

# BODY-WORN CAMERAS IN LAW ENFORCEMENT IN MEXICO: WHAT DO WE KNOW?

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2021, the LAB-CO team<sup>1</sup> carried out research regarding police body-worn cameras use in Mexico. Using case studies, reviews of the media and the academic literature —alongside more than one thousand requests for public information— LAB-CO got close to the phenomenon’s magnitude throughout the country, identified the main problems for its implementation and came up with recommendations for police departments that currently use or plan to incorporate police bodycams (also known as body-worn cameras or BWC). The study seeks to contribute to the debate surrounding Mexico and the rest of Latin America’s police officers’ use of bodycams, a little-studied phenomenon, despite having a great potential to reduce human rights violations, police-related offences, acts of corruption, etc.

The United States, various European countries —and recently Latin American countries like Brazil, Uruguay, Chile and Colombia— have adopted police bodycams, mainly to prevent discriminatory practices and unjustified use of force.

Despite their widespread use, studies undertaken regarding the effectiveness of using police bodycams have delivered mixed results. On one hand, some studies conclude there are no statistically significant changes in police officers’ behaviour or the public’s perception of police officers.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, studies in the United States and Brazil demonstrate that bodycam use **positively impacts reductions in the use of force**,<sup>3</sup> from 12.5% in some cases, to 45% in the case of a specialized Brazilian police unit. **Other research does not manage to demonstrate that cameras deliver a use-of-force reduction.**<sup>4</sup> Additionally, research has documented reduced citizen complaints —up to 90% in some police departments— starting with the introduction of police bodycams.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Made up by Ramón Cota, Natalia Sánchez, Alejandro Espirú, José Colomo and Santiago Rosas.

<sup>2</sup> This will be detailed later in the text, based on Lum, et al., *Research on Body-Worn Cameras: What We Know, What We Need to Know*, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> This will be detailed later in the text, based on White and Malm, *Cops, Camera and Crisis: The Potential and Perils of Police Body-Worn Cameras*, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> This will be detailed later in the text, based on Savarese, M. and D. Janet, “Brasil usa câmaras corporales para menor violencia política”. AP, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> This will be detailed later in the text, based on Peterson and Lawrence, *Do the Effects of Police Worn Body-Worn Cameras on Use of Violence and Complaints Change Over Time? Results from a Panel Analysis in the Milwaukee Police Department*, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> This will be detailed later in the text, based on Eakins, *Policing in America: Understanding Public Attitudes to the Police: Results from a National Survey*, 2016.



Even without counting on unequivocal evidence regarding its effectiveness, bodycam adoption is growing and is very popular with police officers and the public at large. Some research documents, for example, show that in the United States up to 90% of the general public supports police officers wearing body cameras.<sup>6</sup>

By 2021, in Mexico, at least **168 police headquarters (158 municipal, 10 state)** already had bodycams. Given those institutions' geographic distribution, the tool was used by police departments that cover over 10% of Mexican territory, inhabited by 45% of the overall population. Moreover, the research reveals that the Public Security Provisions Fund (Fondo de Aportaciones para la Seguridad Pública; FASP by its Spanish-language acronym) as well as the now-defunct Mexico Public Subsidy for the Strengthening of Public Security (Fortalecimiento del Desempeño en Materia de Seguridad Pública; FORTASEG in its Spanish-language acronym) invested more than 142 million Mexican pesos purchasing 12,096 cameras between 2017 and the middle of 2021.

Unlike developed nations where bodycams are used to reduce police abuses, many Mexican police departments adopted the cameras **for the main —but not exclusive— purpose of mitigating corruption**, with some hopeful indications of their effectiveness to do so. In three case studies in municipal police departments of various Mexican states, LAB-CO examined BWC's incorporation process, and, together with the rest of the investigation, made recommendations for the proper and effective adoption of bodycams in police facilities.

The case studies were conducted in the Mexico City's municipal "borough" known as Álvaro Obregón; in Ciudad Juárez in Chihuahua state; and Colima, in the state of Colima. Consistent with the previously revised literature, those interviewed inside police institutions manifested satisfaction with the use of bodycams, devices they considered **essential to improving internal controls and for promoting police-actions transparency**, above all in cases that smacked of public polemic. During interviews, police officers explained the multiple uses to which the recordings were used, like, for example, in internal disciplinary processes, proofs presented before prosecutors, use on social media, etc., as well as a potential for future inquiry.

In addition, during investigations, **no robust normative frameworks were found**, nor guidelines or parameters for using the bodycams, where fundamental aspects are regulated such as recorded people's rights to privacy or privacy for police officers, public access to the videos or the possibility that the recordings will be used in criminal trials, etc.

While bodycams **possess a great potential for mitigating corruption, and reducing police officers' use of force**, as well as closing the gap between police forces and the public at large, we recommend that their adoption include additional actions to expand their effectiveness. Such actions include:



**1) DESIGN AND DEFINE OBJECTIVES, USES AND GUIDELINES.**

Prior to the acquisition and incorporation of body cameras, it is recommended that police institutions clearly establish the objectives and expectations for their use; that those who will use the cameras be designated, together with the responsibilities that this implies; that the parameters under which the cameras will operate, i.e. their institutionalization, be established; that the mechanisms for supervising their use and control be defined; and that the indicators with which their impact will be adequately measured be designed.

**2) ESTABLISH A HOLISTIC STRATEGY OF MECHANISMS CONTROLS.**

Body cameras must be understood as a tool that contributes to solving problems that afflict Mexico's police departments, not just as an end in themselves. In this sense, we recommend developing additional internal control measures, especially strengthening protocols for discipline, as well as others for external controls, to maximize outcomes from bodycam use.

**3) INSTITUTIONALIZE THE INITIATIVE.**

Using bodycams requires permanent collaboration and communication from multiple operational and administrative areas, to respond to needs that can arise. For example, at the organizational level, police departments require enough personnel to monitor and supervise the cameras. Those employees should be provided with use protocols, training and ongoing capacitation. At the budget level, departments should consider related activities that arise from maintaining and storing hardware and software. At the judicial level, police require agreements for exchanging information with local courts, public prosecutors and other institutions. At the technological level, police require a sufficient broadband capacity, video storage space and compatibility with other systems, among other considerations.

**4) DRIVE REGULATORY DEVELOPMENT.**

To guarantee bodycams' correct and legitimate use, as well as guarantee privacy rights, we recommend developing or updating regulatory frameworks in addition to designing protocols and guidelines that provide legal protection for police officers as well as for the general public.

**5) ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATIONS.**

To minimize internal resistance among police officers, police departments should properly manage expectations within their institutions, as well as with the general public; and not least of all, effectively coordinate with other justice system agencies. Ongoing, permanent assertive communication with all parties implicated in the bodycam implementation process, is recommended.

This executive summary contains ideas that will be widely developed in the complete study. The research seeks to be a starting point for a larger debate regarding the use and effectiveness of bodycams in Mexico and throughout Latin America, to take on problems associated with human rights violations, corruption, and other irregularities within police institutions. While early news is encouraging—especially when it comes to mitigating corruption—further complementary evaluations and research is needed.

If you wish to learn more about this important research, we cordially invite you to contact us at [contacto@lab-co.org](mailto:contacto@lab-co.org)