

Amnesty International reports 152 taser-related deaths in the US

Electric shock becomes accepted police procedure

By Andre Damon
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The use of taser weapons by US police has been linked to 152 deaths since 2001, according to a report published Tuesday by Amnesty International. The report found that most fatal taser electrocutions involved unarmed subjects who posed no serious threat to cops or civilians at the time of weapon discharge. Many were electrocuted while already in restraints and/or received multiple electroshocks.

The report points to the systematic misuse of tasers by police and in prisons, documenting their utilization on the mentally ill, children, pregnant women and the elderly. It also highlights the widespread policy of using tasers as a routine compliance tool on subjects who are passively resisting or simply not perceived to be complying with orders. Amnesty International has also documented the use of tasers by jail guards and “anti-terrorism” interrogators as a means of punishment, degradation and torture.

Tasers are a “less-lethal” electrical discharge weapons that can be used for either long-range paralysis or short-range pain compliance. When used in ranged mode, the weapon propels a pair of barbed probes into a subject’s clothing or flesh at a range of up to 21 feet (6 meters). The probes are connected to the taser via insulated wires, through which the weapon delivers a 50,000-volt shock that instantaneously overrides the subject’s peripheral nervous system and causes extreme pain.

One firearms consultant quoted in the Associated Press described the experience of taser electroshock as “the most profound pain I’ve ever felt.” A Michigan county sheriff reported that subjects “call [taser electrocution] the longest five seconds of their life.” When the taser’s dart cartridge is removed, the device becomes a short-range “pain compliance” weapon that, according to the training manual, is to be applied “aggressively” to sensitive areas such as the neck and groin.

Out of a total of 18,000 US police departments, 7,000 currently use taser weapons. This figure has increased from 5,000 only two years ago. Tasers are currently issued to all patrol officers as a matter of policy in 1,700 departments.

Taser International, the leading taser manufacturer and lobbyist, maintains a double standard in marketing the device. In its press kit, the company claims that “TASER

devices...quickly incapacitate dangerous, combative, or high-risk, subjects who pose a risk to law enforcement officers, innocent civilians, or themselves.”

The company takes a different stand in promotion to law enforcement agencies, focusing on the ease of subduing *noncompliant* subjects through taser deployment. The company’s promotion video for law enforcement features a throaty narrator and a techno soundtrack over clips of unarmed subjects being chased down, electrocuted and handcuffed.

One of the clips features a subject under the influence of methamphetamines being held alone in a jail cell. The man is delirious and combative, but is already contained and poses no immediate threat to himself or others. The video shows police officers entering the cell and immediately tasing the subject, after which he becomes subdued and apologetic.

Another video shows police tasing a mentally ill man who is floating in a pond. The man is electrocuted twice by a group of officers. When two of the cops drag the terrified subject out of the pond, the rest hoot and scream “get ’em!” Like most of the other subjects featured in the promotional videos, this man posed no threat to anyone, and was shocked solely for the convenience of the police.

While Taser International maintains that its weapons are not susceptible to abuse because they have the capacity to internally record their usage, this data is only useful in so far as law enforcement agencies use it to discipline their officers. However, Amnesty International’s report makes clear that it is extremely rare for taser use to be deemed excessive in subsequent investigations, and rarer still for officers to be reprimanded or disciplined, much less prosecuted.

One study conducted by the ACLU found that 80 percent of departments surveyed had no policies “prohibiting or regulating the use of tasers on passive resisters.” This means that subjects who disregard or do not understand police orders may be electrocuted at officers’ discretion. According to a report in the *Denver Post*, some Colorado police districts, police regularly “shock suspects who do little more than mouth off, pull an arm away from a handcuff, run or refuse to obey an officer’s orders quickly.”

The increasingly widespread use of tasers has not produced a net reduction in the use of force by police departments. Instead, the introduction of taser weapons has served as a vector for the propagating the use of force in routine law enforcement procedures such as arresting and booking suspects. The Amnesty International report continues: “The use of force against suspects in the city of Orlando, Florida, had nearly doubled in the last 14 months since Tasers were issued to police, although they arrested fewer suspects.”

As the use of tasers has become more widespread, officers are using the weapons as pain compliance tools more often. A report by the Seattle Police Department shows that between 2001 and 2003, use of tasers in “drive stun” mode, which does not paralyze subjects but causes excruciating pain at close proximity, has increased from 40 to 47 percent of total discharges. This indicates that the weapons are being used increasingly to force compliance in non-threatening situations, contrary to Taser International’s claims that its products are intended for use as an alternative to firearms.

The report continues: “A survey...of more than 30 US police departments (including 20 of the largest city or county agencies) indicates that tasers are typically placed in the mid-range of the force scale, below batons or impact weapons rather than at, or just below, lethal force” The Taser International web site claims that “87% of police departments are now deploying TASER technology at or below [the force level of] pepper spray.” Some, including the Mesa, California, police department, classify the use of tasers as being equivalent on the force scale to limited “hard hands”—i.e., equivalent to wrist locks and other restraining techniques.

A major promoter of increased taser deployment has been Bernard Kerik, the former commissioner of police in New York City and President Bush’s abortive nominee as secretary of homeland security. Upon joining the board of Taser International, Kerik was issued stock options without ever having invested his own money into the company.

He exercised these assets for more than \$6 million before his nomination as secretary of homeland security in November 2004, the same month that Amnesty International published its initial report calling for the suspension of taser deployment pending further investigation.

While Kerik used his dubious fame for having been present at the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York City to push the sale of tasers to US police departments, his relationship with the company was one of a series of financial and personal scandals that forced the Bush administration to kill the nomination.

The Amnesty International report describes an incident in which a 13-year-old girl threw a book in a public library and was subsequently electrocuted. According to the case summary, “The juvenile continued to be verbally disruptive and resisted when officers attempted to place her under arrest. The Taser was displayed and threatened. The juvenile

continued to resist by curling into a ball. As the juvenile was preparing to kick at the officer, she was touch-stunned in the middle of her back.”

According to international UN regulations, if the use of force is unavoidable, law enforcement officers must “exercise restraint in such use and act in proportion to the seriousness of the offence and the legitimate objective to be achieved.” One can hardly see how electrocuting a disturbed child who threw a book in a public library can be classified as either in keeping with “the seriousness of the offence” or “the legitimate objective to be achieved.” Instead, this barbaric response was based solely on the cops’ convenience in subduing an unruly child. A subsequent inquiry determined that the incident was “within policy and did not constitute excessive force.”

The use of electric shock on subjects who are in restraints and do not pose a threat to police or civilians is, besides being a moral abomination, a violation of international law and tantamount to torture.

It is clear that, overall, the increasing use of tasers has nothing to do with protecting the public, but is instead a means of escalating the use of force by law enforcement officers in defending the status quo.

Tasers are a discreet and easy way for police to terrorize an increasingly non-compliant civilian population. Unlike conventional brutality, tasers often do not leave incriminating marks or physical damage (broken bones, bruising, etc.), and can therefore be applied more discreetly. It is for these reasons, together with the severe physical and psychological anguish produced by electrocution, that the United States military continues to use tasers in the torture of detainees in places like Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo.

Tasers are also increasingly being used in the repression of demonstrations and other forms of civil unrest. As social conditions within the United States deteriorate, the use of tasers will no doubt play an ever-greater role in police actions aimed at suppressing dissent and noncompliance. Taser International can expect no slack in demand.

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