

ARMED AND DANGEROUS

Americans drop dead as police get Taser-happy

Are cops underestimating stun gun's lethal power?

Posted: December 28, 2008 4:59 pm Eastern

By Drew Zahn © 2009 WorldNetDaily

Even though the news is inundated with stories of people dying after being stunned by Tasers, police departments all over the nation are adding the electric-shock weapons to their arsenals, convinced the benefits outweigh the risks.

Research by WND revealed several news stories from just this month of police departments newly equipping themselves with the electric stun guns, including law officers in [Maryland](#), [Florida](#), [New York](#), [Michigan](#) and even a small community of 15,000 in [Pennsylvania](#), where the 22 full-time officers will be receiving 12 new Tasers.



The TASER X26, a top law enforcement model

In other cities, the number of Tasers already in use is skyrocketing: [Durham, N.C.](#), plans to double its police arsenal from 110 to 235, and a Georgia police chief is [hoping to add 1,000 more stun guns](#) to the Atlanta metro.

The [Taser company's website](#) includes testimonials from dozens of police departments, from nearly every state in the U.S.; and a statement from New York's Delaware County Sheriff's Department – which armed itself with Tasers last week – claims 13,400 law enforcement, correctional and military agencies in 44 countries use the device, having fired it on a cumulative total of more than 624,000 people.

The Taser stun gun is the most common brand of a conductive energy device, or CED, which fires 50,000 volts of electricity through its target from as far as 35 feet away, causing uncontrollable muscle contraction and temporary immobilization.

For many of law enforcement agencies now using the device, the Taser is viewed as a safe alternative to guns, nightsticks or physical force in restraining uncooperative subjects.

In Johnsonburg, Pa., Police Chief Bryan Parana is proud to boast the first police department in his county to use Tasers.

"It's one of the most researched electronic devices out there. What I want to get across is it's not electrocution," Parana told the DuBois Courier-Express, "It is an electronic device which incapacitates."

The safety of the device, however, is becoming a matter of hot debate, and, as more and more news stories are beginning to reveal, it's an electric device that can also kill.

Two days after the city of San Jose, Calif., agreed to pay \$70,000 to the wife and child of a man who died in 2005 after police jolted him with Tasers, the city is the center of controversy again after area law enforcement officers fired the device into 26-year-old Edwin Rodriguez.

Family members drove Rodriguez to the Valley Medical Center after he suffered an attack of his chronic schizophrenia. When he resisted treatment, however, police pinned him to the ground and stunned him with a Taser, reportedly four times.

Rodriguez died within the hour, the fifth person to have died in the city after being shocked by police since San Jose issued Tasers to officers in 2004.

According to the human rights organization, Amnesty International, deaths like Rodriguez happen too often to be freak accidents.

An [Amnesty International report](#) titled "USA: Less than lethal?" records 334 people have died after being stunned by Tasers in the U.S. between 2001 and August 2008, including 55 in California and 52 in Florida.

"Tasers are not the 'non-lethal' weapons they are portrayed to be," said Angela Wright, author of the report. "They can kill and should only be used as a last resort."

Proponents of Tasers, however, disagree that the devices pose any serious health threat. Deputy Dan Deering, a Taser trainer for Michigan's Jackson County Sheriff's Office – which began using the weapons in the fall – told the Jackson Citizen Patriot that there are "stacks and stacks" of medical documents backing the Taser's safety.

"Tasers generate a lot of volts, but not a lot of amps," Deering told the newspaper. "It's not the volts that kill you, it's the amps."

Police also testify that the weapons reduce injuries to both officers and suspects, and that even the threat of a Taser's excruciating pain is often a sufficient deterrent.

In Howard County, Md., which lies between Baltimore and Washington, police spokeswoman Sherry Llewellyn told the Baltimore Examiner, "We've actually only had to discharge the devices about once a month because simply having the weapon displayed is enough to get suspects to comply."

Critics worry, however, that the very confidence police officers have in Tasers causes them to underestimate their potentially lethal power.

"We're seeing more fatalities following their use," American Civil Liberties Union attorney Peter Bibring told the Mercury News, "and it raises questions about whether they are as safe as the manufacturer claims."

Southern Christian Leadership Conference President Charles Steele Jr. questions the plan to equip Atlanta's police officers with the stun guns.

"What the problem has been," Steele told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, "is that people who've been given permission to use them ... say, 'Oh, it's not a real weapon to a large degree, and I'm going to use this gun without thinking of the ramifications.'"

And while the Taser company, the Associated Press reports, maintains that the devices cannot kill, the increasing use of the stun guns – and the increasing number of deaths connected to their use – is starting to draw critics in both the courtroom and the laboratory.

In June, the San Jose Mercury News reports, a federal jury found Taser International partly responsible for the 2005 death of Robert C. Heston, whom Salinas, Calif., police jolted repeatedly during an arrest. According to California Lawyer magazine, the verdict was the company's first courtroom loss after 70 dismissals and settlements.

And while the Amnesty International report did concede that most of the 334 deaths it recorded were attributed to other medical factors such as drug intoxication, the report cited that coroners have concluded Taser shocks did indeed cause or contribute to at least 50 of the deaths.

A study done by researchers commissioned by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and reported by the Associated Press also concluded that over time, Tasers can begin to malfunction and fire with up to 50 percent more power than their manufactured limits. Further, the study found, even stun guns firing at expected electrical levels carry some risk of inducing cardiac arrest.

"Scientists who had evaluated the Taser to start with said, 'Well, there's zero probability of death.' I'm sure that's not the case," Pierre Savard, co-author of the study, told The Arizona Republic. "I'm 100 percent certain that cardiac diseases increase the risk of death after receiving Taser shock. I think there's enough scientific evidence for that."

Taser International, the AP reports, called the study flawed.

"Regardless of whether or not the anomaly (high-firing guns) is accurate," Taser Vice President Steve Tuttle said, "it has no bearing on safety."

"Independent medical and scientific experts have determined TASER devices to be a safer use-of-force option compared to traditional use-of-force tools," asserts the company's website. "Field studies have reaffirmed the life-saving value of TASER devices."

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