

# Community Views of Milwaukee's Police Body-Worn Camera Program

**Results from Three Waves of Community Surveys** 

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This brief describes community survey results from the Urban Institute's evaluation of the Milwaukee Police Department's (MPD) body-worn camera (BWC) program. This program began in October 2015 as a response to strained police relations in the city's communities of color that were exacerbated by several highly public police shootings of black men in Milwaukee and across the country. Urban researchers surveyed Milwaukee community members in April 2016, September 2017, and July 2018 about their attitudes toward the police department and its BWC program. Findings indicate that public knowledge of BWCs grew substantially each year and that the majority of community members held positive views of the program and the MPD. Yet these views varied over the years and by key demographic characteristics. Notably, black respondents had lower overall opinions about how often MPD officers were respectful and about how well BWCs could improve police-community relations or officer accountability.

Historically, the Milwaukee Police Department has had strained relations in communities of color, where residents have experienced greater police presence and higher rates of poverty and crime. In early 2014, these tensions came to a head after an MPD officer shot and killed Dontre Hamilton, resulting in widespread demands from community members and city officials for a BWC program.

Support for BWCs in Milwaukee—and in other cities across the country—has been rooted in the idea that they can provide a neutral account of officer-community interactions to support investigations into officer use of force and citizen complaints. Better investigations, in turn, can improve police

transparency and accountability and enhance community perceptions of and trust in the police. However, the effect of BWCs on public opinion also depends on how departments implement their program. Body-worn camera programs could negatively affect efforts for transparency if footage is not released quickly or is only released when it justifies officer behavior. To fully address accountability, departments must also follow up the release of footage with a thorough assessment of the officers' behaviors and an appropriate administrative response if policy was violated.

In response to political pressure and calls for action from the community, the MPD applied for and received funding from the US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance's Strategies for Policing Innovation program to develop and implement a BWC program. Across four deployment periods between October 2015 and December 2016, the MPD trained and equipped roughly 1,100 officers with small cameras that mount on officers' heads, collars, or shoulders and record audio and video of officers' interactions with community members. The BWCs have a short buffering period that captures video of the 30 seconds immediately before the officer turns on the camera.

As a requirement of its Strategies for Policing Innovation grant, the MPD partnered with the Urban Institute to develop and execute a rigorous, independent evaluation of the department's BWC program. Previous research from this evaluation found that MPD officers equipped with BWCs conducted fewer subject stops and were less likely to receive citizen complaints than officers without BWCs (Peterson et al. 2018). However, officers in both groups used similar levels of force during community encounters. The current brief uses community survey data to assess public perceptions of the MPD and its BWC program over three periods. Specifically, we examine how strongly community members from various racial and demographic groups believe MPD officers were respectful, and the role BWCs played in building community relations and holding officers accountable.

# **Community Surveys**

We administered three waves of surveys to Milwaukee community members between 2016 and 2018. People were eligible to take the survey if they lived or worked in Milwaukee at the time of data collection. Survey responses were collected electronically through a mobile application for the first survey wave, and with an online survey among a survey panel for the second and third waves. These methodologies are detailed further in the appendix.

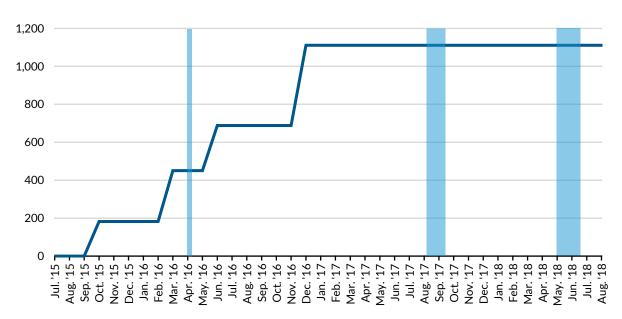
Figure 1 shows a timeline of the BWC program's implementation and the waves of our community surveys. The first survey was conducted between April 6 and 9, 2016, and yielded responses from 508 community members. At the time, 182 MPD officers had had BWCs for approximately six months (since October 2015), while another 268 officers had received their BWCs just weeks before. In wave two, 775 community members were surveyed between August 24 to September 30, 2017. By this time, all 1,100 MPD patrol officers (i.e., those who have the most frequent interactions with members of the community) had been equipped with BWCs for at least nine months. The final wave was conducted between May 23 and July 11, 2018, nearly 18 months after patrol officers had been equipped with

BWCs, and yielded another 752 survey responses. In this brief, we examine four questions across these three surveys that focused on community members' perceptions of the MPD and its BWC program:

- To the best of your knowledge, are Milwaukee police officers currently wearing body-worn cameras?
- Thinking about the Milwaukee police, how often do they treat people with dignity and respect?
- Please indicate how strongly you agree that body-worn cameras will improve Milwaukee police relationships with community members.
- Please indicate how strongly you agree that body-worn cameras will hold Milwaukee police officers accountable for their behaviors.

FIGURE 1
Body-Worn Camera Deployment and Community Survey Timeline





Source: Authors' calculations.

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**Note:** Shaded areas denote the times the community surveys were fielded: April 6–9, 2016; August 24–September 30, 2017; and May 23–July 11, 2018.

#### **Sample Characteristics**

Table 1 details the sample characteristics for each survey wave, as well as the corresponding citywide characteristics from the 2010 Census. The surveys targeted the three largest racial and ethnic groups in Milwaukee: non-Hispanic whites, non-Hispanic blacks, and Hispanics of any race. Accordingly, the surveys were weighted to be representative of the 2010 city characteristics on unique groupings of these race/ethnicity categories, as well as gender and age. For example, survey responses from black

men who were age 36 and older were weighted to match the city's 2010 total of black men who were age 36 and older. This approach allowed us to more accurately compare survey responses across the unique demographic groups and survey waves.

TABLE 1
Sample Characteristics by Survey Wave
Percent

	April 2016 (n = 508)		Sept. 2017 (n = 775)		June 2018 (n = 752)		2010
	Unweighted	Weighted	Unweighted	Weighted	Unweighted	Weighted	Census <sup>a</sup>
White	39.56	47.09	76.65	44.56	75.80	44.56	44.56
Black	41.14	37.51	9.16	35.49	12.90	35.49	35.49
Hispanic	19.29	15.41	7.74	14.58	6.12	14.58	14.58
Other races			6.45	5.37	5.18	5.37	5.37
Female	46.85	52.72	51.88	52.70	52.93	52.70	52.70
18-35 years old	66.54	42.08	40.52	42.89	37.72	42.89	42.89
36 years or older	33.46	57.92	59.48	57.11	62.28	57.11	57.11

Sources: Authors' calculations and US Census.

# Survey Results

#### **Knowledge of Body-Worn Camera Program**

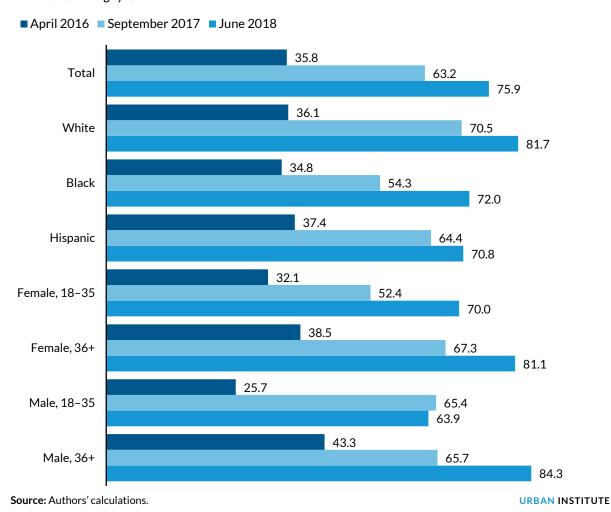
Figure 2 details the results from the three survey waves for the question, "To the best of your knowledge, are Milwaukee police officers currently wearing body-worn cameras?" Only one-third (35.8 percent) of the city's community members thought that officers were wearing BWCs during the first wave of the survey (April 2016), six months after the first phase of camera deployment. This share nearly doubled (63.2 percent) by wave two (September 2017), nine months after all patrol officers had been equipped with BWCs, and jumped to three-quarters (75.9 percent) the following year in wave three (June 2018). These survey results indicate that public awareness of the BWC program grew in accordance with expansion of the program.

Notably, while general trends in knowledge of the program were similar across community groups, the percentage of white respondents with knowledge of the program grew more substantially between the first and third waves than the percentages of black and Hispanic respondents. In wave one, roughly one-third of each group believed officers had cameras. But by 2017 and 2018, more white community members stated that MPD officers had BWCs than the other two groups. Also, fewer young community members (female and male, 18 to 35 years old) knew about the BWC program than older community members across each survey year (female and male, 36 years old and older).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>a</sup> Percentages of 2010 Census population 18 years and older.

FIGURE 2
To the Best of Your Knowledge, Are Milwaukee Police Officers Currently Wearing Body-Worn Cameras?

Percent answering "yes"



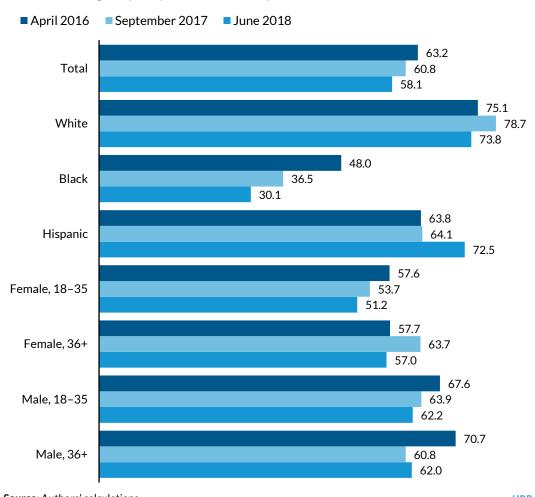
## **Perceptions of Officer Respectfulness**

Figure 3 details the results from the three surveys for the question, "Thinking about the Milwaukee police, how often do they treat people with dignity and respect?" Respondents could have answered this question with "never," "sometimes," "frequently," or "almost always." The bars in figure 3 depict the percentage of respondents who answered with either "frequently" or "almost always." Community attitudes decreased slightly each year. In April 2016, around two-thirds (63.2 percent) of community members reported that MPD officers frequently and almost always treat people with dignity and respect. In September 2017, this share dropped to 60.8 percent, followed by another decrease to 58.1 percent in June 2018. Responses did not vary much across gender or by age groups, although a larger percentage of men than women reported that MPD frequently treated people with respect and dignity.

The most notable differences in these attitudes were by race and ethnicity. Opinions about how frequently the police treated individuals with respect and dignity were most favorable among white respondents, followed by Hispanics. By a large margin, black community members held the least favorable opinions about respectful treatment by the MPD, with the share responding "frequently" or "almost always" steadily declining from 48.0 percent in April 2016 to 30.1 percent in June 2018. These findings are indicative of the historically challenged relationships between MPD and the black communities in Milwaukee and throughout the country.

FIGURE 3
Thinking about the Milwaukee Police, How Often Do They Treat People with Dignity and Respect?

Percent answering "frequently" and "almost always"



## Source: Authors' calculations. URBAN INSTITUTE

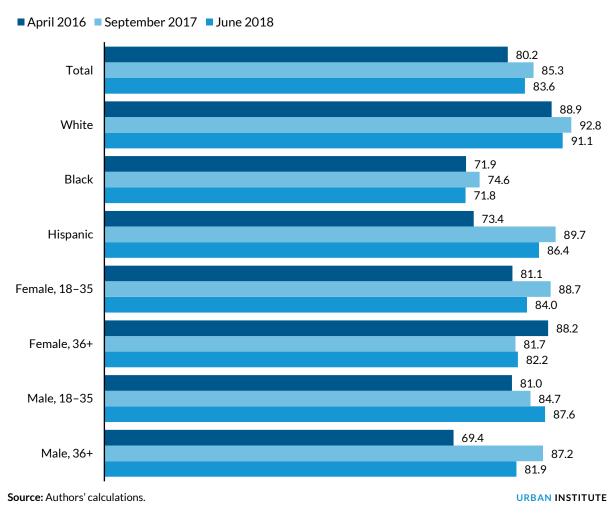
#### Impact of Body-Worn Cameras on Police-Community Relations

Figure 4 shows the percentage of survey respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "Body-worn cameras will improve Milwaukee police relationships with community members." Respondents could have also answered "disagree" or "strongly disagree." Generally,

respondents indicated strong, consistent support for the program. In April 2016, just over 80 percent of community members believed BWCs would improve MPD's relationships with the community. This share increased to 85.3 percent in September 2017 and slightly decreased to 83.6 percent in June 2018.

For many of the race, age, and gender groupings, the shares of community members agreeing with this statement were at their highest during September 2017, around two years after the first deployment of BWCs. Female community members of both age groups reported similar levels of agreement with the statement across each of the three surveys. A notable finding is the 18-point increase in the level of agreements for older men between the 2016 and 2017 surveys, though it is unclear what led to this change. In all three waves, fewer black community members than white or Hispanic community members agreed that BWCs could improve police-community relations. However, even among black respondents, support for the cameras was consistently above 70 percent.

FIGURE 4
Body-Worn Cameras Will Improve Milwaukee Police Relationships with Community Members
Percent answering "agree" and "strongly agree"

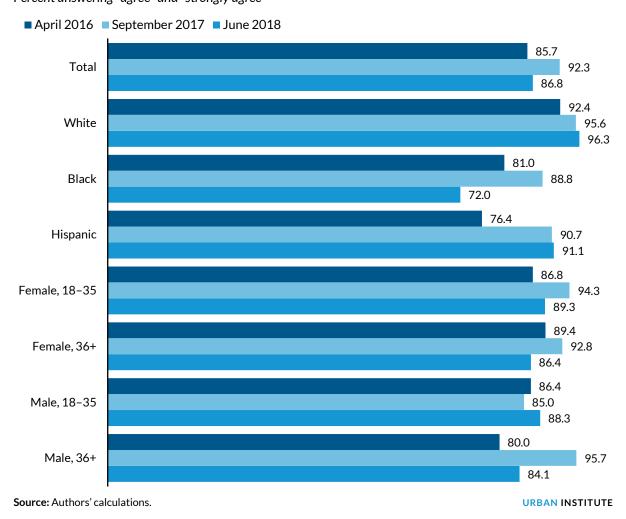


#### Impact of Body-Worn Cameras on Officer Accountability

Figure 5 shows the survey results for the percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed, as opposed to those who disagreed or strongly disagreed, with the statement "Body-worn cameras will hold Milwaukee police officers accountable for their behaviors." Overall, roughly 9 in 10 community members agreed or strongly agreed that BWCs will promote accountability for MPD officers' actions. Responses on this question were slightly higher in 2017 than in the 2016 and 2018 surveys.

Though agreement with this statement was high among all respondent groups, black respondents were much more skeptical than their white and Hispanic counterparts that BWCs could hold officers accountable for their behaviors, particularly in the last survey wave. In 2018, for example, 96.3 percent of white respondents and 91.1 percent of Hispanic respondents thought BWCs would hold officers accountable, compared with 72 percent of black respondents.

FIGURE 5
Body-Worn Cameras Will Hold Milwaukee Police Officers Accountable for Their Behaviors
Percent answering "agree" and "strongly agree"



## Takeaways and Policy Implications

The survey results described in this brief point to three key takeaways, all of which are relevant for police department BWC policies and practices. First, awareness of the BWC program among survey respondents increased as more officers were equipped with cameras and the MPD's program matured. Across all demographic groups, awareness that MPD officers were equipped with BWCs grew steadily from wave one to wave three. While expected, this finding is a necessary step for improving perceptions of transparency. Community members can only have an opinion about a BWC program or understand its impact on police-community relations insofar as they are aware of the cameras use. Further, the awareness of BWCs may be linked to public perceptions of procedural justice during police encounters (White, Todak, and Gaub 2017), though other research indicates that these views depend more on officer behaviors than on whether they are wearing cameras (McClure et al. 2017).

The second takeaway is that, by and large, **people in Milwaukee held positive opinions about the police department and its BWC program**. The majority of community members within each survey wave believed MPD officers "frequently" or "almost always" treat people with dignity and respect. These are important indicators of procedurally just behaviors, which can affect community members' perceptions of a police interaction, the officer, the outcome of the incident, and the department as a whole (see Donner et al. 2015). Procedurally just behaviors include officers treating community members with dignity and respect, trusting them to do the right thing, taking the time to listen, and making fair decisions (Blader and Tyler 2003; Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Tyler 2001; Tyler, Callahan, and Frost 2007). When an officer exhibits these behaviors during a community interaction, research suggests that community members are more satisfied with the encounter, are more willing to cooperate with the officer, and have greater trust and confidence in the officer's behaviors (Mazerolle et al. 2013). Further, the surveys found that a large majority of respondents held high opinions about the potential for BWCs to improve police-community relationships and keep officers accountable for their behaviors.

Though these findings are largely positive, analyzing survey results in the aggregate masks more germane findings concerning police relations with communities of color; relations that are historically fraught and persist, particularly given growing awareness and social media dissemination of police misconduct. Our third key takeaway is that fewer black respondents across all three surveys viewed MPD officers as respectful or believed BWCs could improve police-community relations and officer accountability. This finding is consistent with national surveys, which have found that black community members are less optimistic than their white counterparts that BWCs can reduce racial tensions or increase trust in the police (Sousa, Miethe, and Sakiyama 2018). Black community members are also more likely to have negative police contacts, which could contribute to their skepticism of BWC benefits (Crow et al. 2017; Ray, Marsh, and Powelson 2017).

Several events in Milwaukee during survey data collection likely impacted police-community relationships and perceptions of the BWC program, particularly among black respondents. Between the first and second survey waves, on August 13, 2016, a BWC-wearing MPD officer shot and killed Sylville Smith during a foot pursuit, prompting days of protests and violence in several parts of Milwaukee. The officer was ultimately charged with first-degree reckless homicide but acquitted after a jury trial. The

BWC footage of the incident was not publicly released by the district attorney until nearly a year after the incident (June 14, 2017) because it was being used in an active investigation and trial. A similar incident occurred between the second and third survey waves when MPD officers stopped Sterling Brown of the Milwaukee Bucks for a parking violation on January 26, 2018. After a verbal exchange, the officers wrestled Brown to the ground and tased him. Again, BWC footage of the incident was withheld for several months while the incident was investigated. After the video was released, the officers involved were suspended. Coincidently, the footage was released the same day we began our third wave survey data collection (May 23, 2018). Another notable event was the retirement of Chief Edward Flynn, who was Milwaukee's chief of police for 10 years and in the middle of his third term when he announced his retirement. Captain Alfonso Morales was promoted to chief of police in interim on February 15, 2018, and in full on April 5. The final notable event was when Officer Charles Irvine was tragically killed on June 7, 2018, when the squad car he was in lost control during the pursuit of a suspect. His was the department's first death in the line of duty in 22 years.

In light of our findings, it is clear that police departments must continue to revise their policies and fine-tune their BWC programs in order to maximize transparency and accountability and broaden public support, particularly among communities of color. We therefore conclude this brief with a discussion of three policy solutions that departments with BWCs should consider to achieve this goal. First, departments should standardize, expedite, and publicly disseminate their process for releasing BWC footage. In most localities, the public can request and access BWC footage through an open records request. But, as in the Smith and Brown incidents, this process is often delayed when the police department or district attorney is using the footage for an ongoing investigation. Though it is important to follow due process during these investigations, the need to protect an investigation must be carefully weighed against releasing footage within a reasonable time frame.

Likewise, the process of releasing footage must be consistent in all cases. Transparency and accountability will be compromised if the public believes departments are quicker to release footage that justifies officers' behaviors than footage that depicts police misconduct. In the two incidents described above, the MPD or district attorney took punitive or legal action, respectively, against the officers involved. But, the delay in releasing the footage led to community questions and speculation about what the videos depicted. Thus, it is essential that departments formalize and follow their policy for releasing footage.

Finally, departments should clearly communicate their use of BWCs and the footage they produce. Departments must describe their process of and policy for reviewing footage to investigate police misconduct and substantiate or refute complaints. They should also assess and communicate to the public whether BWCs have helped promote civility and professionalism during community interactions. When appropriate, this may include releasing footage that depicts these benefits. Much of the released footage comes from public requests around use of force incidents. While these crucial requests should be expediently fulfilled, they also reinforce unfavorable views of the police by depicting negative or violent encounters that often do not result in officer discipline (see Kerrison, Cobbina, and Bender 2018). Departments can create a more complete picture by proactively providing details supplemented with BWC footage, further promoting transparency and accountability.

## **Appendix**

## **April 2016 Survey Methodology**

The April 2016 survey was deployed using a newly developed survey platform created by Google. At the time, the Google Survey platform allowed rapid survey deployment to a representative sample of Milwaukee community members. This was accomplished through Google's partnerships with a diverse group of about 80 publishers (e.g., news media). These websites restricted access to premium content via a "survey wall," which required visitors complete a short survey on their computers or smart phones (McDonald, Mohebbi, and Slatkin 2012). Google also offered an app for Android users to take surveys for small credit to their Google accounts. Most respondents (71.7 percent) completed the survey through the phone app, while the rest completed the "survey wall" to access content on a website.

Google Survey had many advantages over traditional internet- or phone-based surveys. It was less expensive and could be administered very quickly (the 508 responses in our study were collected within a few days). Further, Google found that the average response rate for their method was higher than response rates in comparable survey methods (McDonald, Mohebbi, and Slatkin 2012). Pew researchers also found that surveys collected from this platform achieved a representative sample on age, gender, race and ethnicity, marital status, and homeownership when compared to Pew Research Center surveys (Keeter and Christian 2012).

Using this platform created challenges as well. These surveys were specifically developed for marketing purposes, limiting their use in social sciences. The survey could include a total of 10 questions, up to four of which could be included as screening questions to better identify and obtain responses from specific populations. This severely limited the number of research questions we could examine in this survey. The length of each item was limited to a specific number of characters and could only include radio button or check-box response options, also of a limited length. For these and other reasons, we explored an alternative method for administering the survey for waves two and three.

## September 2017 and June 2018 Survey Methodology

The September 2017 and June 2018 surveys were deployed using the Panel Services platform provided by SurveyGizmo. Respondents from this platform come from a network of survey panelists who frequently participate in surveys for a small payment. Our surveys used the Milwaukee market area, which included approximately three or four panels and respondents from counties surrounding Milwaukee County (although these respondents were filtered out based on screening items if they did not live or work in Milwaukee city). Respondents were recruited to complete the survey by email.

The surveys were accessible through a url hosted by SurveyGizmo, which allowed the researchers to develop a more complex survey with more items and measured domains. In total, 31 items were included in the instrument. One disadvantage to SurveyGizmo compared to Google was that respondents could not be filtered out of the survey based on their race. As a result, the surveys had biased samples of respondents who were white, requiring researchers to weight the data.

## Note

A limitation to this approach is that we weighted survey responses on Milwaukee *resident* characteristics, even though the survey data were collected from people who lived *or worked* in Milwaukee. Although we cannot differentiate these two groups in wave one, we find that Milwaukee residents made up 81 percent of the wave two sample and 78 percent of the wave three sample. Given that Milwaukee residents were a large majority of our survey samples, we used the city characteristics from the census to determine the appropriate weights.

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