Producing and interpreting body-worn video: Policy challenges and opportunities

Dr Jean-Pierre Roux
jroux.crim@gmail.com

Independent researcher; doctoral research conducted jointly at the University of Glasgow and the University of Edinburgh

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Body-worn video (BWV) technology is increasingly being used across supervision, oversight, and public disclosure, often with an underlying assumption that it offers an objective and independent record of events. This brief however shows that BWV footage is shaped through decisions made during capture, selection, and system design, many of which are not visible within the footage itself. Accordingly, the meaning of footage is not fixed but shaped through a series of organisational and interpretive decisions.

Given that reliance on and public exposure to BWV footage continue to expand, there is an increasing risk that footage will be treated as self-evident without giving sufficient attention to how it is produced and interpreted. Furthermore, rather than resolving these issues, developments in recording technology may shift where and how decisions are made, including from frontline officers to system design or automated processes. Existing interpretive and governance issues therefore risk being intensified or relocated into new technical systems before they've been fully recognised and addressed.

In order to address these developments, police organisations should implement clear interpretation guidance that makes the conditions under which footage is produced and reviewed more visible. Greater transparency is also needed in how footage is selected, documented, and assessed, in addition to developing review processes that support more consistent and accountable interpretation. Addressing these gaps proactively, before newer recording and AI-assisted systems become embedded in routine police practice, may be critical for maintaining public trust and confidence in the use of police technologies.

KEY POINTS

- Body-worn video (BWV) technology is increasingly used across supervision, oversight, and public disclosure in policing.
- Wider research suggests that video evidence can be highly persuasive, while the doctoral research highlights increasing organisational reliance on BWV footage because of its perceived evidential benefits, including objectivity and transparency.
- The research highlights how BWV footage is shaped by design features, recording practices, selection processes, and organisational decision-making. Wider research further shows how officer positioning, movement, and device placement shape the perspective of recordings and influence what becomes visible or omitted.
- Consequently, BWV footage should not be treated as a neutral, objective, or independent record of events.
- As recording technologies evolve, many of the organisational and interpretive processes shaping how footage is captured, selected, and interpreted are likely to continue in different forms, including through automated and AI-assisted systems.
- Clear guidance is needed to support more transparent, accountable, and contextually informed interpretation of BWV footage, while strengthening public confidence in policing and the use of police technologies.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH AND BODY-WORN VIDEO TECHNOLOGY

This briefing draws on doctoral research examining the adoption of body-worn video (BWV) technology by police in England and Wales. The research explores how police organisations and BWV technology shape one another over time, drawing on qualitative analysis of interviews, policy and guidance documents, vendor and technical materials, and organisational practices concerning BWV technology.

Although the research is grounded in policing in England and Wales, the issues identified in this briefing have broader relevance for policing organisations and governance bodies internationally. As the use of BWV technology expands and the reliance on BWV footage deepens, questions of interpretation, selection, accountability, and technological design become increasingly important.

In this briefing, BWV technology not only refers to the recording device itself, but also to the wider technical infrastructure through which footage is captured, managed, reviewed, and integrated into police practices. This includes digital evidence management systems (DEMS), metadata, and auxiliary systems such as remote and automatic activation.

1. Body-worn video footage is increasingly relied upon across policing and oversight

Body-worn video (BWV) technology is increasingly used across policing organisations in the UK, Europe, and parts of Africa. Its use has expanded beyond frontline recording into supervision, oversight, public disclosure, and evidential review. Digital evidence management systems (DEMS) have, in addition, enabled large-scale storage, auditing, and analysis of BWV footage and system-use data, thus expanding the ways in which recordings are reviewed and analysed.

BWV footage is often understood as providing an objective and independent record of events, something which is reinforced by organisational expectations and vendor claims surrounding transparency and accountability. However, guidance on how BWV footage should be interpreted has not kept pace with the expansion of its operational use. Thus, there is a growing need for policy to provide clear guidance to support transparent and contextually informed interpretation of BWV evidence across the various policing and oversight environments, including those emergent public platforms which review BWV footage.

Uses of body-worn video technology across policing and oversight

USE CONTEXT	WHAT IS USED	EXAMPLE PURPOSE
SUPERVISION	Footage, metadata, audit logs	Incident and performance review
OVERSIGHT	Footage, audit records	Accountability and scrutiny
PUBLIC DISCLOSURE	Selected footage	Public communication and transparency

2. BWV footage reflects recording conditions, not neutral observation

The research highlights that body-worn video (BWV) footage is shaped by recording conditions, design features, and operational practices, rather than providing a neutral or objective record of incidents. First, BWV devices capture the audiovisual information of events from a first-person officer perspective rather than an independent observational viewpoint. This influences how incidents are later interpreted during review processes. Furthermore, technical features such as camera placement, field of view, image quality, low-light performance, and audio capture also influence what can be seen and heard within recordings.

Additionally, BWV devices commonly rely on officer activation, meaning that recordings reflect decisions about when capture begins and ends. As the device is worn rather than fixed, the footage it produces also reflects officer movement, positioning, and device placement during incidents, shaping what becomes visible or omitted within recordings. Accordingly, BWV footage only captures a partial and tethered perspective of the audiovisual information available during an incident.

Footage may therefore differ from how incidents are experienced by the parties involved, including information perceived by officers or citizens that falls outside the camera's field of view or is not captured clearly in recordings. Accordingly, BWV footage should be understood as a representation of events shaped by design, activation, and recording conditions, rather than a neutral or complete account.

3. The meaning of BWV footage is shaped through selection and interpretation

The research highlights how the interpretation of body-worn video (BWV) footage involves the organisational decisions about which recordings are reviewed, presented, and contextualised (an organisational process), while wider research shows that interpretation also varies according to how assessors focus on and understand what is shown within footage (an individual process). In practice, this often includes the clipping of sections from longer recordings, presenting footage alongside accompanying contextual information, and selecting footage for review through different organisational processes (e.g. random sampling, incident-based review, or officer-specific review). All these processes involve decisions about what is considered relevant for oversight, supervision, or disclosure.

Although full recordings are often retained, review processes frequently focus on selected excerpts considered relevant to the incident or assessment at hand. How footage is perceived is also shaped by the viewer, with individuals focusing on specific aspects of a recording while overlooking others. Accordingly, different viewers might interpret the same footage in different ways, influenced by their experiences, assumptions, potential biases, and the context in which the footage is reviewed. Consequently, the meaning of video evidence is not fixed, but shaped by how it is selected and interpreted.

As BWV footage becomes increasingly used for supervision, oversight, and public disclosure, routine reliance on and exposure to footage could possibly reinforce the assumption that footage provides a complete and self-evident account of events. This risks obscuring the role of judgment in interpretation, as well as the decisions of design, selection, and capture that ultimately shape what is reviewed.

4. Police organisations shape how BWV evidence is produced and used

Beyond how footage is captured, selected, and interpreted, the research highlights how police organisations shape the wider development, selection, and operation of body-worn video (BWV) technology through procurement decisions, operational priorities, and organisational practices. Consequently, BWV technology and the footage it produces are not independent of the organisations that select, manage, and use them.

Officers use and manage devices in practice, with training and operational policy shaping how footage is captured. Police also control access to footage, including how it is accessed, reviewed, selected, retained, and shared across supervision, oversight, and public disclosure processes. Choices made during design, procurement, and system configuration further shape the functionality of BWV technology, including its interoperability with other digital systems. These choices are influenced by operational priorities such as evidential quality, officer safety, and system efficiency, which vendors subsequently design systems around. As a result, decisions about procurement and configuration influence the quality of footage, how it can be accessed, categorised, searched, analysed, and who is able to review it.

5. Why it matters

5.1 Body-worn video footage is shaped by organisational and interpretive processes

Treating body-worn video (BWV) footage as a neutral, objective, and independent record risks obscuring the decisions that shape how footage is produced and used. Design features, recording practices, selection processes, and retention policies all influence what is ultimately reviewed and relied upon, yet these factors are not visible within the footage itself. Instead, they can be obscured by assumptions that footage is self-evident and objective, potentially amplified by the routine nature of viewing and assessing video footage.

These organisational decisions accumulate across the evidence chain and may go unexamined in routine supervision, oversight, or public disclosure. When BWV footage is treated as self-evident, there is less space for questioning how it was produced, selected, contextualised, and interpreted. This is especially pertinent given the persuasive nature of video evidence, which can be replayed, slowed down, and closely scrutinised, reinforcing the impression that it provides a complete account even where important context is absent. Therefore, understanding and addressing these limitations is essential to avoid over-reliance and support more transparent, accountable, and context-sensitive interpretation of BWV footage.

5.2 Emerging technologies shift rather than remove human judgment

While this brief draws on empirical research into BWV systems, the issues identified are not limited to a single recording device and are likely to persist as recording technologies evolve, albeit in varied forms. For example, aerial systems such as drones may alter perspective, framing, and activation practices at the point of capture, while AI-assisted processes introduce new ways of selecting and assessing footage.

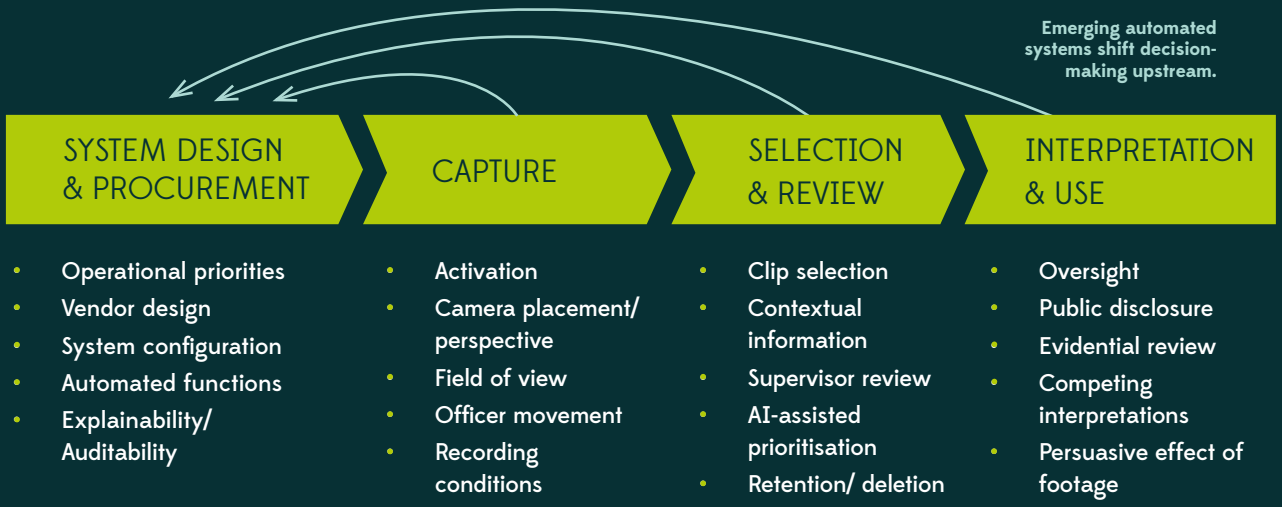
In these contexts, the perceived objectivity of footage may be strengthened where recordings appear to be system-led instead of human-directed. However, automation does not remove judgment but rather shifts it upstream into system design. Moreover, decisions that were previously open to contextual explanation or challenge through human reasoning may become embedded in technical systems, making them more difficult to scrutinise, especially for non-specialists.

These developments emphasise the importance of ensuring that interpretation and governance frameworks evolve alongside technological change. Guidance on the use of BWV technology should therefore extend beyond how footage is reviewed to include how emerging systems are designed, configured, and how their limitations are recognised and communicated during assessment and oversight.

6. Policy opportunities for more transparent and accountable use of BWV

To support more accountable, transparent, and context-sensitive use of BWV technology, policy responses should focus on improving how footage is interpreted, documented, and reviewed.

Where body-worn video (BWV) evidence is shaped and where policy can intervene



Governance and policy intervention points

Recommendation 1: Develop interpretation guidance

Organisations should implement standardised interpretation guidance to support consistent review of BWV footage. This should include, at a minimum, key recording conditions that shape interpretation, such as camera perspective, visibility constraints, activation timing, interruptions in recording, and technical limitations including field of view and image quality where these materially affect what can be seen or heard. Guidance should also recognise that what is visible within footage may differ from what officers or citizens were able to observe during the incident. Finally, guidance may also need to extend upstream into procurement and system configuration requirements, including transparency surrounding any automated functions, explainability, and the ability to audit how footage is prioritised, categorised, or reviewed.

Recommendation 2: Increase transparency in selection and review

Greater transparency is needed concerning how footage is selected and presented for supervision, oversight, or public disclosure. This includes documenting whether footage consists of excerpts or full recordings, the rationale for selection, and whether automated or AI-assisted systems were used in reviewing, analysing, or prioritising footage.

Recommendation 3: Establish review safeguards

Review processes should incorporate structured second review or multiple assessors in cases where interpretation is contested or consequential. When additional footage is available, including CCTV or third-party footage, they should be considered alongside BWV footage to provide additional context, particularly where BWV offers a limited or single perspective.

Recommendation 4: Improve training and public understanding

Training for officers, supervisors, and reviewers should focus on how BWV evidence is shaped by design, use, and context, rather than assuming it provides a complete or independent account of events. Together, these measures can support more transparent, accountable, and contextually informed interpretation of BWV footage, while helping to ensure that the organisational processes through which police recording technologies are shaped and used remain open to public scrutiny and dialogue.

FURTHER INFORMATION AND SELECTED READINGS

Doctoral research

Roux (2026) *Police adoption of body-worn video technology in England and Wales: a socio-technical analysis of change.* Available at: https://theses.gla.ac.uk/85716/.

Selected readings

Boivin et al. (2017) *The body-worn camera perspective bias.*

Granot et al. (2018) *In the eyes of the law: perception versus reality in appraisals of video evidence.*

Jones et al. (2017) *Believing is seeing: biased viewing of body-worn camera footage.*

Miranda (2022) *Body-worn cameras 'on the move': exploring the contextual, technical and ethical challenges in policing practice.*

O'Neill et al. (2025) *Body-worn video and interactions with the public: who does it benefit and how is it used?*

Ristovska (2023) *Ways of seeing: the power and limitation of video evidence across law and policy.*

Sandhu and Simmons (2023) *Police officers as filmmakers: the cinematography of body worn cameras.*

White et al. (2026) *AI, body-worn cameras, and a potential civilizing effect for officers: evidence from the Arizona Truleo study.*

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