



February 20, 2017

RESEARCH BRIEF

Pennsylvanians' Perceptions of Police Body Worn Cameras

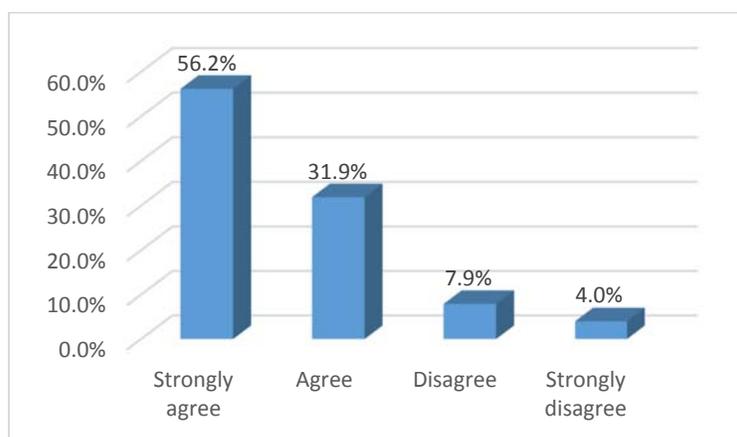
Jennifer Gibbs, Timothy Servinsky, Jr., Nicole Sturges, and Stephanie L. Wehnau

PENN STATE HARRISBURG - In the wake of police shootings of minority citizens – particularly unarmed Black men – politicians, the media, and public interest groups have called for greater police accountability through implementation of police body worn cameras (BWC). Parts of Pennsylvania have embraced BWC; the Pittsburgh City Council, for example, offered preliminary support for a \$1.5 million contract with Taser International for 500 BWC, which would cover 75% of the police force.¹ However, BWC are not a panacea, and some have voiced concerns over citizen privacy. The Pennsylvania State legislature currently is reviewing the state wiretap laws, which, as they stand, would prohibit police from videotaping inside a citizen's residence. Other issues with this technology blocking police accountability include who has access to the recordings; whether the recordings would be released to the public, to whom, and when; for how long the recordings are stored and by whom (the police agency or a private contractor); whether police have discretion to turn the cameras off; whether citizens' requests to stop the recording will be upheld by officers; and technology malfunctions; among others. Given both the support and opposition to BWC, do Pennsylvanians feel safer when police wear body cameras?

Penn State Poll Omnibus Survey

To answer this question, a random sample of Pennsylvanians was interviewed through the Penn State Poll (Poll), an omnibus telephone survey conducted by the Center for Survey Research (CSR) at Penn State Harrisburg. A total of 579 Pennsylvanians responded to a question asking how much they agreed with the statement, "I would feel safer if a police officer was wearing a video camera".² Most (88.1%) of the sample agreed that they would feel safer with BWC, but feelings of safety differed among social groups.

Figure 1. Percent of each response to the statement, "I would feel safer if a police officer was wearing a video camera"



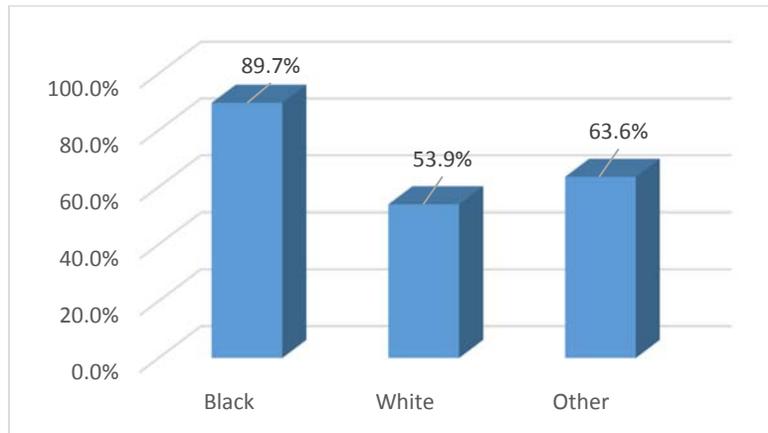
¹ Adam Smeltz (2016, November 22), Pittsburgh City Council advances plans for police cameras, addresses affordable housing, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. Available at: <http://www.post-gazette.com/local/city/2016/11/22/Pittsburgh-City-Council-advances-plans-for-police-cameras-addresses-affordable-housing/stories/201611220053>

² Data are weighted as a function of each respondent's age and sex.

Differences Among Social Groups

Black/African American respondents were more likely to say that they strongly agree (89.7%) than both white respondents (53.9%) and those reporting some other race (63.6%). (See Figure 2.) The overwhelming support by Black/African American respondents is unsurprising, given that the nationwide call for BWC stems from concerns over highly publicized incidents of police use of force on Black/African American citizens.

Figure 2. Percent who strongly agree with the statement, “I would feel safer if a police officer was wearing a video camera” by respondent’s race



Men were more likely to say that they disagree (18.5%) than women (5.7%), indicating women feel safer with police BWC. Respondents with some college (including two-year degree, technical degree, or an Associate’s degree) were more likely to strongly agree (63.3%) that they felt safer with police BWC than those with graduate work (43.5%); just over half of those with a high school diploma or less (58.0%) and those with a college degree (55.2%) strongly agreed. Respondents in households with annual incomes of \$60,000 or more were slightly more likely to say that they disagreed (15.4%) that they felt safer when police wear body cameras than those in households with annual incomes of \$30,000 to \$59,999 (4.4%) and under \$30,000 (6.5%). Finally, Republicans were more likely to disagree (16.0%) that they felt safer with police BWC than Democrats (7.2%).

As BWCs are implemented by police agencies across the state, gaging public perception of this new surveillance technology will be a fruitful avenue for exploration.

Study Information

For additional information, contact Jennifer Gibbs, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice, School of Public Affairs, Penn State Harrisburg, at 717-948-4319 or jengibbs@psu.edu.

Penn State Poll Methodology

The Penn State Poll is designed to allow organizations and researchers with statewide interests to contribute one or more customized questions to an omnibus telephone survey while sharing the costs. Survey data includes responses from 605 randomly selected adult Pennsylvanian residents. The Center for Survey Research at Penn State Harrisburg conducted the Penn State Poll between September 8 and October 29, 2016 and utilized a dual-frame design consisting of both landline and cell phone samples. Data are weighted as a function of each respondent’s age and sex. The margin of error for this survey is plus or minus 4.0 percentage points with the conventional 95% degree of desired confidence. For additional information, contact Stephanie L. Wehnau, M.S., Director of the Center for Survey Research, at 717-948-6429 or csr@psu.edu.