

Deescalating effects of bodycams in patrol-duty of the federal police of North Rhine-Westphalia: Results from a randomized control-group based research project in six police stations

Executive Summary

Framework of the Study:

- The introduction of § 15c PolG NRW formed the legal basis for the use of patrol-duty bodycams in police service. In connection with this legal basis, the state government of North Rhine-Westphalia was commissioned to scientifically evaluate the effects of the regulation and the practical application until 30.06.2019. A project team from the Institute for Police and Criminal Sciences of the University of Applied Sciences NRW applied for the project with an extensive outline and was awarded the assignment.
- Six police stations of the North Rhine-Westphalia police were part of the pilot in which bodycams were deployed and scientifically monitored during patrol duty from May 2017 to January 2018. The police stations selected for the pilot (pilot stations) were Duisburg-Hamborn, Dusseldorf city center, Cologne-Deutz, Cologne-Mülheim, Siegen and Wuppertal-Barmen. The bodycams were assigned at random and worn by police officers in half of the service shifts. The other half of the service shifts completed their patrol missions without bodycams. The decision to activate the bodycam was solely with the participating police officers. Because the shift schedule was generated at random, influences other than those caused by the bodycam can be virtually ruled out so that the causal effects of the bodycam can be determined.
- The impact evaluation was aimed at answering the research questions posed by the client. These related to the deescalating effect of the bodycam as well as its side effects, the effect of bodycam-influencing factors, the underlying theoretical principles of the bodycam, as well as the acceptance of wearing a bodycam both by police officers and citizens.
- In order to cope with the heterogeneity of the research questions and the complexity of research conditions in the field of police practice, several complementary methods of investigation were used: For this purpose, police database registrations of assaults on police officers were processed. The subjective perspective of the police officers in the pilot stations was documented using quantitative surveys and group discussions. The analysis of the video recordings took into account dynamic aspects of the situations on patrol, and a media and complaints analysis took a look at the acceptance of bodycams by citizens.

Key Findings:

- The findings of the video analysis, the quantitative and qualitative surveys are evidence for the deescalating potential of bodycams in police situations. In isolated cases, undesirable side effects have been observed, but there are no indications of a systematic danger to police officers through the use of bodycams.
- Contrary to expectations, the number of registered assaults on police officers in the shifts outfitted with bodycams is higher than in the shifts without bodycams. The data shows that bodycams influence the behavior of police officers, encouraging inappropriately restrained interventions and more formal language-use that promote assaults, which explains the unexpected findings. Consistent evidence of this is suggested by results from the quantitative surveys, group discussions, as well as the video analysis.
- Female police officers in particular were registered as having been assaulted more frequently in shifts wearing a bodycam when compared to their male counterparts. This finding corresponds to the fact that female police officers, more often than their male colleagues, consider that wearing a bodycam on duty also influences their own behavior. In this context, it was also shown that female police officers use the bodycam less frequently than their male colleagues. In addition, the expectation-adverse findings did not occur equally in all pilot stations. It is striking that those pilot stations, in which the unexpected findings were relatively clear, each had a larger proportion of police officers agreeing with the statement that the bodycam influences their own behavior.
- Regarding the distribution of offenses directed against police officers and the reasons for their deployment, no substantial differences could be observed between shifts with and without bodycams. The findings provide only evidence that the deescalating potential of bodycams unfolds to a greater extent in missions in public space, i.e. outside of closed or private spaces.
- Indications of (external) factors that systematically influence the effect of wearing a bodycam were not found. The assumption that the bodycam has no or a lesser effect on people with an impediment to experience and behavior (in particular alcohol and drug influence) was not confirmed. Nevertheless, in some cases, escalations of the situation were observed.
- With regard to the mode of action or the mechanisms of action, general indications were found which confirm the assumptions of the Rational Choice theory-based deterrent effect and the effects according to the Self-Awareness-Theory. Aside from that, a basic condition for the effectiveness of the bodycam is that the police officers accompany their use of the bodycam by actively communicating their use (and activation) of a bodycam.

- The acceptance of bodycam-use by police officers gave a heterogeneous picture: in equal proportions, police officers rated bodycam-use positively, neutrally or negatively. Over time, a decline was observed in the amount of police officers that rated the use of a bodycam as 'positive'.
- With regard to the total sum of externally deployed operations in the pilot stations, bodycams were rarely set to record during the pilot phase (approx. 0,8). On the other hand, about one in three police officers indicated that they had used their bodycam on duty between May and August 2017. As expected, the use of the bodycam was correlated with a positive assessment of the bodycam.
- In addition, those police officers that stated in the quantitative survey that they had been assaulted while on duty before used the bodycam more frequently. This result is of central importance because the potential of bodycam-use is thereby not limited exclusively to the de-escalation of operational situations. Bodycam-use, as such, is suitable in assisting these police officers in maintaining or regaining their ability to act in dangerous situations.
- Acceptance of the bodycam among citizens was generally positive, though negative comments such as distrust of state abuse of power and surveillance as well as data protection concerns were made.

Recommendations for Action:

- The use of bodycams must not influence tactically appropriate behavior for the situation as well as towards the addressees. This includes, for example, aggressive instructions, use of colloquial language and the timely use of enforcement measures. To ensure that police officers are not inhibited from documenting these behaviors, the departments should provide a cultural climate of acceptance and openness that encourages the officers to focus their behavior solely on the needs of their law enforcement duties.
- Police officers need a great margin of discretion regarding the use of the bodycam for successfully accomplishing law enforcement tasks. This results, on the one hand, from the high complexity and intricacy of law enforcement situations and, on the other hand, from the findings that no reliable rules have emerged with regard to the effective use of a bodycam.
- In the context of any adaptation of the legal basis for the use of bodycams, attention must be paid to maintaining discretionary latitude. From a point of view of strict criminal prosecution, foregoing the triggering of the bodycam in a concrete operational situation could be interpreted as a missed opportunity of evidence strengthening. The judiciary has to be informed that the bodycam is not a standardized piece of evidence-gathering equipment, but rather a piece of equipment that focuses on danger-reduction and -evasion.

- The recommendation is to create the legal conditions for the systematic use of recorded bodycam footage in education and training in order to be able to use the performance of the police officers documented in these videos. In addition, bodycam-use should be integrated into the training sessions. The University of Applied Sciences of North Rhine-Westphalia's module descriptions (esp. in the subjects of "Einsatzlehre" (~Operational Doctrine), "Eingriffsrecht" (~Intervention/Arrest Law), and "Verfassungsrecht" (Constitutional Law) are to be adapted to the use of bodycams.
- Since the video sequences only show a limited period of time, the introduction of the so-called pre-recording would allow for a more comprehensive documentation. One possibility under data protection law could be to set up an on-call pre-recording, which is activated by the users in a specific situation (if the intervention requirements are met). Through this procedure, a more comprehensive documentation of the operation would be possible without affecting the privacy interests of bystanders.
- The complexity of the legal requirements for bodycam-use must be reduced in order to increase confidence of action. A thorough briefing on the technology and the legal prerequisites are imperative.
- The deployment of bodycam-use in local police authorities is to be accompanied by internal and external public relations work with the goal of increasing its acceptance. It is also important to refer to the contents of this study - especially to the relatively rare use of the bodycam.