarized key elements. The most common policy elements covered when officers should activate cameras, training requirements, guidance on when to deactivate cameras, and when BWC recording is prohibited.

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Please refer to the additional, attached documents for **Appendix 1 and Appendix 2**.

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