INTRODUCTION

At the 2017 Interim Meeting, the House of Delegates referred Resolution 208-I-17, “Increased Use of Body-Worn Cameras by Law Enforcement Officers,” introduced by the Medical Student Section, which asked:

That our American Medical Association advocate for legislative, administrative, or regulatory measures to expand funding for (1) the purchase of body-worn cameras and (2) training and technical assistance required to implement body-worn camera programs.

The reference committee heard testimony largely in support of referral. Testimony emphasized the use of body-worn cameras by law enforcement officers was a matter of public health and directly related to existing American Medical Association (AMA) policy concerning the health of minorities. Others expressed concern that the issues being raised were outside of the expertise and scope of our AMA. The reference committee recommended referral in order to address all concerns raised by Resolution 218. This Board report provides background, discussion of body-worn cameras by law enforcement officers, and a recommendation.

BACKGROUND

Following a number of high-profile incidents involving deadly force used against minorities, law enforcement agencies have increasingly adopted body-worn cameras for their officers. Often affixed to the torso, body-worn cameras are small, wearable audio, video or photographic recording systems that record events in which law enforcement officers are involved. The recordings can be used to demonstrate transparency to the community, to document events and to deter inappropriate, illegal or unethical behavior by both the wearer of the camera and the public.

To date, 34 states and the District of Columbia have enacted laws governing the use of body-worn cameras by law enforcement, though not all law enforcement departments utilize cameras in the same manner. For example, some permit officers to turn off the devices under certain circumstances; others do not. In addition, a 2016 survey of large police departments nationwide found that 95 percent intended to implement or had already implemented a body camera program. According to the survey, 18 percent had fully operational programs.

The cost to law enforcement entities to implement and maintain a body camera program can be costly and is an ongoing expense. Implementing a program requires an initial capital outlay to
purchase the technology and ancillary equipment; law enforcement agencies must account for continuing operational costs, such as training on use, data storage, software and staff and operational costs required for reviewing the recordings, redacting as necessary, and providing recordings to courts and the public as appropriate. In Washington, DC, for example, the city spent over $1 million outfitting 2,800 officers and expects operating costs to top $2 million per year.3

In 2015, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) awarded $22.5 million in grant assistance to state and local law enforcement departments as part of the Body-Worn Camera Pilot Implementation Program. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018 appropriated $22.5 million for a competitive matching grant program for purchases of body-worn cameras for state, local and tribal law enforcement. The BJA expects to make up to 28 awards for a three-year period, to begin on October 1, 2018. State and local funding is also available for body-worn cameras.

DISCUSSION

Predicated on whether the AMA ought to support funding of body camera programs is the question of whether the AMA ought to support the expanded use of body cameras and whether the devices achieve their intended outcomes.

Policing Activity

The underlying theory in support of body-worn cameras is that both officers and members of the community will change their behaviors for the better if their actions are being recorded. Indeed, a large body of research suggests that people act differently when they believe they are being watched. In the context of law enforcement, body-worn cameras are expected to increase self-awareness and thus deter unprofessional, inappropriate and illegal behavior by officers and civilians alike. As law enforcement officers are more likely to use force against minority community members, many hope body-worn cameras will improve policing behavior toward minorities, using force only when warranted and de-escalation tactics have failed.4,5 In cases where law enforcement officers do use force, body-worn cameras offer contemporaneous evidence of the officers’ actions so that improper behavior can be disciplined. Evidence about the impact of cameras on policing activity generally, though not universally, supports this theory.

An early study conducted in the Rialto, California police department found use-of-force incidents declined 58.3 percent over a three-year period after a body camera program was implemented.6 Importantly, researchers later found that use of force rates were higher in the same Rialto, California police force despite the presence of a camera when officers were allowed discretion to turn off cameras.7 Another randomized controlled trial conducted between 2014 and 2015 in the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department found that officers wearing body cameras were 12.5 percent less likely to be involved in a use of force incident.8 Similar results were found in Orlando, Florida.9 In contrast, the largest randomized controlled study to date, conducted in 2015 with the Metropolitan Police Department of the District of Columbia, found no statistically significant difference in the rates of police use of force.10

Research has found mixed results about other forms of police activity. In the study conducted in Las Vegas, body camera use was not associated with a change in the number of police-community interactions, but body cameras were associated with a 6.8 percent increase in the number of citations issued and a 5.2 percent increase in the number of events that resulted in an arrest. A 2015 study conducted in Mesa, Arizona found officers wearing a camera were less likely to perform stop-and-frisks and make arrests, but were more likely to give citations and initiate encounters.11 In
Phoenix, Arizona use of body-worn cameras were associated with a 17 percent increase in arrests. However, other studies have found body-worn cameras are associated with slightly lower incidents of arrest.

Community Relations

Changing policing behaviors is not the only way body-worn cameras could provide benefits. Many communities and law enforcement agencies see body cameras as a valuable way to improve policing transparency and community relations. Indeed, in 2015 when DOJ grants were announced, then-US Attorney General Loretta Lynch stated that body-worn cameras hold “tremendous promise for enhancing transparency, promoting accountability, and advancing public safety for law enforcement officers and the communities they serve.” Body cameras are lauded as a way for the public to better understand what transpires between law enforcement officers and civilians. Officers may also view body cameras positively, as recordings demonstrate to the community the difficult and dangerous job required of them.

Few studies have taken a comprehensive look at community attitudes toward police after the introduction of body-worn cameras. One such study conducted by the Urban Institute found that body-worn cameras do improve community members’ satisfaction with police encounters. Another study found that individuals viewed officers as having greater legitimacy, professionalism and satisfaction, but did not find significant differences between citizens’ perceptions of officers depending on whether the officer was wearing a camera.

The evidence is clearer, however, that body-worn cameras are associated with decreased rates of complaints filed against law enforcement officers. For example, one early study found complaints against officers dropped 88 percent following implementation of a body cameras program. In Rialto, California, citizen complaints declined by 60 percent. In the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police, officers wearing body cameras were 14 percent less likely to be the subject of a citizen complaint. In Phoenix, complaints against officers who wore the cameras declined by 23 percent, compared to a 10.6 percent increase among comparison officers. In contrast, research in the District of Columbia found no statistically significant difference in the rates of civilian complaints.

The available evidence does not identify the underlying behavioral changes responsible for the decline in complaint rates, however. It may be that body-worn cameras have the intended effect of changing officer behavior for the better, thus reducing circumstances that warrant citizen complaints. It may be that cameras have a “civilizing” effect on members of the public as well. Some evidence also suggests that frivolous complaints are less likely to be filed when recordings are available.

It is important to note, however, that use of body cameras will not automatically foster greater trust between law enforcement and members of the community and should not be viewed, as one evaluation noted, as a “plug-and-play” solution. Notably, the Urban Institute found body-worn cameras improved community satisfaction to a lesser extent than did procedurally just practices, defined in that study as behaving fairly and acting with empathy.

Privacy Considerations

Though the use of body cameras promises greater transparency of law enforcement behavior and actions, they also present new problems, namely intrusion into the privacy of victims, witnesses and bystanders. For instance, law enforcement officers frequently enter individuals’ homes and in-home recordings would become part of the public record. Similarly, interactions and conversations
with victims and witnesses could make those individuals uncomfortable or put those individuals in
danger. Heavily policed communities – often minority communities – will be more heavily
recorded.

These privacy concerns could be addressed with policies to limit recording during such encounters
and by limiting the circumstances under which recordings are made available to the public. The
American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) recommends use of body cameras with significant
privacy protections. Officer privacy may also be a concern. Some law enforcement unions have
opposed body-worn cameras, arguing that adoption of the technology must be negotiated as part of
the collective bargaining agreement.

This report acknowledges the significant privacy concerns raised by the ubiquitous use of body-
wear cameras, but notes that questions about when cameras need to be turned on and off, how long
to keep footage, when recordings will be made publicly available and other policy details are
beyond the expertise of the AMA.

Nexus with the AMA’s Mission

The AMA does not have policy specifically addressing the use of body-worn cameras among law
enforcement. During the debate over Resolution 208 during the 2017 Interim Meeting, the
reference committee heard testimony questioning whether this topic is within the scope of the
AMA’s expertise. This concern is reasonable, as AMA has not historically delved into issues of
policing and significant resources would be required to bring the AMA into the public policy
debates surrounding community policing efforts. Further, while there are dozens of organizations
(the Police Executive Research Forum, Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, ACLU,
etc.) that are actively engaged on this issue, it does not appear that any other major medical
associations have emerged as significant stakeholders.

Nevertheless, there is a connection between health and police activity, particularly in terms of
minority fatality rates. Research has demonstrated that minority communities are disproportionately
subject to police force. Specifically, according to an analysis of FBI statistics, African-Americans
account for 31 percent of police-involved shootings, but comprise 13 percent of the U.S.
population. African-American males are particularly at risk. According to another analysis,
African-American males are three times more likely to be killed by police than non-Hispanic white
males.

Research has also shown a correlation between policing and other health outcomes. In particular, a
recent study found that police killings of unarmed African-Americans were associated with
1.7 days of poor mental health annually among African-Americans. The findings were seen
regardless of whether the individual affected had a personal relationship with the victim or whether
the incident was experienced vicariously. In addition, the numbers of police stops, coupled with the
level of invasiveness during police encounters, is associated with increased levels of stress and
anxiety. African-American men report more anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder and
more morbidity from these psychiatric conditions than Caucasian men. In addition, research of
data from the New York Police Department revealed that residents in neighborhoods with higher
rates of stop-and-frisks were more likely to be in poor health, measured in terms of high blood
pressure, diabetes, asthma and self-rated health. Research on the correlation between health and
policing, however, remains sparse and warrants further research.
RELEVANT AMA POLICIES

Existing AMA policy does not address the use or funding of body-worn cameras. However, AMA policy does state that physical or verbal violence between law enforcement officers and the public, particularly within ethnic and racial minority communities, is a social determinant of health and supports research into the public health effects of violent interactions. (H-515.955) In addition, Policy H-350.971 “AMA Initiatives Regarding Minorities” instructs the AMA to establish a mechanism to facilitate the development and implementation of a comprehensive, long-range, coordinated strategy to address issues and concerns affecting minorities, including minority health.

New policy adopted during the 2018 Annual Meeting encourages states to require the reporting of legal intervention deaths and law enforcement officer homicides to public health agencies. New policy also encourage appropriate stakeholders, including law enforcement and public health communities, to define “serious injuries” for the purpose of systematically collecting data on law enforcement-related non-fatal injuries among civilians and officers.

Additionally, Policy H-145.977 “Use of Conducted Electrical Devices by Law Enforcement Agencies” cautions against excessive use of conducted electrical devices (often called Tasers) and recommends that law enforcement departments and agencies should have in place specific guidelines, rigorous training and an accountability system for the use of conducted electrical devices. AMA policy recommends research into the health impacts of conducted electrical device use and development of a standardized protocol developed with the input of the medical community for the evaluation, management and post-exposure monitoring of subjects exposed to conducted electrical devices.

RECOMMENDATION

The Board recommends that the following be adopted in lieu of Resolution 208-I-17, and that the remainder of the report be filed.

That our American Medical Association work with interested state and national medical specialty societies to support state legislation and/or regulation that would encourage the use of body-worn camera programs for law enforcement officers and fund the purchase of body-worn cameras, training for officers and technical assistance for law enforcement agencies.

Fiscal Note: Less than $5,000
REFERENCES


3. Austermuhle M. Almost every D.C. cop is getting a body camera. Here’s what you need to know. Available at https://wamu.org/story/15/12/15/just_about_every_dc_cop_will_soon_have_a_body_camera_heres_whayou_need_to_know. Accessed June 27, 2018.


