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Police body-worn camera technologies in responses to domestic and family violence: A national study of victim-survivor perspectives and experiences

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50 years

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Abstract

Body-worn cameras (BWCs) have been promoted in Australian states and territories and internationally to enhance responses to domestic and family violence (DFV). However, little is known about their utility, benefits and limitations in DFV incidents. Drawing upon the perspectives and experiences of victim-survivors in Australia, this report reveals that BWCs can provide victim-survivors with a sense of safety and security and offer validation of their victimisation. This is achieved by footage capturing and shedding light on how incidents unfolded at the scene and, to some extent, evidence of DFV and its effects. However, victim-survivors in this research highlighted significant problems with how police perceive and respond to victim-survivors at DFV call-outs. Participants critiqued the approach taken by officers when deemed not to be trauma-informed and suggested that BWCs can illuminate existing issues with police procedures, such as the selective use of and potential manipulation and editing of footage. Additionally, participants highlighted that BWCs can be used and exploited by perpetrators as part of their coercive control tactics, which can result in misidentification and criminalisation of victim-survivors. Ultimately, the findings provide support for a strong evidence base to inform and guide the development of police policy and practice, particularly in jurisdictions seeking to review or extend the impact of BWCs in DFV incidents and legal proceedings.



Executive summary

In recent years, police body-worn cameras (BWCs) have been trialled in domestic and family violence (DFV) police call-outs across Australian states and territories, and legislative and operational shifts have facilitated the use of BWC technology in DFV responses. Despite the rapid rollout and use of BWCs nationwide, there is a deficit of empirical research that examines police BWC use in response to DFV internationally (Cubitt et al. 2016; Harris 2018; Morrow, Katz & Choate 2016; Murphy 2015), including positive and negative effects and impacts, especially from the perspectives of victim-survivors.

In response, this report presents the findings of the first Australian study to examine DFV victim-survivors' perspectives and experiences of the use, effects, perceived merits and unintended consequences of police BWC technology. The current study draws on a dataset obtained from an anonymous online survey questionnaire that received 119 responses and 14 semi-structured interviews with victim-survivors from across Australia. Participants considered the potential benefits and risks this technology might or did have when deployed. Their responses speak to the application of BWCs in frontline call-outs and their evidentiary purpose and value in court proceedings in Australia. The findings revealed that police BWCs can provide a sense of validation and security to victim-survivors. However, also shown are caution and opposition to BWC deployment from some victim-survivors consulted because BWCs can amplify certain issues associated with policing DFV.

This study provides valuable information supporting the need to develop best practice use of BWCs in DFV applications, and recommendations for police policy and practice reform. It is imperative that victim-survivors are engaged on this topic to ensure that the lived realities of on-the-ground policing of DFV are captured. This is crucial to ensure that these technologies are being used as intended in the policing of DFV and that interpretations of BWC footage are facilitating an effective remedy in response to DFV. Moreover, it is vital that BWCs enhance rather than reduce victim-survivors' confidence in state responses to DFV and minimise rather than exacerbate the harm associated with appearing in court, engaging with the legal system and testifying in court. Additionally, such a study of victim-survivors' perceptions, experiences and recommendations is imperative in ensuring that expectations of procedural and substantive justice are met.



Key findings

BWCs can provide a sense of safety, security and validation to victim-survivors

Victim-survivors identified how BWCs can help them feel safe, secure and, in some instances, validated. They believed that the BWC facilitated this because it can document and ‘show’ abuse, including police actions. Some victim-survivors explained how the BWC validated their decision to leave a violent perpetrator, where they felt that they had the means to do so, and others emphasised that it offered them a degree of protection that they otherwise would not have had.

BWCs can provide accountability for perpetrators and police

Some participants noted that the presence of a BWC revealed police actions and inaction. In this sense, it enabled them to make a complaint through the ethical standards unit for police misconduct where they felt that the police response was inadequate and compromised their safety. Victim-survivors also noted that the BWC recording provided accountability for perpetrators because the footage captures tangible, irrefutable evidence.

BWCs cannot always capture DFV and its effects

BWCs are deployed on call-outs after an incident. However, as victim-survivors highlighted, DFV involves a pattern of behaviour and a constellation of strategies intended to control and entrap a target. Participants cautioned that BWCs were unlikely to capture their lived reality and experiences of coercive control.

BWCs can reveal and amplify issues with police policy and procedures

Victim-survivors conveyed unease and concern about BWC policy and procedure, particularly in cases where they had not been informed about or asked to consent to a recording. They called for greater transparency around the operationalisation of BWCs and access to footage. Additionally, participants expressed anxiety about the editing of footage or how police may manipulate what the camera captures. They recommended that there be greater transparency about how footage can be both obtained and altered.

BWCs and trauma

Expectations about how they present to and interact with officers were flagged by victim-survivors, who were cautious about the ability of BWCs to document the effects of DFV. Recognising the impacts of psychological and neurological trauma and the trapping of the ‘ideal victim’ stereotype, the findings made clear the need for greater understanding of trauma.

Other victim-survivors felt that BWCs could help to reduce feelings of secondary victimisation and trauma resulting from the justice process, particularly because BWC footage assists victim-survivors to provide a statement, which can alleviate the burden associated with testifying in court.

BWCs can result in misidentification of victim-survivors as primary aggressors

Victim-survivors may use force against perpetrators, including in the form of resistive violence or self-defence, which can result in their misidentification as the primary person engaging in violence. Their emotional and physical state, too, may be viewed unfavourably by police, especially if perpetrators appear calm and in control and seek to manage their image or manipulate or collude with police. In such circumstances, police may incorrectly label the person most in need of protection as the primary aggressor, and the perpetrator as a victim-survivor.

BWCs can lead to privacy concerns for victim-survivors

Victim-survivors expressed concern that BWCs can violate their privacy, particularly because they capture victim-survivors in a highly vulnerable and distressed state, when experiencing trauma, affected by substances (such as alcohol or drugs) or in need of medical attention. The impacts of being captured on camera while experiencing the adverse physical, emotional and psychological consequences of DFV could result in wrongful accusations against victim-survivors or misinterpretations of the scene.

Perpetrators can use BWCs as part of their coercive control tactics

Victim-survivors expressed concern that BWCs could become part of the perpetrator’s coercive control tactics and that BWCs can be easily turned into tools that further entrap victim-survivors. Perpetrators adopted various coercive control tactics to manage their own image, manipulate the scene being filmed by acting calm and rational when police arrived and/or turned the BWCs on, and attempt to collude with police to paint themselves in a positive light. If officers did not have knowledge of perpetrator strategies, any footage capturing the victim-survivor behaving in ways that police might construe as ‘angry’ or ‘aggressive’ could work to the perpetrator’s advantage by positioning them in a narrative in which they, rather than the victim-survivor, are the ‘victim’.

Policy recommendations

- A review of BWC policy should be undertaken in each jurisdiction and consideration given to having a consistent national framework, informed by international best practice studies. This is worth pursuing as victim-survivors may be navigating systems and accessing services in multiple locations.
- Clear and consistent guidelines should be developed about when recording is to be activated and stopped.
- Police agencies should produce plain language, open-access guidelines outlining how footage is:
 - edited for court proceedings;
 - securely stored and managed;
 - accessed (by which parties and what process); and
 - potentially requested (by which parties and what process).

Practice recommendations

- Police training should emphasise the dynamics and features of DFV, including its effects on victim-survivors.
- DFV training should include modules on the impacts of DFV and trauma, and how this may be observed in victim-survivors with regard to their emotional, mental and physical state and the manner in which victim-survivors provide information to police.
- Practice should be trauma-informed.
- Police training should challenge stereotypes about ‘ideal victims’ and objective truth, mental biases and frameworks influencing how victim-survivors may be (narrowly and subjectively) viewed.
- Police training should provide guidance on:
 - identifying primary aggressors, including acknowledging how primary aggressors can be misidentified and that violence may be used by victim-survivors in self-defence and violent resistance;
 - how misidentification occurs and disproportionately impacts certain cohorts (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victim-survivors, victim-survivors with disabilities, culturally and linguistically diverse victim-survivors, criminalised victim-survivors); and
 - how perpetrators may seek to manipulate and collude with police.



Introduction

This project is the first Australian study to examine the merits and risks of the use of police BWC technology in DFV incidents, drawing on the perspectives and experiences of participants, captured via a survey of 119 victim-survivors and 14 semi-structured interviews with victim-survivors. Notably, to date, it is the only study globally that has a cohort of participants who have experience with BWC deployment. (Saulnier, Couture-Carron and Scholte (2022) consulted 33 victim-survivors of sexual assault and/or intimate partner violence about their perspectives on BWCs, but their participants were not required to have encountered BWCs or to have engaged with police.)

The project builds on a pilot study undertaken by members of the research team who, in 2019 to 2020, conducted an anonymous online survey of 452 police officers in the Western Australian Police Force and the Queensland Police Service and 30 semi-structured interviews with DFV practitioners from the victim support sector and specialist women's and legal services. This research explored the frequency of deployment, consequences and utility of this technology as a response to DFV (Iliadis, Harris et al. 2024; Vakhitova et al. 2022). The team found that there is a high frequency of BWC deployment by police in both Western Australia and Queensland, and that BWCs could help to identify primary aggressors by capturing evidence that contextualises the circumstances, behaviours and attitudes of those at the scene. However, although BWCs can potentially show DFV and the impact of (primarily) physical harms, alarmingly the data indicated that they often fail to capture the complete context and pattern of DFV and coercive control.

The current study aimed to determine how victim-survivors perceive and experience police BWC technology. In doing so, it generated critical insights on the use, efficacy, perceived benefits and limitations of police BWCs in DFV responses, including in relation to its evidentiary use in court proceedings and state responses. The research revealed that BWCs can provide a sense of validation and security to victim-survivors, but they can also reveal and amplify issues with police procedures, which can have adverse consequences for victim-survivors.

Together, the findings from the current study and the pilot project generate a strong evidence base that can be used to inform and guide the development of police policy and practice, particularly for jurisdictions seeking to review or extend the use of BWCs in DFV incidents and legal proceedings.

Terminology

Domestic and family violence

DFV encompasses a broad range of abusive behaviours, including but not limited to emotional, psychological, financial, physical, sexual and technology-facilitated abuse, as well as stalking, among other forms of violence (such as manipulation, intimidation and threats—see, among others, Dragiewicz et al. 2019). Perpetrators engage in patterns of coercive and controlling behaviours (Stark 2007). A range of terms are used to refer to these forms of violence.

A particular term may be preferred in a particular jurisdiction. For instance, the term ‘domestic violence’ is used in legislation, policy and practice in Queensland, whereas ‘family violence’ is used in Victoria.

Nuances and meanings may also be drawn out in relation to the context in which harm occurs. Domestic violence can refer to violent behaviour between current or former intimate partners whereas family violence may be used to describe violence between people in families, intimate relationships, extended families, kinship networks and communities. In Australia, the term ‘family violence’ is adopted by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, advocates and academics as it speaks to the broader dynamics and settings in which violence may occur (Willis 2011). In this study, we use the term ‘domestic and family violence’ to capture the broad range of abuse and contexts in which such abuse occurs, as outlined above. While both of these terms recognise violence perpetrated within broader family structures, our participants identified that in their case abuse was inflicted by a current or former intimate partner.

Mostly, although not exclusively, women and children are identified as victim-survivors of DFV and men as perpetrators (see Serpell, Sullivan & Doherty 2022; victimisation and homicide statistics in Australia Bureau of Statistics 2017). Participation in the survey was open to persons of all gender identities. The bulk of survey participants were women, reflecting the gendered dimension of DFV. The interview process sought to recruit female-identifying victim-survivors. A gendered framework shaped the research design and analysis and we used a feminist conceptual framework in our research.

Victim-survivors

The words ‘victims’ and ‘survivors’ are used in the DFV sector and scholarship to refer to people who are subjected to violence. While they can be interchangeable terms, there are distinct meanings that may be evoked by each. ‘Victim’ features in state discourse, in reference to an incident or experience of victimisation—including cases of fatal violence—and some contend that the term is associated with weakness or vulnerability. In contrast, ‘survivor’ has been said to represent agency, empowerment and self-awareness, reflecting a progression beyond an experience of violence. Although sometimes constructed as such, there is no linear or homogeneous progression from victim to survivor. Rather, we select the joined phrase of victim-survivor to reflect the varied ways people identify and the definition the chosen word has for each individual, which may differ from what we outline above (Delker et al. 2020; Dunn 2005; Kelly 1998; Schwarz & Bonner 2019, all cited in Harris & Woodlock 2023).

Perpetrator or abuser

Throughout this report, people who enact DFV are called perpetrators or abusers or, as is common in police and court lingo, primary or predominant aggressors. Noting that there are debates about whether person-first language should be applied in sector responses and scholarly works (Bernburg & Kohn 2003; Clear et al. 2001; Tu & Penti 2020; Uhlmann et al. 2015, all cited in Harris & Woodlock 2023), we highlight the need to place responsibility on and foreground the actions of the abuser (Kleinman 2004; Lamb 1991; Lamb & Koen 1995, all cited in Harris & Woodlock 2023). In justice responses a primary or predominant aggressor is ‘the person who through known history and actions within the relationship is exerting the greatest amount of harm and control over their partner or family member’ (Victoria Police 2022: 18). Recognising how victim-survivors may use violence in self-defence and resistance, it is important to note that police policy advises against making cross-applications; that is, they must not apply for protection orders against both or all parties (see, for example, Victoria Police 2022). Thus, while the words *primary* and *predominant* allow for other parties to be identified as perpetrators, in practice a victim-survivor should not be misidentified as a perpetrator.

Misidentification

Police incorrectly identifying or labelling a victim-survivor as a perpetrator or primary or predominant aggressor is referred to as misidentification. This can result in victim-survivors being unable to access DFV services, exposure to further DFV, a protection order being issued against the party in need of protection, criminalisation and/or wrongful imprisonment (Reeves 2021).



Literature review

BWCs in DFV responses

Internationally, police organisations have harnessed technologies in efforts to prevent, regulate and investigate offences. BWC devices—video recorders affixed to an officer’s vest, cap or sunglasses—are one such example of this (Harris 2020; Iliadis et al. 2022; Iliadis, Harris et al. 2024; Vakhitova et al. 2022). In Australia, the adoption of BWCs has been embraced by police agencies since 2015 as a mechanism to facilitate investigative and justice system responses to crime, including DFV. Most, if not all, Australian police agencies were aware that the potential benefits of BWCs involve improving the safety of the community and the police, strengthening evidential cases, increasing police transparency and accountability, positively influencing the behaviours of police officers and the public, and using footage in complaint reviews and legal proceedings (Victorian Auditor-General’s Office 2022).

Alongside growing recognition of the scope of the problem of DFV, and the fact that DFV incidents comprise a high proportion of generalist (frontline) police call-outs, the use of BWCs in DFV settings has been described by politicians, police and judicial officers as a ‘game changer’ (Cardozo 2015). This is because BWCs are believed to reduce the time and harm experienced by victim-survivors in criminal justice processes (Harris 2020; Iliadis et al. 2022).

BWCs can be used to take digitally recorded evidence from victim-survivors (either at the scene or a police station) and to record evidence at the scene of a call-out. Prior to the introduction of BWCs, the use of digitally recorded evidence-in-chief in DFV incidents took place across some Australian jurisdictions, such as New South Wales, with the use of hand-held devices, also known as ‘mobipols’ (see Simpson 2021). Some jurisdictions have DFV-specific initiatives, with BWC procedure and practice guidelines developed to respond to this harm. New South Wales, for instance, launched DFV-specific applications in 2015. In other jurisdictions, uptake and trials have been prompted by legislative and operational shifts to facilitate the use of BWCs in DFV responses. These include the Australian Capital Territory (2015); Queensland (2016, following the Special Taskforce on DFV); South Australia (2016); Victoria (2016, prompted by the Royal Commission into Family Violence); the Northern Territory (2017, after 2016 pilots); and Tasmania and Western Australia (trialled in 2016 in Western Australia and 2018 in Tasmania, and expanded in 2019 in both jurisdictions; see Billings 2018; Clare et al. 2019; Taylor & Lee 2019).

In 2016, Western Australia trialled BWCs for six months before disseminating the technology to all frontline officers by June 2019. The full rollout of BWCs to frontline Western Australia Police Force officers was completed in July 2020. This included dissemination to the Tactical Response Group, which is the only police agency in Australia and New Zealand to do so to date.

Despite the rapid implementation of BWCs in police agencies across Australia, there has been little investigation into their use in DFV policing, including in both generalist and specialist police operations, resulting in a knowledge deficit in relation to how BWCs might help or hinder DFV prevention and regulation, and the potential consequences of this technology for victim-survivors (Harris 2020; Saulnier, Couture-Carron & Scholte 2022). An exception is a study by Peterson et al. (2021) that examined the effects of BWCs on prosecutorial and court-related charge outcomes across multiple crime types, including domestic violence charges, following a six-month cluster-randomised trial of BWCs in Miami Beach, Florida (within 12 months after the completion of the experiment). The study reported BWCs have significant evidentiary value that varies by crime type. BWCs may be best suited to capture evidence of crimes committed against police officers and potentially in DFV offences as well (pp 191–192).

Beyond the harm caused by DFV, victim-survivors often experience distress as a result of their contact with the criminal justice system (see, for example, Iliadis 2020). Victim-survivors of DFV represent a substantial proportion of police contacts (Dworkin et al. 2017; Segrave, Wilson & Fitz-Gibbon 2016). Analysing police and crime statistics from each Australian state and territory, a 2016 ABC News investigation reported that, nationally, police respond to 5,000 DFV matters a week, which equates to approximately one DFV call-out every two minutes (Blumer 2016). Australian research indicates that DFV represents between 40 and 60 percent of frontline policing activities (Meyer 2016; Royal Commission into Family Violence 2016; Segrave, Wilson & Fitz-Gibbon 2016).

This underscores the need to ensure that new practices, policies and technologies adopted by police are victim sensitive. However, despite the enthusiastic adoption of BWCs by law enforcement agencies around the world over the past decade, empirical research into the relationship between police BWC technology and secondary victimisation of DFV survivors remains scant (Harris 2020; Saulnier, Couture-Carron & Scholte 2022).

Privacy concerns

Concerns have been raised around the potential for BWCs to invade victim-survivors' privacy (Adams & Mastracci 2017; Buchanan & Goff 2019; Harris 2020; Morrow, Katz & Choate 2016; Murphy 2015). For example, it has been suggested that BWC footage could be used in contexts for which it was not intended (such as child custody matters), which could exacerbate victims' trauma (Kopp & Gardiner 2021). At the same time, Thomas (2016) argues that, when handled appropriately, BWCs have the potential to enhance privacy for victims: BWC deployment could help reduce unlawful police intrusions.

Understanding and interpreting trauma

Alongside high levels of trauma among victim-survivors of DFV, scholarship shows that brain injury caused by perpetrators can significantly impact women's mental and physical health (Baxter & Hellewell 2019). Brain injury can negatively impact victim-survivors' memories and how they communicate, as well as how they regulate their emotions, leading to variations in their recall of events and behaviour that is inconsistent with stereotypes of how victim-survivors should act (Harris 2020). While this may result in victim-survivors being deemed unreliable witnesses, Epstein and Goodman (2019) assert that a trauma-informed understanding would recognise that a victim-survivor's behaviour and 'disjointed' way of recalling events may in fact constitute further evidence that their story is plausible.

Research shows that state authorities do not often detect or understand how trauma presents or how it is experienced by victim-survivors (Harris & Iliadis 2021), which can lead to officers viewing the effects of trauma as disproportionate to DFV victimisation. Victim-survivors are more likely to be believed when they show 'proportional' signs of despair and sadness (Bollingmo et al. 2008), which those who are not trauma-informed view as an over- or under-emotional display. Deviations from 'expected' responses are said to both lower a victim-survivor's credibility (Rose, Nadler & Clark 2006) and result in misidentification (Harris 2020). It is in this context that the presence of BWCs and subsequent interpretations of footage have been critiqued, due to the possibility that 'non-ideal' victim-survivors might not be seen as credible if they deviate from expected or idealised constructs of victimhood (see, among others, Barlow 2022; Iliadis, Harris et al. 2024).

To date, only a handful of studies have empirically examined the effect of BWCs on victims in general and even fewer have focused on victim-survivors of DFV (Goodall 2007; Harris 2020; Saulnier, Couture-Carron & Scholte 2022; Toronto Police Service 2016). Goodall (2007), who surveyed 36 victim-survivors (non-DFV specific) about their attitudes towards police BWCs, found that participants were generally supportive of police BWC use and some mentioned that the technology made them feel safe. In a study conducted by the Toronto Police Service (2016) of victims of assault and robbery, most participants said they felt as comfortable or more comfortable interacting with police officers when they were wearing BWCs than when they were not. Informed by 33 interviews with victim-survivors of sexual assault and/or intimate partner violence, but not all with experience of BWC or police, Saulnier, Couture-Carron and Scholte (2022) found that victim-survivors prioritised the need to be informed about and consent to the use of BWC and highlighted the importance of procedural consistency in BWC use.

Misidentification

The misidentification of women as primary aggressors has been a concern of DFV advocates, particularly in Victoria, where this issue was raised in the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016). Misidentification is described as occurring when police respond to an incident of DFV and are uncertain who is the victim-survivor and who is the predominant aggressor. This misidentification primarily impacts female victim-survivors and is seen as a form of systems abuse, where perpetrators use the legal system as part of their abusive and manipulative tactics (Douglas 2018). Women who use force in self-defence against the perpetrator are commonly misidentified as the primary aggressor, particularly within a policing context where DFV is de-gendered and any incidents of violence are seen as DFV, rather than understood in relation to ongoing patterns of coercion and control (Miller 2005).

Research by Vakhitova et al. (2022) found that police officers in the Australian states of Queensland and Western Australia felt that BWCs could lead to the misidentification of primary aggressors. Officers expressed concern that the victim-survivor's demeanour and representation in footage could be misinterpreted or not well understood by state agents. Another officer in their study felt that 'the footage may assist [the legal process] but it may provide a distorted representation of the person requiring assistance' (P012, cited in Vakhitova et al. 2022). DFV practitioners in Iliadis, Vakhitova et al.'s (2023) study also cautioned that the incident-based visual nature of the medium means that BWC footage might show a 'hysterical or angry woman' who appears to be 'the problem' without providing a picture of the broader context in which her experiences of violence and responses have occurred.

Despite their potential to improve understanding of the effects and potential benefits of BWCs, victim-survivors have been overlooked in research and state evaluations to date. Thus, issues such as those emerging from this research—privacy concerns, limitations around understanding and interpreting trauma, and misidentification—have been overlooked in BWC DFV evaluations. Instead, the focus of reviews is generally on whether BWC enables charges and prosecutions or improves evidentiary quality (see Drover & Barak 2015; Goodall 2007; Katz et al. 2014; Morrow, Katz & Choate 2016; Owens, Mann & McKenna 2014). As Walton, Brooks and Li (2018: 13) stress, victim-survivor voices are needed to ensure that policy and practice are operating as intended and 'would help with the development of an appropriate protocol to manage victim interviewing, investigation, and prosecution process'. As this research establishes, victim-survivor concerns and measures of 'success' are quite different from those of the justice system, including the emphasis on charge and conviction in other scholarship, and therefore warrant greater attention (Harris 2020). Moreover, there is an urgent need to explore how perceptions and experiences of BWC influence and shape perceptions of the justice system more broadly. Scholarship shows that negative experiences of formal responses can result in victim-survivor reluctance to report future incidents of violence or breaches of intervention orders (Iliadis, Fitz-Gibbon & Walklate 2021). It is therefore crucial that understandings of this innovative and new medium that has been added to the operational police 'toolkit' throughout Australia are well informed, holistic and take into account the views and experiences of victim-survivors who have encountered police BWCs in DFV call-outs and legal proceedings.



Methodology

Research approach

This study examined the merits of police BWC technology as a response to DFV and its impacts on victim-survivors. It is the first study worldwide that attains DFV victim-survivor views and experiences of BWCs to generate new criminological knowledge on these issues. The study, combined with the research findings from our pilot project (Iliadis et al. 2022; Vakhitova et al. 2022), provides a strong evidence base for the development of future legal reform, policy and practice, particularly for jurisdictions seeking to review the impact of BWCs in response to DFV, and on victim-survivors specifically.

The project addressed five key research questions:

- How do victim-survivors perceive and experience BWC technology?
- How is BWC footage used by state agencies?
- What are the implications of BWC footage use for victim-survivors?
- What are the perceived benefits and consequences of BWC technology within the context of DFV incidents and proceedings as described by victim-survivors?
- Can BWCs reduce the discomfort, fear and trauma associated with formal responses?

The study used mixed qualitative and quantitative research methods and involved a two-stage design: a nationwide survey ($n=119$) was followed by semi-structured interviews ($n=14$). This approach allowed us to explore the views of victim-survivors to better understand how they perceive and experience BWCs in the context of DFV police call-outs and legal proceedings, and their views on the potential benefits and consequences of BWCs in DFV responses. The project received ethical approval from Deakin University's Human Research Ethics Committee (number 2019-297). Both the survey and interview quotations are presented as they were written or spoken by the participants, with minimal editorial interference, to reflect the lived experience and voices of the participants.

Survey recruitment and instrument

Survey participants were recruited with the assistance of the Women's Services Network and Women's Legal Services Queensland, who disseminated the survey to victim-survivor members via internal agency news bulletins and social media. We do not know how many people specifically received an invitation to complete the survey because the victim support sector facilitated survey recruitment via their networks of victim-survivor advocates who are generally interested in participating in, or learning about, research. Because the survey was disseminated via their social media networks as well, it is impossible to determine how many victim-survivors were exposed to the survey or received a personal invitation.

A total of 119 complete responses were received (108 participants answered the survey completely; of those who did not finish, the rate of completion was 73–90%). Survey participants comprised 109 victim-survivors (92.0%) who identified as women, seven as men (5.9%), one (0.8%) as non-binary and two (1.7%) as 'other' and specified as 'transgender woman' and 'gender-queer'. As shown in Table 1, the average age of survey participants was 42.

The data collection took place between 18 June 2021 and 22 February 2022. Participants were informed that their participation was anonymous and that they could withdraw from the survey at any time without providing a reason. The survey was pilot tested by a DFV agency and modified based on their feedback.

The online survey instrument was designed using Qualtrics and took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Informed by a mixed-method research design, it featured both closed- and open-ended questions. While some questions asked victim-survivors to reflect on their experiences with BWCs, the survey also included perception-based questions, meaning that victim-survivors who had not encountered BWCs were also eligible to participate. Beyond this, there were no other factors that limited survey participation beyond the requirement that one identified as a victim-survivor of DFV.

First, participants were asked whether and how strongly they supported the use of BWCs in response to DFV, which was followed by prompts querying the reasons for their support or disapproval. The responses were measured on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 meant 'strongly disagree', 4 was 'neither agree nor disagree' and 7 reflected 'strongly agree'.

Second, participants were asked whether, to their knowledge, they had encountered a police BWC in response to a DFV call-out. If they had, they were asked to indicate on how many occasions.

Third, participants who had encountered BWCs were asked to indicate whether they felt the BWC was beneficial in their experience of the police call-out and subsequent legal process, if one followed. Participants without firsthand experiences with BWCs were asked to reflect on whether they felt that a BWC would facilitate a beneficial police response in police call-out to a DFV incident. Responses to these two questions were also measured on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 meant 'strongly disagree', 4 signified 'neither agree nor disagree' and 7 equated to 'strongly agree'.

Participants were then asked to indicate how likely they thought it was that BWCs would have the capacity to: (1) show the extent and impacts of DFV and its harms, (2) provide objective footage to be used as evidence in court, (3) capture the ongoing pattern of DFV and its impacts, (4) assist victim-survivors to provide evidence in court, (5) enhance opportunities for prosecution, (6) make abusers more accountable, and (7) assist police in identifying an abuser.

Additionally, participants were asked about the likelihood of police BWCs resulting in: (1) the victim-survivor being identified as the abuser, (2) the removal of children, and (3) privacy concerns for victim-survivors. Responses to these perception-based questions were likewise measured on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 meant 'extremely unlikely', 4 was 'neither likely nor unlikely' and 7 indicated 'extremely likely'.

For all questions measured on a Likert scale, the respondents were able to pick any position on a sliding scale and the corresponding number between 1 and 7 to better reflect their perceptions. Responses were analysed against participants' sociodemographic characteristics, including age, gender, state or territory of residence, primary ancestry and language spoken at home. Pseudonyms were applied to open-ended responses, such as 'P001' for 'participant number 1'.

Survey analysis

Exploratory data analysis was first conducted, including univariate statistics for each variable of interest, and the analysis of bivariate relationships between the variables. The quantitative analyses were conducted using R for Windows, version 4.2.1 (R Core Team 2021) and R Studio, version 22.07.1 + 554.pro3 (RStudio Team 2020). Descriptive statistics were calculated using Base R; the plots were produced using the packages *tidyr*, *plyr*, *ggplot2* and *tidyquant*. To visualise the tendencies in the quantitative data and examine the relationships between variables of interest, we produced a series of raincloud plots. These types of plots display both individual observations and patterns among them (such as striation or clustering), as well as overall tendencies in the distribution (Allen et al. 2019). Using raincloud plots, we were able to simultaneously visualise raw data, probability density and key summary statistics such as median and interquartile range. In addition to visualising the data, to determine if there are statistically significant differences between the groups of interest (such as between the participants with and without firsthand experiences of police BWCs), a Kruskal–Wallis rank sum test (a non-parametric one-way analysis of variance test) was used for all variables of interest (Kruskal & Wallis 1952).

A thematic content analysis was then applied to the open-ended responses. Microsoft Excel was used to code the open-ended responses, first descriptively, then interpretatively, before overarching themes were identified (King, Horrocks & Brooks 2019). To reduce the potential for researcher-induced subjectivity in interpreting the findings, two independent researchers were involved in coding the themes (as recommended in O'Connor & Joffe 2020).

Interview recruitment

Interview recruitment took place via the survey, as participants were given the option to self-select to participate in a follow-up interview following the completion of the survey questionnaire. If survey participants were interested in a follow-up interview, they were asked to email the principal researcher, who then provided prospective interview participants with a plain language statement outlining the research aims, what participation would involve, how participants could withdraw from the research or make a complaint about the research, and how participant information would be securely stored. Prospective participants were also provided with a consent form, which they were asked to read and sign ahead of the interview if they wished to participate. To be eligible to participate in a follow-up interview, participants were required to have encountered a BWC in a DFV call-out on one or more occasions.

In total, 14 victim-survivors participated in an interview, all of whom identified as women. Ten participants were from Queensland, two from New South Wales and two from Tasmania. Nine identified as having an Australian background, two identified as Aboriginal or Indigenous, one was from Sweden and one was from the United Kingdom. All women were heterosexual. Twelve women had children.

Interview participation

Interviews were held via Zoom between July 2021 and April 2022 and conducted by the research team, with the assistance of the research fellow. All researchers have extensive experience interviewing victim-survivors and were guided by best practice guidelines (see, for example, World Health Organization 2001) to prioritise victim-survivors' safety and wellbeing. In the interviews, the researchers also adopted a framework that was sensitive to and considerate of victim-survivors' diverse experiences. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes.

The interview process followed several steps intended to give participants the opportunity to learn more about the project and their rights as a participant, and to control how they wanted the interview to proceed. Some of these steps included explaining the nature of the interview and semi-structured interview questions, acknowledging the sensitivity of the subject matter and reassuring the participant that the interviewer was aware of this, reminding the participant of the available resources for debriefing and support, and working with participants to develop a step-by-step strategy for how to proceed in response to certain scenarios developing. For example, the interviewer asked the participant, 'If you do not want to answer a question, how will you let me know?' and, 'If you begin to cry, how would you like me to respond?'

The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed participants to expand on and/or diverge to other points to convey their perceptions and story. With the participants' consent, interviews were audio recorded to allow for transcription. Pseudonyms have been applied to ensure participant confidentiality. Likewise, any identifying information (such as mentions of locations or support services) was de-identified.

The interview questions focused on the experiences of victim-survivors who had encountered police BWCs. Participants were asked to comment on the potential benefits of BWCs in response to DFV, as well as the consequences, with reference to examples drawn from their direct experience. The interviewers asked victim-survivors to reflect on broader considerations that are important for understanding how BWCs might hinder or help state responses to DFV. Examples of questions included:

- In your experience, what are the main benefits and limitations of BWCs in DFV state responses?
- How does BWC technology impact your feelings towards police and the justice system? (For example, does it increase/decrease your confidence in their decision-making processes?)
- Do you support the use of police BWC footage as evidence in court? Why/why not? and
- Drawing on your experiences, do you consider there to be any risks associated with the use of BWC footage within the context of DFV incidents and proceedings? If so, what are they?

Interview analysis

We employed thematic analysis, a type of data analysis involving finding patterns in data and grouping them into themes to show how they relate to one another. We applied the system of thematic analysis as outlined by King, Horrocks and Brooks (2019), which involves three coding steps. The first step is to code the interview transcripts descriptively. Next, we applied interpretive coding, where meaning is interpreted according to the research question and analysed within a feminist framework. To strengthen the validity of the analysis, we double-coded, whereby two researchers independently read and coded the transcripts. These codes were then compared and contrasted, and the researchers worked together to develop a thematic structure of descriptive and interpretive codes. The final stage of thematic analysis involved defining the overarching themes (King, Horrocks & Brooks 2019), which all researchers collaborated on. Two overarching themes were identified that represent the breadth of BWC experiences. These are that BWCs reveal and amplify issues with police procedures and that BWCs provide victim-survivors with validation and security.

Limitations

The findings of this study should be considered in light of some limitations. The first and foremost is the recruitment approach chosen for this study. The interview participants were recruited from the pool of survey respondents, which may have favoured those who were particularly motivated, whether positively or negatively, to share their experiences. Moreover, survey and interview cohorts had a significant difference in relation to encounters with BWCs. Survey participants included those who spoke about both perceptions of BWCs (but not experiences), as well as those who had direct experiences with BWCs. However, the interview participants were those with experiences of BWCs. Thus it is possible that, as the proportion of those who had encountered BWCs increased, the cohort's support and endorsement of BWCs decreased. This suggests that victim-survivors may be more likely to advocate for BWCs in theory, but less likely to do so when they experienced their use, in practice.

The second limitation pertains to sample bias. The survey distribution was facilitated by an organisation located in Queensland (Women's Legal Services) and the Women's Services Network, Australia's peak body for specialist women's domestic and family violence services. While other organisations were invited to offer assistance, these two agreed to help. This recruitment strategy resulted in a disproportionate rate of respondents from Queensland. Additionally, the study solely relied on an online survey, rendering it a non-representative sample.

The third limitation concerns the number of interview participants (14 victim-survivors). This constrained sample size precluded the generalisability of results and a definitive explanation for the significant endorsement of BWCs in the survey, especially among those with direct, personal experience. To address these limitations, future research could explore alternative recruitment methods and use a larger, more representative sample.

Results

Survey findings

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 outlines the sociodemographic characteristics of the survey sample in this study.

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample (n=119)		
Variable	N	%
Age (μ , SD)	42	10.3
Gender		
Woman (female)	109	92.0
Man (male)	7	5.9
Non-binary	1	0.8
Other	2	1.7
Residence		
Qld	65	54.6
NSW	19	16.0
Vic	18	15.1
Tas	7	5.9
ACT	3	2.5
WA	3	2.5
SA	3	2.5
NT	1	0.8
Primary ancestry		
Australian	50	42.0
English	40	33.6
German	4	3.4
Indian	3	2.5
Indigenous Australian	3	2.5

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample (n=119) (cont.)		
Variable	N	%
Language spoken at home		
English	106	89.1
Spanish	4	3.3
Other	9	7.6

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

Participants averaged 42 years of age (ranging from 21 to 69 years). Those identifying as women accounted for nearly 92 percent of the total sample (n=109). Seven identified as men (5.9%) and one (0.8%) as non-binary. Two participants (1.7%) described their gender identity as ‘gender-queer’ and ‘transgender woman’. Most participants lived in Queensland (n=65, 54.6%), New South Wales (n=19, 16%), Victoria (n=18, 15.1%) and Tasmania (n=7, 5.9%). Fewer survey participants were living in the Australian Capital Territory (n=3, 2.5%), Western Australia (n=3, 2.5%), South Australia (n=3, 2.5%) and the Northern Territory (n=1; 0.8%).

Participants mostly identified their primary ancestry as Australian (n=50, 42%) or English (n=40, 33.6%), followed by German (n=4, 3.4%), Indian (n=3, 2.5%) and Indigenous (n=3, 2.5%). Two participants (1.7%) identified with each of the following ancestry categories: Chinese, Irish, Scottish, Dutch and Spanish. One participant each (0.8%) identified as Filipino, Greek, Polish, Russian, Guinean, Hispanic and Swedish. The language most commonly spoken at home was English (n=106, 89.1%), followed by Spanish (n=4, 3.3%). Other languages spoken included Hindi, Swedish, Mandingo, Odia, Russian, Polish, German and Tagalog, with only one response recorded against each of these other elected languages.

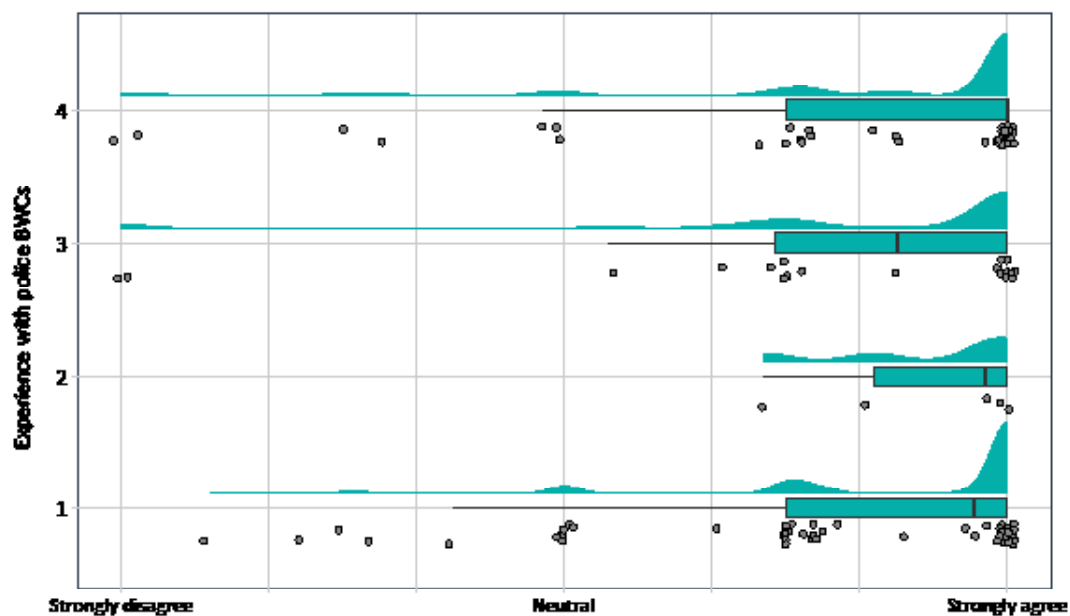
Victim-survivors’ experiences with BWCs

Thirty-seven (31%) survey participants had encountered BWCs in a DFV call-out, while 19 (15%) reported not having experienced BWCs to the best of their knowledge. A further five (4%) participants indicated that they were not sure if they had encountered a BWC. This suggests that almost one-third of our sample (n=37, 31%) had encountered BWCs on at least one or more occasions. Of those who had experienced a BWC, 13 participants had only one experience (35%), seven participants had two experiences (19%) and the rest had three or more encounters (n=17, 46%). As noted in the *Methodology* section, considering that the survey was focused on victim-survivor perceptions and experiences, those who had not encountered BWCs were still eligible to complete the survey.

Support for police BWCs

Survey participants were generally supportive of the use of police BWCs. On a 7-point Likert scale measuring support for the use of police BWCs in DFV responses and investigations, participants with firsthand experience scored an average of 5.9 ($SD=1.70$; median=7.00). In contrast, those without BWC experience scored slightly lower at 5.7 ($SD=1.9$; median=6.25; refer to Figure 1). However, the difference between these groups was not statistically significant.

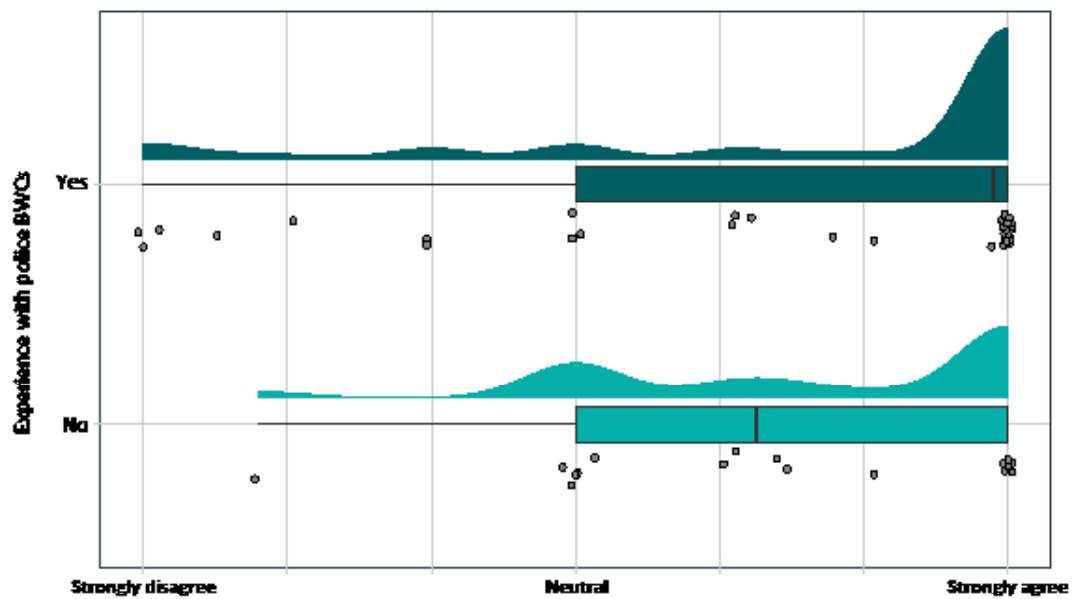
Figure 1: Support for police BWCs based on firsthand encounters with the technology



- (1) had firsthand experience with BWCs ($n=37$)
- (2) did not have experience with BWCs ($n=19$)
- (3) not sure ($n=5$)
- (4) was not aware that police used BWCs in investigating DFV ($n=58$)

Further, participants with firsthand experiences, on average, agreed that the technology was beneficial in their DFV incident (mean=5.2 on a 1–7 scale; $SD=2.2$; median=6.9; see Figure 2). Similarly, those without firsthand experience, on average, believed that police BWCs would have been beneficial in response to their DFV call-out (average score of 5.37; $SD=1.5$; median=5.2). The Kruskal–Wallis sum rank test revealed that the difference between the scores of those with firsthand experience and those without it was not statistically significant.

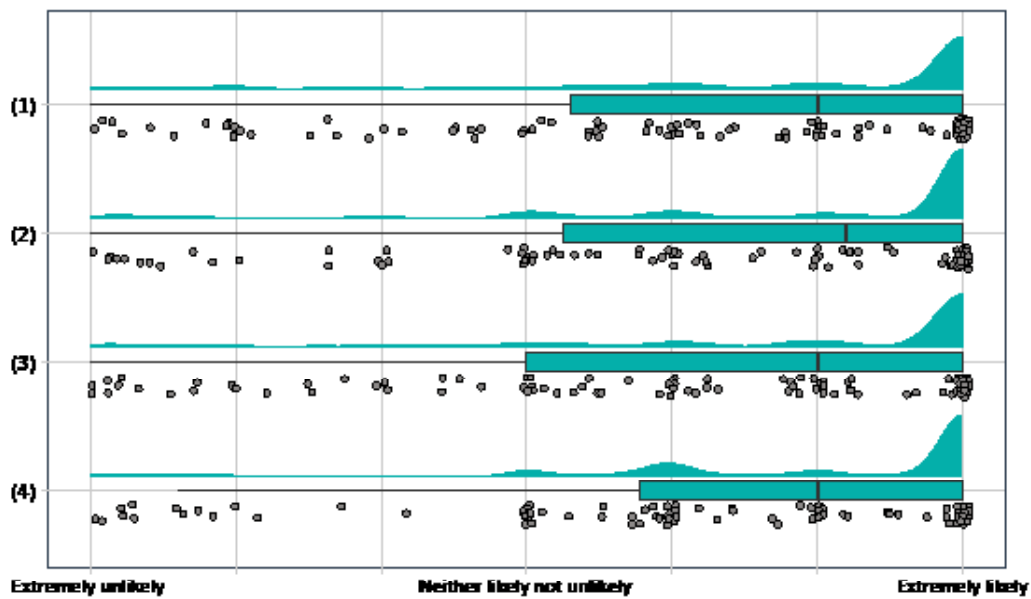
Figure 2: Perceptions of whether the use of police BWC technology was ($n=37$) or would have been ($n=19$) beneficial in responding to DFV



Perceptions of the likelihood of police BWCs producing objective evidence

Figure 3 shows participants' perceptions of how likely police BWCs are to provide objective evidence. Most participants agreed or strongly agreed that BWCs are likely to produce objective evidence (mean=5.59, $SD=1.74$) that could be used in court to show the extent of DFV (mean=5.32, $SD=1.85$), capture its impacts (mean=5.18, $SD=1.91$), and assist victim-survivors with providing evidence in court (mean=5.41; $SD=1.82$).

Figure 3: Perceived potential benefits of BWCs in relation to evidence

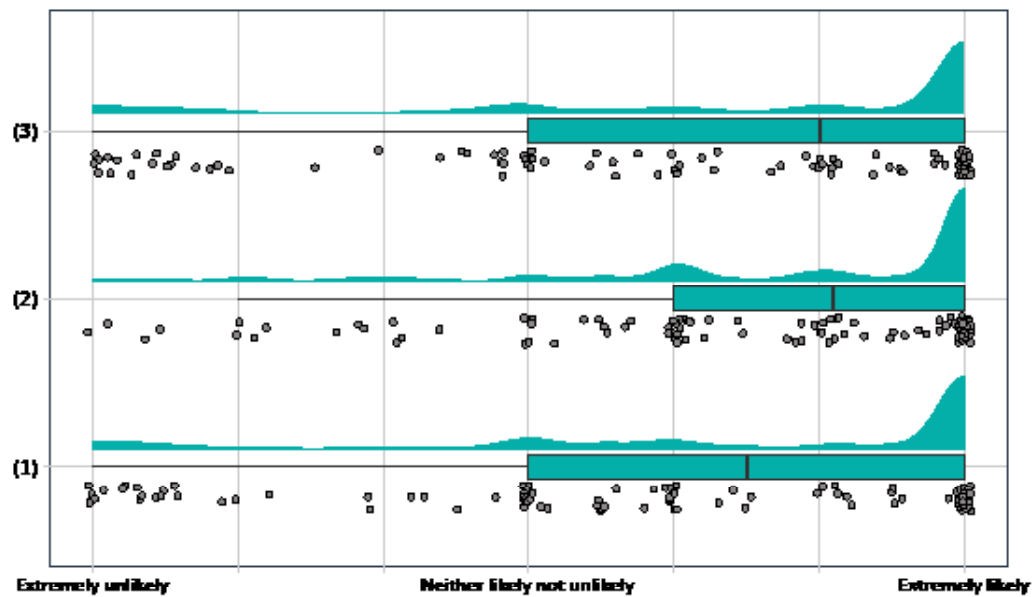


- (1) perceived likelihood that police BWCs show the extent and impacts of DFV and its harms
- (2) perceived likelihood that police BWCs produce footage that can be used as objective evidence in court
- (3) perceived likelihood that police BWCs capture the ongoing pattern of DFV and its impacts
- (4) perceived likelihood that police BWCs assist victim-survivors with providing evidence in court

Perceptions of the likelihood of police BWCs helping police identify and hold abusers to account

Figure 4 shows that survey participants were quite optimistic about the potential for police BWCs to hold perpetrators accountable (mean=5.04, $SD=2.06$), enhance opportunities for prosecution (mean=5.65, $SD=1.52$) and assist police in identifying an abuser (mean=5.06, $SD=2.13$).

Figure 4: Perceived potential benefits of police BWCs in relation to abuser

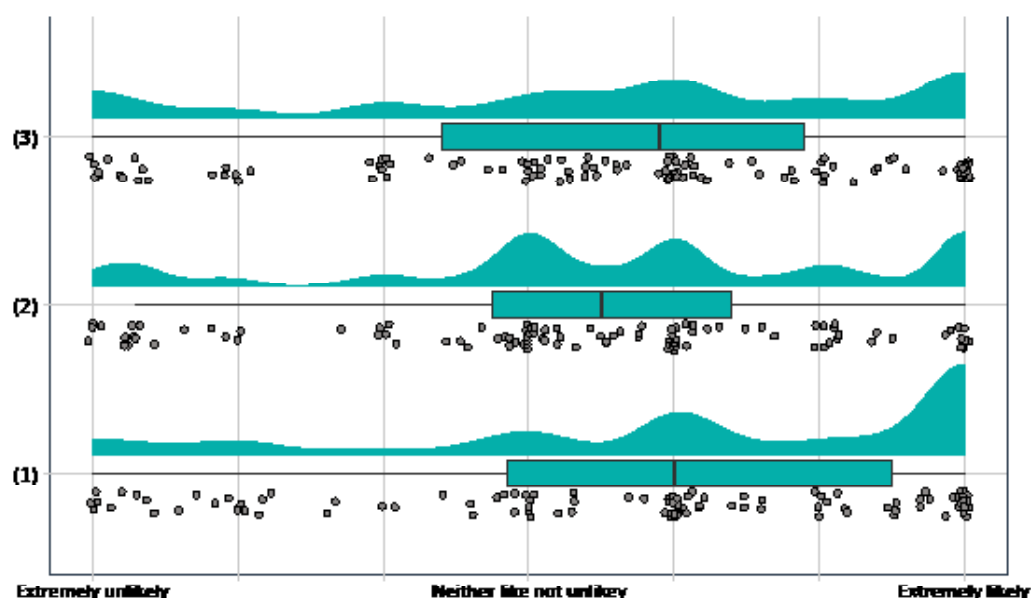


- (1) perceived likelihood that police BWCs make the abuser more accountable
- (2) perceived likelihood that police BWCs enhance opportunities for prosecution
- (3) perceived likelihood that police BWCs assist police in identifying an abuser

Perceptions of the likelihood of police BWCs resulting in privacy concerns for victim-survivors, removal of children or misidentification of primary aggressor

Figure 5 shows that the scores for victim-survivors' perceptions of the risks associated with police BWCs were on average slightly lower than those related to their views on the potential benefits (perceptions of both benefits and risks were measured on the same Likert scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)). Of the three areas of potential concern that we asked about, participants mostly had privacy concerns (mean=4.82, $SD=1.93$), followed by concerns over the possibility of misidentification of the primary aggressor (mean=4.60, $SD=1.75$), with the smallest proportion of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing that police BWCs are likely to result in the removal of children (mean=4.19, $SD=1.88$).

Figure 5: Perceived potential risks of police body-worn cameras



- (1) perceived likelihood that police BWCs result in privacy concerns for victim-survivors
- (2) perceived likelihood that police BWCs result in the removal of children
- (3) perceived likelihood that police BWCs result in the victim-survivor being identified as the abuser

Table 2 indicates that participants who have directly experienced police BWCs in the context of DFV generally felt slightly less optimistic about the benefits of BWCs compared with those without this experience or those who were not aware that police used BWCs in responding to DFV. However, the Kruskal–Wallis tests revealed that the differences were not statistically significant for all evaluated perceptions.

Table 2: Perceptions of potential benefits and risks associated with police BWCs based on firsthand experience with and awareness of BWCs

Experience	Firsthand experience with BWCs (n=38)		No firsthand experience with BWCs (n=19)		Not aware of BWCs (n=57)	
Variable	Mean (SD)	Median	Mean (SD)	Median	Mean (SD)	Median
General support for BWCs	5.9 (1.7)	7	5.7 (1.9)	6.2	5.9 (1.5)	6.8
BWC was/would have been beneficial	5.2 (2.2)	6.9	5.3 (1.5)	5.2	–	–
Potential benefits of police BWCs in relation to evidence collection						
Show the extent and impacts of DFV	5.1 (2.0)	5.9	5.7 (1.5)	6.0	5.3 (1.9)	6.0
Produce objective evidence for court proceedings	5.3 (1.9)	6.0	6.2 (1.3)	7.0	5.4 (2.0)	6.2
Show the extent and impacts of DFV	5.2 (2.0)	5.9	5.1 (1.7)	5.1	5.5 (1.9)	6.2
Assist victims to provide evidence in court	5.0 (2.0)	5.2	6.3 (0.9)	6.8	5.4 (1.8)	6.0
Potential benefits of police BWC in relation to abuser						
Make abuser more accountable	4.8 (2.2)	5.0	5.6 (1.8)	6.3	5.3 (2.0)	5.8
Enhance opportunities for prosecution	5.4 (1.7)	5.8	6.2 (0.8)	6.1	5.6 (1.8)	6.2
Assist police in identifying the abuser	4.9 (2.4)	5.9	5.5 (1.5)	6.0	5.3 (2.0)	6.4
Potential risks of police BWCs						
Misidentification of the primary aggressor	4.6 (1.9)	5.0	4.6 (1.3)	5.0	4.3 (1.8)	4.4
Removal of children	4.2 (2.1)	4.0	4.2 (1.2)	4.1	4.6 (1.5)	4.6
Privacy concerns	4.9 (2.1)	5.3	4.7 (1.5)	5.0	4.8 (1.8)	5.0

Thematic analysis of open-ended responses

BWCs can enhance victim-survivors' safety and mitigate secondary harm

A fairly large proportion of participants highlighted the capacity of BWCs to make them feel safe and secure ($n=18$, 15.1%). They felt that the cameras enabled this, by documenting both the abuse and police actions. One participant said, 'It protects everyone. Perp[etrator]s are less likely to retaliate and police actions are protected' (P098). Similarly, another participant wrote that the BWC 'created a sense of security knowing that everything was being recorded' (P104). One victim-survivor participant described how her ex-partner was speaking in Polish to her at the scene, thinking that the police would not understand what he was saying. However, because this was recorded, the footage (and a translation of the footage) was later used as evidence. She explained:

My ex-partner was abusing me in Polish language (so police officers won't understand), telling that he will deport me to Poland. I told them that he [kept] abusing me in their presence. The police officer discreetly showed me his camera with light on. (P030)

Another participant felt that the police recording the scene saved their life: 'I didn't mind, just happy they were there to save me, they saved my life' (P025).

Others described how BWC technology can offer a degree of protection to victim-survivors where police responses have been ineffective, as the footage can be used as evidence to support a complaint against police:

In this instance, the BWC enabled me to make a complaint through ethical standards [a unit within the police organisation] for police misconduct; apart from that was not useful apart from showing police incompetence with dealing with true DV. (P106)

In this case, the victim-survivor felt that the footage facilitated greater transparency of police (in)action and therefore ensured that officers were held to account for their inadequate response.

A further 12 participants (10.1%) emphasised that BWCs could help decrease or alleviate the secondary victimisation of victim-survivors by reducing their need to repeat their account of the incident, including in court. As one participant noted, 'evidence-in-chief should reduce having to tell [the] story over and over again in court' (P003). In this sense, having a BWC facilitate a victim-survivor's testimony can alleviate the harm associated with court appearances and empower victim-survivors in the provision of evidence.

BWCs can validate victimisation

Several participants ($n=18$, 15.1%) mentioned that having a BWC document the scene gave them confidence that their abuse would be recorded and they would therefore be believed and validated. One participant stated that the use of a BWC offered evidence of how her ex-partner was manipulating the police:

[The technology] helps get evidence of how the man has reacted and gaslighted and lied to police from the start, helps identify evidence of female ... distress and helps support police version of events. (P056)

Another felt that BWC footage would show that the abuse she was subjected to was real. She explained that the footage reinforced a sense of validation of her victimisation:

It's not all in my head. Even though I was filmed and recorded in my own home, police filming oddly gave me a sense of worth, seeing what I had to live in. (P052)

In addition to associating BWCs with safety, some participants felt that an officer's presence and recording at the scene showed that police were concerned about their abuse and victimisation: 'I felt very protected by the police and that they don't take domestic violence lightly and that it is very serious' (P047).

Relatedly, two victim-survivors explained that the use of BWC footage in legal processes prompted their decision to leave their abuser. One said:

Watching my video footage in court was quite confronting as I could not remember much of the incident. After viewing, though, it triggered memories of how I felt at the time and cemented my decision to leave [the] relationship. [Respondent's] footage was very cold and he showed no remorse or accountability. Once again [it] confirmed my decision as the right one. (P034)

Likewise, another victim-survivor wrote, 'So grateful they [the police] helped me leave and although I startle seeing them I know the strength they gave me when I was at my lowest from DV' (P052). In this sense, for some participants, BWCs played a significant role in solidifying recognition of their victimisation and encouraging their decision to leave their violent partner.

BWC footage can compromise victim-survivors' privacy

Several participants ($n=20$, 16.8%) highlighted that BWC technology has the potential to breach victim-survivors' privacy, which could make them reluctant to provide detailed evidence in court. A participant wrote:

I understand the use of BWC[s] in any situation, the need to document things and reflect/look back on, used as evidence et cetera; however, in a domestic violence situation when you are the victim, having and knowing a BWC is in front of you recording when you are stating what has happened is very off-putting and to me makes a victim ... reluctant to tell the whole story of what has happened due to repercussions of it being used in court with the perpetrator seeing a video of what was said. (P019)

Another participant described BWC technologies as intrusive and degrading: ‘it feels like ... an invasion of personal privacy. Humiliation at an already traumatic vulnerable time’ (P049). However, a different participant stated that although the BWC felt ‘invasive at the time’, they were ‘glad’ in hindsight that it was used to capture evidence of the scene (P021).

BWCs can exacerbate harm

Eleven victim-survivors (9.2%) felt that being recorded by the police BWC exacerbated their trauma and made them feel anxious or upset. One participant detailed how this escalated when the police began recording:

Police wore the BWC and advised me that I was being recorded. That alone made me feel more anxious. Trying to report what’s happened to you while you’re in pain, emotionally and physically, is anxiety inducing, [and especially] inappropriate when medical care is required and not necessary when police can take a statement at a later time while the victim (me) seeks medical attention and the support they need immediately after a DV incident. (P074)

One participant believed that the footage could be used to undermine the victim’s statement by presenting them in an unfavourable manner: ‘If there is substance use, this can and has been used against victims’ (P073). This is an important consideration because research has found that victim-survivors’ presentation in footage, including where they are distraught or inebriated, can impact perceptions of their character and credibility (Harris 2020). These consequences have been found to be particularly serious for women of colour, Indigenous Australian women and immigrant women (Harris 2020).

Interview findings

The two significant findings from the interviews showed contrasting experiences with BWCs. Many of those interviewed felt that BWCs reveal existing issues with police practice and procedures and can also magnify these problems to create a unique disadvantage for victim-survivors of DFV. Conversely, others expressed that BWCs gave them security and a sense of validation. Figure 6 summarises the interview findings. Given that there is extensive diversity in the cohort of victim-survivor participants—including in regard to cultural, ethnic and linguistic identity—a diversity of views is to be expected. In this section, we present an overview of the breadth of these contrasting accounts and opinions about BWCs.

BWCs reveal and amplify issues with police procedures

One of the key findings of this project is that BWCs reveal the significant problems with how police perceive and respond to DFV. Some participants criticised the approach taken by police in responding to DFV, in particular the failure to adopt a trauma-informed approach, and suggested that BWCs can illuminate existing issues with police procedures, including through the selective use and manipulation of footage. Additionally, they highlighted that BWCs can be used and exploited by perpetrators as part of their coercive control tactics, which can result in misidentification and criminalisation of victim-survivors.

Figure 6: How do victim-survivors perceive and experience BWC technology?



How presentations of trauma might go unnoticed in BWC footage

There is growing recognition that trauma, such as that caused by DFV, can result in victim-survivors behaving in ways that might seem to go against assumptions of how victims are ‘supposed to’ present (Epstein & Goodman 2019; Rose, Nadler & Clark 2006). Research has found that the effects of neurological and psychological trauma are not well understood (Harris 2020). Therefore, difficulties with memory or recall, concentration, reasoning, communication and emotional regulation may be read as ‘failings’ in a victim-survivor or as undermining their account, as opposed to being evidence of DFV (Jones, Crozier & Strange 2017; Nemeth et al. 2019; Wong et al. 2014). One participant commented how filming a scene using a BWC does not necessarily provide a comprehensive overview of the signs and symptoms of trauma experienced by a victim-survivor, particularly if the officer using the BWC does not have the knowledge and training needed to understand the effects of trauma or recognise presentations of trauma among victim-survivors. In the example offered by Amelia, she explained that:

For a lot of women who do experience a level of coercive control ... that immediate reaction when a police officer encounters them is never going to be calm, cool, collected, and that you [the victim-survivor] go, ‘I need to get out of this situation’ because of this. It’s always going to be like the pressure point. Then because you’ve been living a life where you are constantly in defensive mode to protect yourself, that’s what they then see on a body-worn camera. They don’t necessarily see the cool, calm, collected person who could ... happily sit and talk with police officers now and go, ‘This is what you don’t see. This is how we try to protect ourselves.’ If you came out to my house, you would see me as being a well-composed businesswoman. On the inside, it would be, ‘just get me out of here’. You would never see that until there is that critical point where you’re being attacked.

Research has documented that a lack of understanding of DFV and its effects among police and justice authorities can contribute to misunderstandings of presentations of trauma, especially in the case of victim-survivors who do not fit 'ideal' victim stereotypes (Barlow 2022).

Consequently, victim-survivors whose presentation does not match stereotypes of how victims should behave—such as if they appear to be overly emotional or not emotional enough—may be regarded as irrational, unstable or not credible (Barlow 2022; Harris 2020; Westera & Powell 2017). Duggan (2018: 159) cautions that survivors who do not conform to 'dominant myths and stereotypes' of victimhood, by not seeming sufficiently distressed or submissive for example, can face a lack of 'criminal justice recognition and intervention'. Additionally, as explained in further detail below, victim-survivors may be misidentified as perpetrators instead of those most in need of protection if they engage in violent resistance or appear to be in a state of heightened 'irrational' panic (Harris 2020; Hester 2012). This underscores the need for trauma-informed training among police and criminal justice agents.

Misidentification

A lack of understanding of how trauma can present at a scene can result in victim-survivors being misidentified as the primary aggressor (Reeves 2021). The risk of misidentification was a significant concern for participants, and the image management, manipulation and collusion tactics of perpetrators were seen as key in exacerbating the risk, particularly with the presence of a BWC, as discussed further below (see also Bancroft 2002; Ferguson 2021). Charlotte explained that because she was upset when the police arrived, but the perpetrator was calm, she was spoken to by police as if she were the aggressor. She said:

In terms of body-worn cameras, police like never really wanted to help me. But [by] the time they got here ... the person who was exhibiting DV towards me was calm and I was the one that was in a stressed-out state and they would talk to me like I was the one in the wrong and ... they [the police] would talk to him like he's their mate. But by the time they get there, it's like even if they do come straight away, from my experience, he [the perpetrator] ... already knows what's happening and what type of behaviour to put on. So, he's already going to act like he's their friend and I'm crying and getting upset and breathing heavily and being loud because I'm traumatised, scared and upset and they just look at me like I'm the bad one.

Likewise, Sarah felt that police were not trained in identifying the dynamics of DFV and therefore lacked understanding of how both victim-survivors and perpetrators might appear at a scene and interact with police. She stated:

I just think with DV sometimes, because it's such a heightened situation and if police are not trained, even if they've maybe done their little course or something, they are not trained in domestic violence or to recognise people are in a heightened state, or even if it's the victim it can sometimes seem like the aggressor maybe because maybe they're angry but they've probably just been punched in the head or something, you know what I mean? And then, so if that's been recorded, it [the BWC] is not actually giving it a true picture of the situation.

Participants observed that police can misinterpret trauma responses, and perpetrators often capitalise on how the scene is misconstrued. Jessica explained that she was in shock and was not aware that BWCs were being used. When police responded to the incident, she was unable to fully express what had happened, which allowed her ex-partner to control the narrative.

Jessica reflected:

I don't know if I was aware that the cameras were being used at the time ... I was pretty traumatised. So I was, yeah, confused, shocked, hurt, scared. And the way it came out, this is something that I feel is quite relevant, my ex twisted stuff. So he like manipulated the police basically into serving me with a protection notice. So when I was given that or when the police officer started to say, 'Hey, we're going to serve you as the respondent,' they had decided that I'm the one that's [the primary aggressor] ... yeah. Sorry, it's still, it's traumatic, it's traumatising.

Sarah's and Jessica's accounts point to the problem of how victim-survivors' demeanour and use of violence might be misinterpreted, and these problems can be amplified in BWC recordings, particularly if police and other state agents interpreting footage are not trauma informed. In brief, their violent resistance or reactive violence and self-defence have all too often been classed as violence and led to the incorrect issuing of orders, criminalisation and failure to protect vulnerable parties (Hester 2012; Johnson 2010; O'Dell 2007).

Police fail to inform victim-survivors that they are using BWCs

As noted earlier, Jessica was not informed by the police that she was being recorded when they attended the incident. Other participants also flagged that they were not told or asked about the use of BWCs. For example, Olivia felt that she should have been told that she was being recorded and was later shocked to learn of and see the footage. She explained:

I think they need to tell you that they're on, because I mean the first time I had experience with them at my house, I didn't know they were being used, so they should be telling everyone that they're on. I think during my interactions with them I did notice they were wearing cameras, but I didn't know it was all being recorded ... from the start ... And once I saw the footage, I was like, 'Wow, yeah, the whole thing was recorded.' I didn't really realise.

Another participant, Jessica, similarly felt aggrieved about not being consulted or having the opportunity to provide permission for a BWC to be used. While she did not feel that this would have changed her actions at the scene, she did feel that it would have been 'decent' for the police to inform her. Jessica noted:

I didn't know I was being recorded. Yeah ... I feel like that is massive ... they should say, 'Just a heads up, we're all wearing body-worn cameras.' It wouldn't change what I would have said, but ... I just feel like it would be the decent thing to do.

What is noteworthy is that across Australian jurisdictions there is no uniformity in relevant privacy and evidence legislation or BWC policy, and thus not all jurisdictions require officers to inform victim-survivors that they are recording or to gain their consent to be recorded (Iliadis et al. 2022). For instance, in New South Wales, consent is required to record, whereas in Queensland it is not. As noted by participants, however, the presence of a BWC and live recording of a scene can be both jarring and confronting for victim-survivors who only after the incident become aware that they were being recorded. Victim-survivors of sexual assault and/or intimate partner violence consulted in Saulnier, Couture-Carron and Scholte's (2022) Canadian study also emphasised their concerns about not being informed of or consenting to BWC recordings.

Privacy concerns for victim-survivors

Several participants felt that not only is there a lack of informed consent regarding the use of BWCs, but there is also fear about who would view that footage and how it would be stored and used. Simone, for instance, raised concerns about the possibility of officers sharing footage from the scene with perpetrators of DFV. In explaining her concerns, she reflected on anecdotal stories featured in news media where police have been identified as sharing victim-survivors' private information with perpetrators. She stated:

As much as you do want to trust people, there's all the news where we've got police being stood down for handing out the address of a domestic violence victim to the husband ... It's despicable and I hate to throw everyone in with the same kind of ... judge[ment] ... but I would rather do that than be one of the anomalies where it happens.

The lack of knowledge of where police store the footage and how it is used also warrants attention and appeared to impede participants' confidence in police and justice processes. Simone highlighted a sense of uncertainty about the procedures regarding BWC footage:

I mean, the only real kind of issue that I see, other than the trust with the police, I mean, you have procedures in place, the whole stop-starting of a shift, is the storage and that kind of stuff. You'd want to make sure it was absolutely secure, keeping it for a certain amount of time, longer if there's courts involved, who has access to it ...

Likewise, Amelia felt that there was no transparency around the storage of and police access to BWC footage. She said:

I think that for some victims that, yeah, there would be concerns about how is that [the footage] going to be used, how does it get stored, who accesses it, all of that kind of stuff. Because to the general public, if you don't have connections to the police force, you don't know how their systems work. So you would just be of that assumption that once it's stored everyone can access it.

Privacy concerns about BWC data retention, storage and access have been raised by civil bodies (Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights & Upturn 2017). As participants emphasised, without transparent and accessible information, policy and guidance in relation to BWC data, they worried about the security, misuse and sharing of recordings of their most vulnerable moments. This was heightened by a fear of police misconduct, footage or victim-survivor information being shared or perpetrators viewing or having a copy of footage. In the absence of this information, the police—and BWC—were not perceived as a source of safety but could contribute to retraumatisation.

Perpetrators can use BWCs as part of their coercive control tactics

Coercive control is an effective and devastating form of DFV, in particular because perpetrators can capitalise on existing structures of gender and sex inequality that give them power over the victim-survivor (Stark 2007). By leveraging these systems of oppression, perpetrators entrap the victim-survivor, with few avenues of escape. Tactics include perpetrators using legal systems and law enforcement to further isolate victim-survivors, which communicates to the victim-survivor that the perpetrator has ultimate control (Douglas 2018). Participants observed how BWCs can become part of the perpetrator's coercive control tactics and that BWCs are easily turned into tools that further entrap victim-survivors. The tactics they described included perpetrators manipulating the scene being filmed and acting calm and rational when police had the BWCs on. Participants also reported that BWCs did not capture the breadth of coercive control, instead only collecting evidence of specific incidents.

Perpetrators can change their behaviour when the police arrive

Participants spoke of feeling that BWCs allowed perpetrators to control the scene the police viewed and cameras recorded, and that they were aware of perpetrators managing their image. This mostly manifested in the perpetrator seeming calm when police arrived and the footage showing the victim-survivor behaving in ways that police interpreted as aggressive. As Charlotte explained:

[The BWC footage] just captures me being dramatic and the perpetrator being calm and friendly ... I think police just need a better understanding of how perpetrators work and how they do become nice when authority steps in. Because they don't want to look like the bad guy, they want people to feel sorry for them.

Several participants noted that police often converse with the perpetrator in a friendly manner, as if they were 'mates', whereas the victim-survivor is treated with suspicion. This allows the perpetrator to control how both he and the victim-survivor are viewed. Jessica detailed how the perpetrator in her case leveraged cultural stereotypes about female victim-survivors, such as her having mental health issues:

... the things he was trying to say about me, like I have mental health issues, which I don't, yeah. It is, it's scary ... I guess one of the things I was weighing up was ... he was so calm. And then the police said that he was in shock. And it's like but he's not in shock, you can see he's not in shock. He's just putting on a really good act. I was in shock ... They were like talking to him about like dogs and holidays and [questioning] 'How long have you lived here then, mate?', and all this. And to me, it was like, just because you called us, doesn't mean you're the victim.

Amelia likewise felt that police do not comprehend what perpetrator manipulation looks like and misunderstand how and why victim-survivors are driven to defend themselves. She stated:

I think that any human being when you're driven to try and defend yourself, where it's about keeping yourself alive, you would pick up whatever you could to protect yourself. By the time the police get there, that other person that has attacked that you're trying to protect yourself from is all cool, calm and collected. 'Look at that, she stabbed me. You need to charge her.' Then that's what they automatically believe.

Similarly, Deborah felt that perpetrators often do not appear out of control and carefully manage their image. This results in women seeming 'crazy':

Perpetrators of violence stop, they stop when police arrive, they stop when someone knocks at the door ... I speak from my own experience probably more than anything. But I think it's pretty rare that the police would come out and the perpetrator is still off his tree. I think that would be very rare, because they don't want the police to see them like that ... Instances where perpetrators have been the calm one and actually it's the woman who looks crazy and violent and, yeah, harmful.

Perpetrators can manipulate the scene

Alongside perpetrators acting calm and in control when the BWCs are on, participants also highlighted that perpetrators often manipulate the scene when the police arrive. In the stories recounted, women were sometimes provoked, with perpetrators turning on their phone cameras to record women's reactions. Olivia explained how she had been working overseas for two weeks and wanted to see her child when she returned home. The perpetrator refused to bring the child to her and threatened to kill her (Olivia) several times. Her lack of sleep, jetlag and fear combined to cause her to react in (justifiable) anger, which the perpetrator then filmed and showed to the police. Olivia explained:

I'd been threatened I was going to die so many times the next morning, I was petrified. My cortisol was going round and round in my body, and I couldn't sleep a wink, so I didn't sleep a wink that night ... And then he comes home early in the morning, about 7.30 am, without the child purposely too; it was purposeful emotional abuse ... And so I just went crazy, swearing at him. And it was all manipulated. He filmed me swearing at him. This is what I've heard actually quite a lot of them do; they do something which will really make you [respond], like withholding a child or something, and then they film it.

Police were then called to Olivia's home, and she was eventually served with an intervention order. Likewise, Jessica recounted how the perpetrator forced his way into her house, and filmed her reaction, which he then showed to the police as 'evidence' that she was the aggressor:

He was filming me. So, once he had gained entry, he was filming me and saying, 'You're crazy, you're crazy, you're crazy.' Because I was reacting to his abuse. So, I took his phone and I called 000.

Perpetrator image-management, manipulation and attempted collusion with police are understudied (Bancroft 2002; Ferguson 2021). However, scholarly inquiries and state reviews of BWC footage of material relating to DFV homicide victims points to the need to take these concerns seriously, and bolster training and recognition in this area (Harris 2020; Ratcliffe 2021). If officers do not have knowledge of perpetrator strategies, abusers are able to construct a narrative in which they are the victim of a 'crazy' victim-survivor.

BWCs only capture incidents, not patterns of abuse

As participants detailed in their accounts, BWCs allowed perpetrators to control and manipulate what was seen in the footage. This was partly because BWCs can only record incidents and cannot capture patterns of abuse or course-of-conduct crimes (Harris 2020; International Association of Chiefs of Police 2017). Participants felt that this is one of the disadvantages of BWCs, which also reflects a lack of understanding among police about the nature of men's coercive control and DFV in general.

Melanie explained how BWC footage often shows the breaking point of victim-survivors but not all the events leading up to that point: ‘the camera cannot show the emotional damage that’s been done over the months before or ... years before the person finally rings the police to help them to get them out’. Sarah similarly felt that BWCs cannot provide a true reflection of the events or what has led to the actions of the victim-survivor. She explained:

When they’re recording, everyone handles stress in different ways and everyone reacts differently ... So, if you’re fairly emotional and stressed, if you showed that to a third party, it’s not a true reflection of [them], unless you know what has happened. These cops come to your house for two minutes, five minutes, whatever; they don’t know the 12 years’ history of everything that’s gone on and they don’t really care. You can’t explain in that amount of time.

Participants felt that perpetrators should not be able to use BWCs as part of their coercive control tactics and the fact that this is possible indicates that there are significant limitations to their use for DFV. Research by Barlow (2022) in the UK context has similarly found that while BWC footage has the potential to document physical injuries and victim-survivors’ statements at the scene in the immediate aftermath of an incident, it cannot capture the ongoing contexts and patterns that characterise DFV. Indeed, this was acknowledged by a Victoria Police officer in a review of BWCs in DFV policing:

We know we’ve all got a problem with the incident-based approach to family violence ... But maybe this [BWC evidence] is just another practise, another improvement that actually just has the result of narrowing the focus of police to what criminal offence has been conducted here in the moment. (McCulloch et al. 2020: 31)

BWCs reveal issues in police policy and practice

Participants explained how not only was BWC footage manipulated by perpetrators but police would selectively record incidents and evidence. According to participants, police also made it difficult for victim-survivors to access the footage, so that they were often not able to use it in court to support their statements. In this regard, the issues raised by participants highlight concerns about policy and practice that ought to be contextualised against the lived experiences of victim-survivors with BWC engagement.

The selective use and manipulation of BWC footage

Several participants maintained that the BWC footage they saw in court did not accurately reflect what had happened. They attributed this to police editing or manipulating what was recorded, omitting certain sections of the recording.

Emily was accused of assaulting not only her ex-partner but also the police. However, she maintained that the BWC recording did not show these alleged assaults, nor did it show how police were interacting with her. She explained:

I said to [my lawyer], ‘You see, where does it show that I’m assaulting them?’ ... they [the police] can turn the camera [on] and use it to their advantage. So yeah, even though they had their body-worn cameras, it wasn’t showing ... you could hear my voice, but it wasn’t showing what they were doing to me, yeah, basically.

Elaine believed that police used BWC footage selectively to misrepresent her as being aggressive towards her ex-partner and towards them. She also described being mistreated and assaulted by police:

I started to leave the property and the police officer is going, 'Move on, move on', like this and I'm like, 'Oh my god, what, you're telling me to move on when I just told you I'm going down to the police station and speaking to someone else?' All this is on camera, but the camera angle doesn't get me leaving the property ... I'm on the footpath ... and I'm accosted by two police officers physically for absolutely no reason. I'm just standing there. So that footage has my reaction to being assaulted by him and the police, and as I said, the police just suddenly ... put the camera on and just went, 'Oh, look at this crazy woman'.

Emily and Elaine pointed to a need to consider how 'camera[s] can, and do, lie—or at least produce multiple versions of truth' (McKay & Lee 2020: 3). The positioning of the camera on an officer has been said to foster 'camera [view] perception bias' (Boivin et al. 2017) or 'camera view bias' (Taylor 2016), referring to the way the viewer is invited to associate with the officer's perspective and place, behind the camera (Harris 2020). Elaine suggested that the officer in her case was conscious of how this occurred and used his words and movements to create a false visual record of the scene and her actions.

Drawing on interviews with police detainees, Taylor and Lee (2019) raise concerns that BWCs might enable officer manipulation (selective recording) and editing of footage and support the false notion that footage depicts objective truth or reality. Emily's and Elaine's accounts speak to the manipulation that may occur and how this serves to foster misidentification and a false 'reality' of violence. Simone spoke explicitly about editing and how this could create a particular narrative and image of those at the scene, indicating that this was contrived. She noted that her ex-partner is a police officer, so she had more insight into BWCs than many civilians. She highlighted how the footage would sometimes be edited post-recording:

I've actually seen the editing process where it's been cut down to a select little piece which made the police officers involved look better or the offender look worse. I've been present when the editing process has happened which, yeah, it concerns me and that's something I have to live with. But that's why this is so important to me because I can't believe that it hasn't been brought up before.

Gatekeeping access to and use of footage

Several participants found it difficult to obtain the BWC footage and felt that the process of seeking to obtain footage was made intentionally arduous by police. They claimed that it was particularly challenging to access recordings if the footage did not show the police in a positive way. Olivia was threatened by her ex-partner, which was recorded on the police's BWC, yet because they did not use the correct procedure (caution him) at the call-out, no action could be taken against him. Olivia said:

I have rung the police and I have said to them, 'This guy is talking about threatening to kill me on your body-worn camera. Can we get him charged for assault? Can we do something about this?' They've said twice to me, 'No, we can't because we haven't cautioned him with whatever he says to us may be used in evidence. We never cautioned him, so we can't use it.'

Olivia felt that this gave the perpetrator full confidence that he could threaten and harm her with little recourse. As a result, Olivia has been retraumatised and she felt that the perpetrator's abuse of her was 'enabled' by the police. She explained:

It's traumatic. I've got post-traumatic stress disorder, and just can't get over it really, because it's, well, I'm still in court. See, because he's been enabled by this cop in the beginning, that's given him so much bravado in court. Anyway, with this police body-worn footage, nobody's even viewed it. It's been submitted to the court back in July 2019, but nobody's ever viewed it, and we've been to so many trials and so many mentions, and it hasn't been viewed.

Elaine was accused of assaulting both the police and her ex-partner. She sought access to the footage but her request was denied. The charges against her were dismissed once her lawyer was able to request and gain access to the BWC footage. Elaine felt that the police's reluctance to provide the footage was because it did not support the police narrative, and because it showed the bruises from injuries caused by the police:

So, in court, the footage never came out. I got a very good solicitor who sent the police a letter that said if you pursue this we're going to be claiming costs of you being violent before, and it was dismissed. The police pulled out early on because they knew that I had a really good solicitor and because I was covered in bruises, I had evidence.

BWCs provide victim-survivors with validation and security

Many participants had mixed feelings about the use of BWCs. While they felt that there are limitations to their use, they also thought that the footage provides a source of evidence that could validate their accounts. In particular, they remarked that because trauma can impact the recall of events, BWCs can assist by prompting their memory and minimise retraumatisation. A significant finding was that most participants believed that BWCs provide accountability and that they are a useful tool to ensure that both police and perpetrators are held responsible for their actions. Women spoke of BWCs as providing objective evidence, which they saw as leaving no doubt about what had happened. Consequently, many participants felt safer when BWCs were used, and some expressed that they wished BWCs had been used in their cases, as they would have felt more secure.

BWCs can assist with memory recall

The impacts of DFV can cause traumatic memory alterations for victim-survivors (Epstein & Goodman 2019; Jones, Crozier & Strange 2017; Nemeth et al. 2019; Wong et al. 2014). This is not to say that they do not remember things correctly, but that recall of the sequence of events may be impacted, and thus victim-survivors may have trouble providing accurate information to police about the sequence. Several participants noted that when they were able to view the BWC footage of the incident, they were better able to remember what had happened and how it had unfolded.

BWCs can assist with addressing the impacts of trauma on memory

Melanie felt that the presence of a police BWC would assist victim-survivors in court processes, especially because it can be stressful recounting the DFV publicly. She said, ‘Sometimes it’s very hard to talk in court, because you’re so anxious and sometimes, like me, I don’t remember the event properly, so the camera remembers for you.’

Georgia felt that the ability to give a statement and share her version of events via a BWC was useful because the statement was taken immediately following the incident and this meant that the recording and her evidence captured a true, raw account of what she expressed had happened:

I know I had trouble remembering parts of the situation, and I guess ... your first instant with the police when you tell them what’s going on, I guess that’s your most rawest and your most truest maybe.

This sense that the camera ‘remembers for you’ was also evident in Jessica’s account of the use of BWCs, as she was able to clearly see how her ex-partner spoke about her and the DFV incident:

As traumatising as it was, but when ... [the police were] talking to me, [it] probably lasts all about 20 minutes and it’s broken up into chunks and that’s it. Them talking to him, he was rambling away for like an hour maybe, and I think that part, for me, was useful in processing [and thinking], ‘Wow, he flipped a switch like that.’ So it’s horrible, horrific to look back and see the man I loved for, you know, nine years, father of my two children, just throw me under the bus so casually, wow, to protect himself. But in a sense, if I hadn’t ... seen that, I’d have been like, ‘Oh, I don’t know what he said, I don’t know what he did.’ You know. So maybe, trying to see the silver lining there, that I’ve seen it with my eyes, how he [behaved and spoke about me and the situation] ...

In this sense the BWC footage was a reinforcing factor in Jessica recalling how her ex-partner behaved and holding him accountable for his abuse, which further solidified the extent and reality of her victimisation.

BWCs can alleviate retraumatisation

Several participants spoke of how giving evidence via BWCs helps to reduce the retraumatisation that can occur in the court process. Amelia explained that she was terrified when she had to relive what had happened to her by giving evidence, which she was required to do in front of the perpetrator. She felt that BWC footage can assist victim-survivors in this process because it averts ‘a victim having to face the perpetrator’ while giving evidence. Amelia stated that this is important because:

... you’re not having to necessarily live everything. You can go, well, here is the actual recording of what we showed up to and it can give a victim, I guess, a sense of safety of not having to actually walk into the room because you’re not having to then relive it ... The police would be able to use it [the BWC footage] to go, ‘This is why, this is the fourth time we’ve come out and we’ve got a series of videos that show this is what that person is experiencing’.

Another participant, Nicole, reflected on how BWC footage can alleviate some of the burden associated with testifying for victim-survivors:

The last one was a situation that was quite, it was a verbal incident, and very stressful to me, and the fact that they had the body camera there, I mean obviously I just didn’t have to spend the whole day in the police station doing these endless statements. It was just easier.

This is an important consideration in light of research that suggests that the provision of testimony via BWC footage can lead to a reduction in victim-survivor court appearances and can therefore alleviate the harm and burden associated with testifying (Harris 2018, 2020).

BWCs can enhance accountability

The fact that BWCs were seen, by some, to record the incident ‘as it happened’ led many participants to believe that footage can facilitate accountability for both the police and the perpetrator. Participants felt that when the cameras are recording, police and perpetrators alike know that they are being watched.

Accountability of police

Several participants alleged that they had previously been subjected to police brutality, and thought that the cameras could protect them from further harm at subsequent call-outs. Charlotte said:

It means that nobody can do anything wrong to me when they are filming because they’ve got a camera on it. So, if the police were to try and do something wrong towards me, they probably wouldn’t because they’re filming themselves. So, if they were to make a wrongful arrest, they probably wouldn’t, like that time that they put handcuffs on me, they didn’t charge me because there was nothing to charge me with.

Sarah, however, highlighted how BWCs could also protect police as footage could verify their interpretation of the situation and back up their statements:

That accountability I guess, so they're saying one thing, then they've got hopefully footage to back up what they're saying or to like record if there's damage or just to see what has happened.

Melanie saw the potential of BWCs as both facilitating police accountability and protecting the police. She stated, 'I think 100 percent they work really—they should be worn at all times to domestic situations, because it also may protect the policeman as well.'

There has been much discussion in the literature of accountability and BWC, particularly in relation to police use of force and police misconduct (see, for example, Wasserman 2015). In some research, victim-survivors have suggested that BWCs might enable police accountability both in relation to action (misconduct) and inaction (failure to follow police procedures and policies or to respond to the requests of victim-survivors: Harris 2020; see also state commentators in media coverage: Billings 2018; Connaughton 2015; Siossian 2015). A review of a DFV BWC application in Plymouth, United Kingdom, found that the use of BWCs led to improvements in transparency and accountability of police officers attending call-outs (Goodall 2007). More recently, an evaluation of the NSW Police Force BWC initiative suggested improvements in the transparency of, and increase in, police legitimacy, and that this could be attributed to the use of the technology (Davies 2021).

Accountability of perpetrators

Several participants maintained that BWCs could hold perpetrators accountable for their actions. This, they asserted, was made possible because perpetrators know they are being recorded and the resultant footage provides evidence of DFV.

Isla also felt that BWCs can show evidence of the impact of the perpetrator's abuse, which can then be used to hold them accountable. She explained, 'BWCs probably assist in collecting evidence of the damage because, otherwise, it's just hearsay what they put in the affidavit, and that wasn't the true story.'

When asked if she believed that BWCs could hold perpetrators accountable, Sarah replied:

Yes, because they're being recorded too, I guess, so yeah, to a point, as in not really changing their actions or behaviour but at least they know they're being recorded as well so, yeah, and things could be used against them.

Sarah thus challenged the assertion of some BWC proponents that BWC can reduce or prevent violence (see state agent commentary in Aggs 2015). For Sarah, BWCs can aid in documenting DFV, and presumably in justice regulation processes; however, she did not have faith that BWCs can prompt behaviour change or address the underlying drivers of DFV.

BWCs can provide safety

The notion that BWCs can provide safety for victim-survivors was expressed by several participants. These participants described a sense of safety when BWCs were deployed.

Melanie, for instance, was living in a rural area when she was attacked by the perpetrator. She knew that it would take some time for the police to arrive, so she placated the perpetrator until the police attended. When she saw that the officers were using a BWC, she felt great relief.

Melanie stated:

Because it was out in the country, I knew that the policeman would be a little while before he came, so I just tried ... be as nice as possible until the policeman got there. When he got there I was just so relieved, and I could see he had a camera which, if anything happened ... [it] would have been recorded.

Isla saw that BWCs were on when the police arrived, but it was the presence of police that made her feel safe. She said, 'I knew the BWC was on, but I don't think I was really thinking about that at the time of the event, I think just the presence of them was the safety factor'. The presence of a BWC thus appeared to offer a degree of safety and protection to some victim-survivors, in the context of a volatile situation that often involves few (if any) witnesses and heightened risks to physical and psychological safety.

BWC use can increase feelings of safety

Several women who had experienced BWCs noted that the technology was not deployed in all of their interactions with police but emphasised that they wished that it had been used at all of their DFV incidents. Deborah reflected that in one such encounter the police did not accurately report on what had occurred:

I feel so strongly about [the use of BWCs] because I'm in a situation where I need evidence of what actually happened, of what I actually said. If I was to go into the police station, I would have seen the report and signed off on it. But because the police attended our house, they then went away and did the report. So, I wasn't even sure what the report was going to say, but, you know, later, months later, I realised it didn't have all the information I needed, which is what actually occurred. That's why I'm so passionate about it. So, in my situation, where that evidence could be used by the person who knows what happened or by the victim, then yeah, I feel like that could be really helpful.

Nicole's ex-partner had been stalking and harassing her for over 20 years, and she felt that the presence of BWCs would have not only made her feel safer in the past but also minimised the trauma she experienced having to detail the incidents later, at the police station.

I have been a lot involved with police stations, and call-outs with the police. Unfortunately, back then, I should say, because this started 20 years ago, body cameras were not a thing, so I lived on the Sunshine Coast for part of the time, and then I lived in Brisbane, and it wasn't a thing that policemen used. The times they did come out it was never recorded on the body camera, and I often wondered why not, because you could buy it to put it in cars back then, and I did think it would have been very handy to have that then and there, because afterwards you had to come to the station and do the statements. And to have to go through all the emotions that [are] related to these situations and incidents is very stressful, and you're not there just for one, or two, or three hours; sometimes [it's] a whole day with them, slowly tapping away the statement. It was very stressful.

BWCs show objective evidence

The belief that camera footage provides objective evidence and a true representation of events was expressed by numerous participants. Some of these participants highlighted the potential of the visual element to capture irrefutable evidence that leaves no doubt about what happened.

Visual evidence

Simone claimed that the visual nature of BWC technology means that it is 'hard evidence' that shows the 'reality' of what happened. She believed that this leaves little room for interpretation, and that BWC footage is irrefutable, undeniable evidence:

When you have a visual, you can see. So, everyone's perceptions or experiences are all different. You and I could look at the exact same scenario and see two different things, whereas video, it's objective, but obviously then the people who see it, they have their own perceptions of it as well. It's irrefutable. I think it's really beneficial.

Melanie believed that the footage cannot be edited, and thus it helps victim-survivors guard against the potential for police bias:

Well, it's not edited. The police give the full story. They don't just take a section out to make the perpetrator look bad, so I think it's good that it's in court. Yes, 'cause you just don't have the policeman's written statement in his book. You also have a visual to go with his written statement.

However, as Simone noted earlier, and as Taylor and Lee (2019) have explored, police can and do edit footage. For example, this is required by prosecutors to remove inadmissible evidence and identifiable or private information.

Deborah also felt that BWCs provide evidence that is clear and ‘solid’: ‘I just think when it comes to this sort of stuff, everything’s about evidence, everything’s about having solid evidence and documentation of what actually went down.’ In this sense, and as noted by police participants in a study conducted by Iliadis et al. (2022), BWC footage can provide ‘irrefutable’ evidence in the form of ‘real time footage that is date and time stamped to best capture evidence’ (P100, cited in Vakhitova et al. 2022). It therefore ‘removes or reduces the consideration that evidence is hearsay’ (P034, cited in Vakhitova et al. 2022). (It is worth noting that, across Australian jurisdictions, there are differences in exceptions to the hearsay rule.) Some scholars (Harris 2020; McKay & Lee 2020) have critiqued the ability of BWC recordings to represent objective truth and reality; nonetheless, this study found that the presence of footage provided comfort to numerous women in the circumstances outlined above.

Concluding thoughts

Our study was intended to identify how victim-survivors perceive and experience police BWC technologies in DFV responses, and the implications, limitations and potential benefits of the technology at call-outs and in legal proceedings. We also sought to understand how BWC footage is used by state agents and we discovered that the footage has utility for evidentiary purposes, which can assist victim-survivors to negotiate justice processes, specifically by alleviating the distress and discomfort associated with testifying in court. As detailed further below, there are also strengths associated with the provision of BWC footage in justice processes, including that it can bolster evidentiary cases.

Our survey findings revealed that one-third of survey participants encountered a police BWC on one or more occasions. The survey was open to victim-survivors both with and without direct experience of a police BWC, as we sought to capture victim-survivor perceptions and experiences of these technologies and views on their benefits and risks in DFV responses. The survey was disseminated in 2021, when the full rollout of BWCs had not yet been completed in all Australian states and territories (eg the Western Australia Police Force was yet to complete its full rollout). Nonetheless, the survey captured a variety of views and experiences from victim-survivors. Victim-survivors’ engagement with police BWCs at DFV call-outs will continue to grow as BWCs come to play an increasingly important role in operational policing practice across all Australian states and territories.

Also notable among our survey data was that most participants identified as women and the majority resided in Queensland, followed by New South Wales and Victoria. While their primary ancestry was either Australian or English, a smaller percentage of participants identified as German, Indian or Indigenous Australian. Participants mostly reported their primary language as English, followed by Spanish, with a smaller percentage of participants indicating that they spoke another language.

The survey findings revealed that our participants were generally very supportive of the use of police BWCs. Those who had firsthand experience with BWCs were slightly more likely than those who had not to express general support for the use of police BWCs; however, on average, they were slightly less likely to agree that BWCs result in specific benefits for victim-survivors, with differences not being statistically significant. Our analysis of the open-ended survey responses showed that participants generally felt that BWCs provided them with a sense of safety and security. The participants indicated that BWCs offered validation of their victimisation by shedding light on how incidents unfolded at the scene. In some instances, participants reported that BWC footage reaffirmed their decision to leave their violent perpetrator, where they felt they were able to do so. Others observed that BWCs could even help to substantiate their complaints against police where police responses were regarded as ineffective or involving misconduct.

However, survey participants expressed concern that BWCs can violate their privacy, particularly because they capture victim-survivors in highly vulnerable and distressing moments, when medical attention might be required. Some described the difficulty of trying to articulate themselves on camera at a time when they were also experiencing the physical, emotional and physiological impacts of DFV, and that this often heightened feelings of harm. Participants' privacy concerns were closely connected to the possibility of substances (such as drugs or alcohol) being captured on camera, the consequences of which could include charges or wrongful accusations or misinterpretations of the scene and the victim-survivor.

Two significant themes emerged from our interview findings. On the one hand, participants felt that BWCs have the potential to reveal existing issues with police practices and procedures, which can negatively impact some victim-survivors. On the other, participants stated that the presence and recording of a BWC in response to DFV gave them a sense of safety and security.

Participants who supported BWC use spoke about the benefits relating to the technology's ability to provide a 'raw' and 'true' version of events that could not be refuted. These benefits were noted alongside the capacity for BWCs to assist with memory recall because the footage captures the scene as it unfolds in real time and there is opportunity for a victim-survivor to provide a statement directly following the incident. In some instances, the provision of testimony via a BWC can mitigate the burden associated with testifying in court.

These benefits, however, were not realised by other participants, who expressed concern about victim-survivors' presentation at the scene, particularly those who might not conform to idealised constructions of victimhood or have the capacity to coherently articulate and relay their victimisation. This is especially problematic when neurological and psychological trauma impacts the victim-survivor's ability to provide information to or manage their interaction with police or to regulate their emotions. In such circumstances, rather than being recognised as an effect of DFV and trauma, deviation from the 'ideal victim' stereotype can result in police and others regarding a victim-survivor as unreliable or untrustworthy (Harris 2020). A further related issue arises where alcohol and drugs have been consumed by victim-survivors and/or captured on camera, or where victim-survivors' self-defence mechanisms or use of force results in their misidentification as a primary aggressor.

While some participants believed that BWC footage can provide accountability for perpetrators' behaviours, others felt that the footage does not capture ongoing patterns of violence, instead only showing isolated incidents that are often restricted to evidence of physical violence.

Some participants noted privacy concerns arising from the BWC recording in their place of residence, and usually within the context of a highly emotive and charged environment, including where a victim-survivor's character and credibility might be brought into question if they do not present as 'expected'—that is, as calm, rational and not overly hysterical (see Iliadis, Harris et al. 2024). This is noteworthy when considering that perpetrators might initiate the police call-out and the implications this has for victim-survivors, children, and other witnesses and bystanders. In these circumstances, the BWC recording can exacerbate feelings of anxiety and distress, and this was particularly evident where participants felt that they had no agency in consenting to the recording. While there is differing legislation in Australian jurisdictions regarding police being legally obligated to inform that they are recording and obtain consent, a trauma-informed process would provide victim-survivors with choices about the use of BWC, and at the least ensure that they are informed that a BWC is being used.

Ultimately, our findings show that BWCs have the potential to reduce the discomfort, fear and trauma impacts associated with formal responses, particularly insofar as they can make victim-survivors feel a sense of safety and reduce secondary victimisation resulting from state responses. BWCs can even help to validate victim-survivors' victimisation because they can 'show' incidents and some of the effects of DFV. However, as documented in the victim-survivor accounts in this study, debate abounds as to whether BWC footage shows the true extent and consequences of DFV, especially the manifestation and effects of coercive control. Further concerns arose among participants in relation to whether and how their trauma and victimisation would be understood.

A trauma-informed, survivor-centred approach also acknowledges how trauma can often manifest in seemingly out-of-control or unexpected behaviour. It is vital that such a framework is adopted, as a victim-survivor's trauma response can be amplified in the absence of such a framework, and police and court responses can increase the harm and impacts associated with victimisation. Trauma-informed, survivor-centred approach policies and practices should include giving the victim-survivor choice about whether BWCs are used, informing them that BWCs are turned on, and protecting their dignity and privacy (as also recommended by Saulnier, Couture-Carron & Scholte 2022).



Policy implications and recommendations

BWCs have been rolled out across the globe, with surprisingly little review of their impact on the most vulnerable groups they are intended to protect. This is unfortunately true of evaluations of DFV applications (Harris 2020). Moving forward, we call for the perceptions and experiences of victim-survivors to be embedded and central in assessments of BWCs.

Our cohort of participants (in both the survey and the interviews) was diverse and included a range of cultural and linguistic groups and Indigenous Australian victim-survivors. As a whole, they urged the need for culturally sensitive and appropriate responses to DFV.

The victim-survivor participants in this study expressed a range of views about BWCs, including support for and resistance to their deployment. Overall, most believed that BWC technology has the potential to enhance police responses and justice regulation of DFV. However, the cautions and concerns documented in both the survey and the interviews affirm that, for the promise of the technology to be realised and to safeguard against unintended harmful consequences, deployment must be guided by open and consistent policies and police and judicial training, including trauma-informed training. In line with previous research that we have conducted with police, advocates and other practitioners (see Iliadis et al. 2022; Iliadis, Vakhitova et al. 2023; Vakhitova et al. 2022) and international scholarship (see Barlow 2022; Saulnier, Couture-Carron & Scholte 2022), we argue that BWCs alone are not a panacea for the problems arising from DFV policing.

The following policy, practice and research recommendations emphasise the need to recognise, respect and be guided by the lived experiences and expertise of victim-survivors. Additionally, the need for a holistic and trauma-informed response to DFV is key.

Policy recommendations

Legislation pertaining to privacy and evidence differs across states and territories, and differing BWC policy results in variations in consent and recording requirements throughout Australia. Given victim-survivor concerns about cameras being turned on and off at the discretion of the responding officer(s), and victim-survivors not being asked to consent to recording, we propose that the following be developed:

- a review of policy in each jurisdiction and consideration of a consistent national framework, informed by best practice studies, internationally. This is worth pursuing as victim-survivors may be navigating systems and accessing policies in multiple locations; and
- clear and consistent guidelines about when recording is to be activated and stopped.

Victim-survivor anxieties about the editing of, access to and storage of footage speak to broader issues about privacy and data use by police, prosecutors and potentially perpetrators. Confidence in both police and BWCs could be enhanced by ensuring that policy on BWCs and associated data use is made publicly available. To that end, we suggest that police agencies produce plain language, open-access guidelines outlining how footage is:

- edited for court proceedings;
- securely stored and managed;
- accessed (by which parties and what process); and
- requested (by which parties and what process).

There is great potential to harness BWC footage to study, evaluate and bolster on-the-ground policing. Indeed, recommendation 15 of the Independent Commission of Inquiry into Queensland Police Service responses to domestic and family violence (2022: 23) calls for:

... a procedure which requires Officers in Charge to ensure that all frontline officers who attend domestic and family violence occurrences meet with a designated senior officer to receive feedback in relation to a sample of their body worn camera footage at least every six months.

This was to be instituted in early 2023, with the process reviewed in 2024. There is merit in adopting this recommendation in other jurisdictions, particularly once best practice is established in the 2024 review.

Practice recommendations

Medical and other immediate needs of victim-survivors must be given priority at the scene, over taking a BWC statement.

DFV involves perpetrators using a range of strategies, tactics and channels to engage in a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviours. However, a BWC captures the aftermath of a single incident, which arguably focuses only on physical violence or incidents that can be visually documented. Thus, it is important that police training emphasises the dynamics and features of DFV, including its effects on victim-survivors.

The victim-survivor participants emphasised that their interactions with police—their presentation and provision of a statement to officers—were shaped by the effects of DFV, which in some cases included neurological and/or psychological trauma. It is imperative that:

- DFV training includes modules on the impacts of DFV and trauma, and how these may be observed in victim-survivors through their emotional, mental and physical state and how they provide information to police; and
- practice is trauma-informed.

Victim-survivors commented that there are expectations about how they present, based on the ‘ideal victim’ stereotype, to which they are expected to conform. There are potential consequences for those who are said to deviate from this ‘ideal victim’ stereotype, in their manner, emotion, stance and physical appearance, for instance. In this regard, we call for training that challenges:

- stereotypes about ‘ideal victims’; and
- assumptions about objective truth, mental biases and frameworks that influence how victim-survivors may be (narrowly and subjectively) viewed. These issues should be addressed and critiqued by officers in DFV education, training and performance reviews, including in supervisory evaluation of footage as outlined in recommendation 15 of the Independent Commission of Inquiry into Queensland Police Service responses to domestic and family violence (2022).

Given fears about misidentification and perpetrator responses to police, we urge that police training involves consideration of the following:

- Primary aggressors are not always correctly identified.
- Misidentification occurs and disproportionately impacts certain cohorts (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victim-survivors, victim-survivors with disabilities, culturally and linguistically diverse victim-survivors, criminalised victim-survivors).
- Violence may be used by victim-survivors in self-defence and violent resistance.
- Perpetrators may seek to manipulate and collude with police.

Recognising that BWCs cannot capture all presentations of violence and dynamics, and most often capture an incident and/or aftermath of an incident, it is important that BWC evidence is viewed and interpreted in concert with other evidence and accounts of violence (not in isolation).

Victim-survivors expressed concern about how BWCs can ‘hide’ the actions, inaction or misconduct of police who are out of camera view. Thus, we suggest that, where possible, officers are in view of each other, so that one officer’s camera can capture the conduct and image of the others. Where this is not possible, it might be flagged or noted in a post-incident report. This would offer greater transparency and accountability of police action and inaction and a point of recourse for victim-survivors if they feel that their safety and needs were not attended to and wish to review police decision-making processes at the scene.

Research recommendations

At the time this research was conducted, BWC rollout was expanding and changing with regard to policy and practice. It is vital that the following take place:

- reviews of BWC initiatives that feature (and centre) victim-survivor voices; and
- comparison of BWC initiatives in various jurisdictions, providing insights into particular policy and practice. For instance, this could include evaluating differences between jurisdictions where victim-survivors are informed of and required to consent to recordings and those where they are not. Such an examination would provide insights into the benefits and limitations of different police BWC policy, programs and applications, to determine best practice.

Victim-survivors expressed concern about the misidentification and criminalisation that can be facilitated by the use of BWCs. While the issue of misidentification is not facilitated by BWCs alone, participants contend that the technology can potentially exacerbate and enable misidentification. Some participants had encountered a BWC, whereas others had not, and some were unsure whether BWCs were even used in call-outs, including in their own incident. More research is needed in this area to chart this possible unintended consequence.

It was beyond the scope of this study to assess the impact of BWCs on children in DFV responses. Recognising that children are themselves victim-survivors and that there are potential implications of using BWC footage in custody and child protection matters, this is a key area of enquiry that needs further investigation.

BWC footage can assist victim-survivors with statement provision and memory recall, but there was concern about how it would be presented in court and the potential repercussions for victim-survivors, particularly 'non-ideal' victim-survivors. This was especially so for those whose account at court differed from the recorded evidence or who recanted or declined to proceed and were presented as hostile witnesses. There is a need to understand the impacts of DFV victimisation.

To date, there has been no in-depth examination of BWC deployment or the role of footage in investigations, breaches and prosecutions, including understanding what evidence is admissible and what is not. Such examination is needed, especially in light of recent legislative changes, such as the criminalisation of coercive control in New South Wales. To that end, we recommend examination of BWCs in the policing and court spheres to better understand how the technology might enable:

- investigations;
- the imposition of intervention or protection orders;
- responses to breaches of intervention or protection orders; and
- justice responses in relation to new legislation (such as coercive control).

Future research also needs to ensure that victim-survivor perceptions and experiences of BWC use in police and court settings are taken into consideration, as well as any repercussions for victim-survivors, particularly where the footage differs from statements at court or where victim-survivors recant or are presented as hostile witnesses. Victim-survivors contend that BWC footage does not increase the evidentiary standard in DFV cases. Instead, they suggest that use of the technology may contribute to police downplaying that which is not captured in footage (violence that is not ‘visible’)—specifically, non-physical harms. This has implications for policy and legislation, such as criminalisation of coercive control, that seeks to enhance recognition and regulation of all forms of entrapment and abuse that perpetrators enact (Barlow 2022). This is important because BWC footage cannot capture the course of conduct—that is, the pattern of violence and diverse strategies exercised by perpetrators. It is much more likely that BWC footage can document physical harms as opposed to individualised emotional and psychological harms and impacts experienced by victim-survivors. We argue that future researchers and state agents (in the police and in the courts) must recognise that footage shows only one incident of police intervention. This does not represent the lived reality of DFV and so footage should be viewed alongside other evidence of ongoing patterns and behaviours that characterise DFV.

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