



The Science of Training

with [David Blake](#)

2 under-discussed issues with body-worn cameras

The body-worn camera is a tool like any other an officer can deploy; proficiency in use requires a “train like you fight” approach

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Editor's Note:

Few forces are impacting law enforcement like video. [Policing in the Video Age](#), P1's yearlong special editorial focus on video in law enforcement, aims to address all facets of the topic with expanded analysis and reporting.

In the third installment of this four-part signature coverage effort, we address training & policy in a recorded world. [Click here to learn more about the project.](#)

Navigating the complexity of BWCs is a challenge police departments continue to face. If you're in need of BWC training for your department, [PoliceOne Academy](#) has several online courses available, including “How to Implement a BWC Program.” Start your path to becoming an expert by visiting [PoliceOneAcademy.com](#) and submitting a request to learn more.



Over the last several years, law enforcement has experienced unprecedented critiques from the public, media and politicians. The criticism ranges from speculation about rampant excessive force to implicit bias, with body-worn cameras originally introduced as being the solution for all. While BWCs have not solved all perceived problems, they have helped mitigate many of them. Yet with all the positives, there are two BWC problems that are under-discussed and worthy of attention.

The first problem involves the failure of officers to [turn the cameras on during critical incidents](#). A quick Google search provides a long list of negative press on this topic and there is consistency coast to coast. The second problem is how BWC footage is interpreted (bias) both by the public and internally within the criminal justice system. Early mistakes with video evidence can have dire long-term consequences.

DECEIT VERSUS PROFICIENCY ISSUES

There is typically very little hands-on training with using BWCs that is street transferrable. Many agencies purchase cameras, perform some preliminary testing, set up the software, write a policy and deploy.

These rollout actions are similar to the [recommendations from the Department of Justice](#), which are the most inclusive I've seen. Yet the DOJ and other BWC experts provide little guidance on training officers to proficiency in order to comply with "shall turn on" policies.

The BWC is a tool like any other an officer can deploy. One cannot expect a human to fully comply with a "shall turn on" BWC policy if the officer has not been provided sufficient training. For those thinking this is as simple as pushing a button or sliding a mechanism and requires no training, I'd say you probably don't think of shooting as just a simple pull of the index finger, right? The law enforcement motto, "train like you fight" applies here as well.

In reality, human beings tend to [focus their attention](#) on the most important aspect of the environment. Attention is driven both consciously and unconsciously, is impacted by stress and may narrow (mentally and visually) based upon the situation.

A "shall turn on" policy, especially one that is not trained to street level proficiency, fails to account for human attention during stressful incidents. For example, do we focus on our BWC as we arrive on scene at volatile situations or do we focus on the potential threats and exiting the vehicle quickly? San Diego Police Department Chief Shelley Zimmerman clearly understands this concept when she defended her officers in this [context](#):

"Things happened so very quickly I think everyone will understand it's reasonable that officer safety and public safety will take precedence over an officer's ability to record."

The fix to this known problem is two-fold. The first is to utilize a system that removes the human factor from the equation. A camera system that automatically turns on mitigates the possibility of human error. Absent this option, officers need to be trained to create muscle memory (unconscious habit). This means lots of repetition in turning the device on in various situations, much like we train our other tools.

One way to ensure proficiency is having officers wear inert BWCs in stress-based training while expecting them to follow the “shall turn on” policy. In my own experience, telling officers to turn on the camera prior to a stress-based simulation (e.g. Force Options Simulator) results in about a 50/50 chance of activation under stress.

PREVALENCE OF VIDEO BIAS

The DOJ quotes Dr. Bill Lewinski of the Force Science Institute in regard to [10 limitations of BWC video](#). These limitations range from a BWC’s fixed point of view to the two-dimensional images they provide. I have also written on the [limitations of BWCs](#) and come to understand how the video can create a bias for investigators, executives and the public.

Law enforcement should make a pre-emptive effort to close this gap with the public through education. It is not difficult to demonstrate that what is seen on [video is not necessarily what an officer sees](#). The [Force Options Simulator](#) is an underappreciated tool in regard to understanding and demonstrating differences between video, the human experience and subsequent memory of events. Having citizens, community groups and even the media participate in scenarios and then recount what occurred will open eyes as to the deficits between their experience or memory and the facts.

RELEASING BWC VIDEO

Another recommendation involves the release of BWC footage for high-profile events. The video should not stand alone. Consider a press conference that provides both the pros and cons of interpreting video, as well as what can reasonably be stated about the event in comparison. Real world examples, such as multiple video angles in sports required to confirm or dispute a referee’s call, are essential. Dr. Lewinski’s presentation at the *President’s Task Force for 21st Century Policing* is a good breakdown of the differences between the human experience and the camera (time stamp 20:50 – 29:10).



Finally, it's important to consider that investigators and others within the criminal justice system are not immune to bias based on video. Those who sit in judgment of performance must have some understanding of how a human being receives, processes and remembers information.

Humans do not work like cameras and what is experienced or remembered during rapidly evolving, tense, uncertain situations can vary from what is recorded. Investigations involving any video should be broken down frame by frame to see and understand more of what occurred as the human eye is not capable of picking up all the details at full speed.

My personal experience includes a video I've shown to hundreds of law enforcement officers and civilians that is initially determined to be excessive force. Once a frame by frame is shown a new vote is taken and the exact opposite occurs, with almost 100 percent of these groups reversing their original opinion.

Street level operator proficiency and video-created bias are rarely mentioned in regard to BWC rollout or training. There is also little research on the direct effect of BWCs in this regard, although there is associated video-based research to rely upon. These two areas have caused significant internal and external problems that can be reduced.

The solutions presented are topical and recommendations are provided for consideration but are not all inclusive. Investigators seeking to understand human vs. camera may consider downloading the peer-reviewed journal article, [Body Worn Cameras: Comparing Human and Device to Ensure Unbiased Investigations](#).

About the author

David Blake is a retired California Peace Officer and certified Ca-POST instructor in DT, Firearms, Force Options Simulator, and Reality Based Training. His experience includes SWAT, Force Option Unit, Field Training, Gangs/Narcotics, and Patrol. He is a certified Force Science Analyst© and teaches the Ca-POST certified courses entitled Force Encounters Analysis and Human Factors: Threat & Error Management for the California Training Institute. He also currently facilitates the Ca-POST Force Options Simulator training to tenured officers from multiple jurisdictions. Dave is an Expert Witness / Consultant in Human Performance & Use of Force.

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