

Study first to show how law enforcement leaders feel about police wearing body cameras

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The use of force and police behavior continues to be a prominent topic in the media. Several recent high-profile incidents involving police use of deadly force have resulted in increased scrutiny of officer behavior and police-community relations by the media, policy-makers, civil rights groups, and academics, leading to nationwide interest in police-worn body cameras to increase transparency and accountability.

While the use of body-worn cameras on [police](#) to address these issues has been endorsed by the media, government, social activists, and policy makers alike, there is scant scientific evidence to support or refute the perceived benefits or drawbacks. A first-of-its-kind study by researchers from Florida Atlantic University and collaborators, measured law enforcement leadership attitudes toward police wearing body cameras, and published results of their study in the current issue of the *American Journal of Criminal Justice*.

Key findings from the study reveal that:

- Fifty percent support the use of body-worn cameras in their agencies
- Only 21 percent agree or strongly agree that body-worn cameras would affect officer behavior while on duty; more than 58 percent were neutral
- One-third believe body-worn cameras would improve police

officer behavior during interactions with citizens; 50 percent are neutral

- Nearly 50 percent agree that body-worn cameras will impact police officers' decision to use force in encounters with citizens
- Nearly 50 percent believe that body-worn cameras will improve citizen behavior during interactions with police
- Almost 60 percent agree or strongly agree that the media will use data from body cameras to embarrass or persecute police
- More than 60 percent agree or strongly agree that pressure to implement body-worn cameras comes from the media
- Two-thirds agree or strongly agree that use of body-worn cameras is supported by the public because society does not trust police
- Fifty percent agree or strongly agree that body-worn cameras will result in an increase in guilty pleas from people charged with crimes
- Nearly 63 percent do not believe that body-worn cameras are an invasion of a police officer's privacy, but are evenly split on whether they are an invasion of citizens' privacy
- Almost half agree or strongly agree that body-worn cameras could be used by supervisors to 'fish' for evidence used to discipline officers
- Fifty percent believe that the maintenance and upkeep of body cameras will take time away from normal duties

"While the general public might be enthusiastic about the potential benefits of police body-worn cameras, until this study, it was unknown how leadership in law enforcement felt about these cameras," said John Ortiz Smykla, Ph.D., lead author, director and professor in FAU's School of Criminology and Criminal Justice within FAU's College for Design and Social Inquiry, who collaborated with Vaughn J. Crichlow, Ph.D., assistant professor in FAU's School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Matthew S. Crow, Ph.D., Department of Criminal Justice,

University of West Florida, and Jamie A. Snyder, Ph.D., Department of Criminal Justice, University of West Florida. "We found the lack of empirical research on this subject to be very intriguing, and that's what motivated us to pursue this important study."

The study was conducted in Sunshine County, a large southern county with 27 local [law enforcement agencies](#), a number of state and federal law enforcement agencies, and a population of approximately 1.3 million. Participants were in leadership positions such as chief, deputy, sheriff, major, colonel, and captain.

Twenty-nine items were used to measure their perceptions, and questions were divided into eight perceptual domains—officer behavior, officer effectiveness, evidentiary impact, privacy, safety, use of force, impact on citizens, and public/media interest.

Most of the departments that participated in the study were not currently using body-worn cameras, however, multiple departments were either planning on or considering using them. A survey in 2013 by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) of 500 law enforcement agencies throughout the United States; of the 254 departments that responded to the survey, showed that only 25 percent reported that they used body-worn cameras at that time.

Those who caution against the use of these cameras are concerned with a number of privacy issues for both police officers and citizens. Open records laws in many jurisdictions such as Florida, further compound this issue. Questions still persist as to who will have access to the video footage captured by the cameras and the policies and guidelines related to public release of videos. As of May 18, 10 states (Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Maryland, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Utah, and Vermont), enacted laws related to body-worn cameras, several of which directly address public disclosure and privacy

issues.

"The perceptions of [law enforcement](#) leadership are vital because it could either make the possible transition to body-worn cameras less disruptive or situate departments in climates that are less than favorable for something that may be inevitable," said Smkyla.

Provided by Florida Atlantic University

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