



TRIBAL INSIGHTS

THE SMALL RURAL TRIBAL BODY-WORN CAMERA PROGRAM

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For Indigenous People the Question About Cameras Becomes a Question About Sovereignty



Indigenous residents in Arizona support police body-worn cameras (BWC) in principle but only if policies are written with their input. A 2025 study of 16 Indigenous community members found the central issue is not just transparency, but tribal sovereignty over when, where, and how cameras record.

Flagstaff, Arizona sits at the convergence of four tribal territories, where tribal, municipal, and state police jurisdictions often overlap. Between July and August 2025, a researcher conducted interviews with 11 justice-involved participants, meaning those incarcerated within the past five years, and five community members without recent incarceration. Ages ranged from 21 to 64. All identified as Indigenous (participant names are pseudonyms).

Cameras as Personal Protection

At a basic level, most participants liked the idea of BWCs. The reasoning was personal, since footage had helped someone they knew, or could have.

“There are certain ceremonies where we’re not supposed to be recording or taking pictures,” said Morgan. Justice-involved participants backed BWC use at roughly the same rate as those without recent incarceration, challenging the assumption that those exposed to the system would be more hostile to surveillance tools. However, that support came with conditions.

Several participants described being told in court that footage existed, then never seeing it. Participants observed that officers control recordings and decide what is captured. “You could see them telling the other officer, ‘Hey, turn off your body cam,’” said Jordan. “They turn off the audio and have a private conversation about something going on and they’re not supposed to do that.” When asked about ceremonies, the conversation shifted entirely. For many participants, sweat lodges, sun dances, ghost dances, and prayer ceremonies are spaces where recording is forbidden. The presence of a camera is understood as a spiritual violation.

“There are certain ceremonies where we’re not supposed to be recording or taking pictures,” said Morgan. Participants said the concern was not hypothetical, noting that some non-Native officers may not recognize ceremonies or understand the harm caused by recording them. Participants also described situations where cameras could have provided protection. Taylor described a medicine man whose sacred feathers were taken by officers on the reservation: “If they had been wearing cameras, we would have evidence that they took them.”

Let Tribal Communities Decide

Participants called for tribal governments to hold final authority over camera use, storage, access, and violations. Officers must be educated about the cultures they police as a condition of operating with integrity. Participants requested exemptions for sacred ceremonies, end-of-life moments, and children.

The report frames this as sovereignty and Indigenous self-governance. “Any implementation must be shaped in collaboration with and led by Indigenous communities themselves.”

Click [HERE](#), to read the full report on *Indigenous Perspectives on Body-Worn Cameras: Cultural and Community Considerations*



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