Trends: Close Up

August 2016

Policy Implications of Body Worn Cameras

Body Worn Cameras, or "BWCs," are increasingly being deployed by law enforcement agencies.

This isn't surprising as both the public and politicians have advocated for broader use of the technology as a way to provide transparency and accountability to law enforcement conduct toward the public. For example, on September 21, 2015, the Department of Justice announced over $23 million in federal funding to support a BWC pilot program, which will support 73 local and tribal law enforcement agencies in 32 states. In their press release, they noted that this was done as a "part of President Obama's commitment to building trust and transparency between law enforcement and the communities they serve."

There is some limited evidence that suggests that BWCs may help accomplish these goals. For example, there was a study done in the City of Rialto, California in 2012 during which a group of police officers were randomly selected to wear BWCs for 12 months. The results were extraordinary. During the experiment, use-of-force by officers wearing BWCs dropped by 59% and complaints against those officers fell by 87% from the previous year. In a sense, this is not surprising.

About the Series

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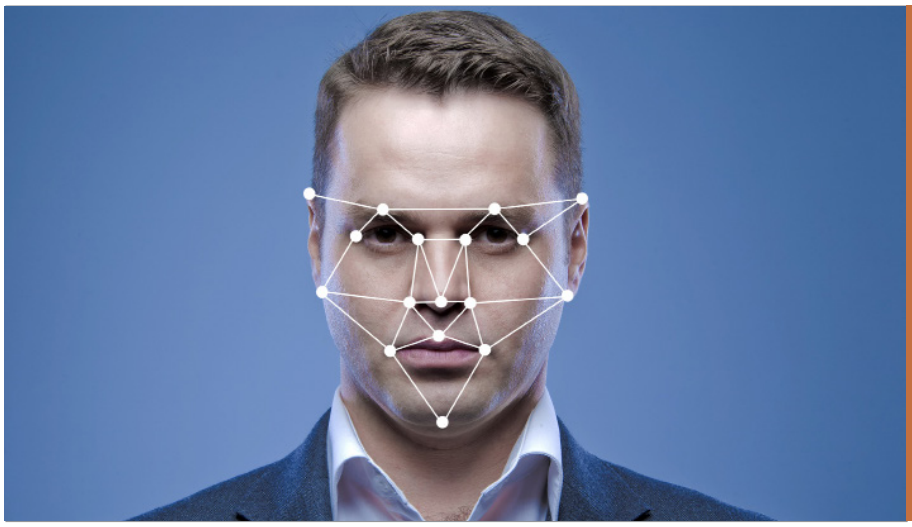
BWCs are designed to be conspicuously worn by the officer. Most manufactures include a light or flashing light that is visible when the unit is recording. So, the vast majority of people that were interacting with officers probably knew they were being recorded. Additionally, the officers obviously knew the interaction was being recorded and subject to review at a later date. The net effect seems to be very positive, although the Rialto study was limited in scope.

Automated License Plate Readers

Law enforcement is already using mobile automated license plate readers or, "mobile ALPRs." The devices are affixed to police cars and while the officer is driving, the system is actively scanning surrounding vehicles, whether they are being driven or parked, and checking the license plates on those vehicles against a database. If there is a match, the officer inside the car is alerted and can take appropriate



"...BWCs could be developed that would run facial recognition software in real time by connecting to a database of wanted persons via a cellular signal."

Law enforcement is already using mobile automated license plate readers, or "mobile ALPRs"

action. This is an extremely useful technology for locating stolen cars or apprehending suspects wanted for other crimes known to be associated with a specific car. However, it is also being marketed by at least one vendor as a way to collect unpaid fines and court costs, and this vendor is willing to give police departments in Texas the mobile ALPR units at a cost of $20,000 per car if the vendor receives a 25% service fee for all unpaid fines/court costs collected because of the units.[1]

Facial Recognition Technology

However, the technology of visual recognition systems can and will likely evolve to have far greater capacities in the very near future. For example, BWCs could be developed that would run facial recognition software in real time by connecting to a database of wanted persons via a cellular signal. What would be the implications of that technology? First, an officer could casually walk through any area while the system actively scans the public. That might be a sporting event, a mall, a school, a homeless shelter, etc. When the software identifies a match between the face of a person in the vicinity of the officer and the database, a message might be transmitted via an app to the officer's smart phone. That message would likely include a picture of the wanted person, as well as a brief description of the charge and jurisdiction maintaining the warrant. The officer could then detain the individual and further investigate to make sure that the suspect is the right person and that an active warrant

1 http://www.ibtimes.com/pay-fee-or-go-jail-how-license-plate-scanner-vigilant-solutions-makes-money-texas-2290835

exists. Logically, the majority of the public would support the use of this type of technology for apprehending people wanted for felony charges. They may also support its use in connection with people wanted for misdemeanor charges. However, the technology could be used in connection with any offense that has a booking photo associated with it. Currently, that is not likely to be the case with traffic offenses in most jurisdictions. However, it may be the case in connection with unpaid fines and court costs, depending on the underlying charge. Will the public support the use of this technology to arrest people that have failed to take care of citations for a defective tail light or unpaid court costs? The question will be further complicated by the potentially disproportionate effect this technology will have on the poor and minorities.

So, how likely is BWC technology to develop facial recognition and how likely is it to be used in this manner? The answer is very likely, and perhaps the technology already exists but is not commercially available. It will be attractive to law enforcement because it will be a low cost and effective way to apprehend wanted people, and from an operational standpoint will work similarly to mobile APLRs. It will be a significant additional tool to help law enforcement make communities safer. However, policy makers need to consider the obvious ramifications of this technology and decide whether they want to put some reasonable limitations on it use.

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Highly Controversial Use of BWC Technology:

- Using mobile ALPRs and BWCs with facial recognition to flag vehicles and individuals associated with unpaid fines and court costs

- Profit-sharing collected fines and fees with technology vendors providing ALPR and BWC technology

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