

# CANDID CAMERAS

**Richie McBride** explains how *BodyWorn Cameras* represent the latest and perhaps most effective method for advancing prison security.

**O**ne of the enduring trends among the majority of prisons internationally is the issue of overcrowding, and the associated problems this creates. The number of prisoners in England and Wales has nearly doubled over the last two decades, while a notable proportion of institutions in the United States are operating at 40 percent over their maximum capacities. The evidence is clear: prison services are under immense strain with limited resources at their disposal. As a result, prison environments are rife with tension and correctional staff are more stretched than any of their predecessors in recent history, both of which spur abusive behaviour and increase the likelihood of dangerous incidents such as riots. Serious assaults in English and Welsh prisons skyrocketed from 1,278 in 2012 to 3,372 in 2016, prompting the Ministry of Justice to conduct a consultation and instigate a plan on nationwide reform.

The most obvious solution is to build more prisons or reduce the number of future inmates through effective rehabilitation programmes and more lenient

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sentencing. Constructing prisons, however, is a lengthy and costly enterprise at a time when governments still have to diligently manage their budgets. Moreover, the current network of prisons will not experience the rewards of further rehabilitation programmes in reducing recidivism for at least a few years. With governments, prisoners and correctional staff at breaking point, there has to be other, more immediate, options available for prison safety and security.

Technology provides many of the answers in this regard. CCTV surveillance has been widely employed within prisons since the nineties and its prevalence has been growing year on year. Modern facilities are designed with integrated CCTV systems at the forefront, which reflects the importance of video technology already present in the judicial services sector. The ability to keep track of inmates' actions, particularly in communal areas, and record video footage of incidents as evidence grants wardens greater

levels of control and supports disciplinary structures in prisons. Yet CCTV technology is limited, and the extent to which it can affect improved inmate behaviour has not been thoroughly tested. The few studies that have been conducted have revealed that while CCTV has a positive impact on non-violent behaviour, it largely fails to reduce violent behaviour, which is the most damaging to morale, life and property. The limitation with CCTV systems lies in their passive nature; it's all too easy for prisoners to forget about their existence during a heated, spontaneous and possibly violent confrontation.

Body Worn Camera (BWC) technology, on the other hand, shows promise for its application within prisons. BWCs are small, lightweight and durable devices designed to be worn on the prison officers' uniform to record evidential quality audio and visual evidence of incidents. Most BWCs are encrypted and are used in conjunction with secure back-office video management software to protect confidential and sensitive footage. Having been predominantly associated with police forces for the last few years, BWCs are quickly becoming widespread and are now deployed for various use cases in a range of industries, including prison services.

### STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

A key component of the drive in the UK to improve not only security, but also prison conditions for inmates and staff alike, centred on a nationwide deployment of state-of-the-art BWC technology. Justice Minister Claire Sugden commented on the recent roll-out of Edesix VideoBadge BWCs: "I believe this is a significant and important step in ensuring that prison officers have the right tools to perform their difficult and challenging role and will contribute to a safer prison environment for both staff and prisoners".

Pilot schemes of the BWCs in 'high-risk areas' of the prison network in Northern Ireland suggest that they could be used to promote reassurance, modify behaviour, prevent harm and deter prisoners from flouting prison rules. It is hoped the cameras will foster a safer working environment for wardens and instil greater harmony between inmates by acting as a visible deterrent for possible outbursts of abusive behaviour and violence. Through equipping themselves with BWCs, prison staff can quell violent behaviour before it even begins. Prisoners are made aware that both their actions and the staff's actions are



**Staff can dock their BWC at the end of their shift to upload footage**

being carefully monitored and recorded in evidential HD quality to support disciplinary action or even criminal charges. Initial trials of BWCs in prisons have been well received by all parties involved, and since the cameras are only mounted on prison wardens, the impact of inmate privacy is minimised when compared with traditional CCTV. BWCs also work in conjunction with CCTV to supplement static recorded footage with point-of-view visual and, crucially, audio evidence.

As well as moderating prisoner behaviour, BWCs make prison wardens and correctional officers accountable for their actions. The BWCs chosen by HMPS in Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland as well as private prisons throughout the UK, are able to record for a full eight-hour shift, and allow supervisors and management to follow up claims of prisoner abuse. A reciprocal confidence-inspiring effect is therefore created, whereby staff feel safer and prisoners are encouraged to be more comfortable.

Individual prisons can also tailor BWC policies to their specific requirements. For example, a minimum-security prison may suggest that continuous recording is unnecessary and the BWCs should only be activated when an incident arises or the officer feels threatened. Maximum-security prisons may take a more suitable

approach involving continuous recording and integrating BWCs with personal alarm systems. The flexibility of the latest BWC technology is a huge advantage for the dynamic and challenging environments prisons pose. Cameras can be transferred to prison wings and sectors where staff are most in need of protection from abuse, without changing any of the associated infrastructure used to manage the BWC network. BWCs can, therefore, be a cost-effective, quick and flexible method for reducing violent or abusive behaviour and improving officer safety within prisons.

### DATA MANAGEMENT

Sceptics of BWCs cite the management of data and bureaucratic burden as fundamental obstacles of organisation-wide deployments, however the advent of large-scale software developments has facilitated automatic IP uploads and data management across entire sites. Indeed, it is now the case that staff can instantly assign themselves a camera using their access cards and simply dock the device at the end of their shift to un-assign and securely offload footage – that really is as complex as it gets. Innovations have made supervisory and evidence gathering processes



much easier for management. Advanced video management software generates automatic reports detailing camera usage, conditions, audits and volume of footage recorded by an estate of BWCs.

One of the developments crucial to the success of BWC systems in prisons is CCTV network integration. Some BWC manufacturers, such as Edesix Ltd., offer software packages, which allow both, live and recorded BWC footage to be viewed alongside static CCTV feeds in control rooms. These features mean supervisors in prisons can manage the CCTV network and Body Worn system together under one Video Management System, rather than

## THE EVIDENCE IS CLEAR: PRISON SERVICES ARE UNDER IMMENSE STRAIN WITH LIMITED RESOURCES

splitting their time between surveillance mediums. Complete evidence packages can then be created, with POV video and audio provided by BWCs, which supplement wider, more contextual views from static CCTV cameras.

Body Worn technology has already proved its effectiveness and value for money within many aspects of the criminal justice sector, and so the growing prevalence of BWCs in prisons is the next logical step. Police forces all over the globe are increasingly issuing BWCs as integral operational

equipment to capture court-ready evidence, refute false claims and de-escalate heated situations. A study conducted by Cambridge University found that police officers wearing BWCs received 93 percent fewer complaints and led to a “profound change in modern policing”. Similar benefits are expected to be experienced by correctional officers sporting BWCs including much improved morale among staff members and more harmonious relationships between inmates and officers; not to mention the usefulness of the videos captured for real-life incident training and identification of best practice techniques, so as to improve prison security well into the future.

Deployment of BWCs to prisons has been growing primarily in the US and UK as the transferable benefits become more apparent. Prison services in Asia are also observing how BWCs can transform prison environments, with unit sales in the region forecast to total over 16,300 per year by 2020. While BWCs are not the sole remedy for tempering aggression and establishing sufficient officer safety in prisons, they are effective in facilitating and supporting other aspects of correctional reform, which together with increased investment should lead to improved prison security. Further technological advancements, such as smaller BWC devices and faster network infrastructure, will hopefully see Body Worn Video become an essential component of prison security, ushering in new models for controlling prisoner behaviour and minimising abuse from both sides of the bars ●

**Richie McBride** is co-founder and managing director of Edesix, an Edinburgh-based market leader in the provision of body worn camera solutions. He has over 25 years of experience in software development and product management, and launched Edesix in 2002.



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