

Posted 8/31/08

IS IT TOO EASY TO “ZAP”?

Tasers are threatened by abuse



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By *Julius (Jay) Wachtel*. Smarting from its first-ever loss in court, [Taser International](#) was assessed damages in excess of \$6 million by [Federal jurors](#) who ruled that the company “failed to warn police that its stun guns could be dangerous when used on people under the influence of drugs or in conjunction with chest compressions.”

The June 2008 verdict held the company 15% responsible for the death of a Salinas (CA) man whom police zapped as many as thirty times while trying to calm him down. An autopsy attributed the cause of death to methamphetamine intoxication, heart problems related to chronic drug abuse and being Tasered.

In another recent “first” a Winnfield (LA) cop became the [first officer ever charged](#) for unlawfully killing someone with a Taser. The 22-year old cop, son of the town’s late police chief, was indicted for manslaughter and malfeasance in office for Taser-ing a handcuffed suspect as many as thirty times and not getting him medical help. According to physicians, the man died from heart failure brought on by multiple shocks. If convicted the officer could face a 40-year sentence.

Tasers are pistol-like devices that use compressed nitrogen to shoot two darts that attach themselves to a target’s clothing, delivering a 50,000-volt shock for up to five seconds per trigger pull. They have been cited as contributing factors in numerous fatal encounters between citizens and police, but until recently virtually every death was ultimately attributed to other causes.

It's easy to understand why cops like the Taser. In the heat of a struggle batons and other impact weapons are difficult to use: blows must be placed so as to disable but not kill, and officers must get close to suspects who may be larger in size and more physically adept. Pepper spray is often ineffective. Not only must the stream be carefully aimed, but its action is not instantaneous and the spray can contaminate others. In contrast, the Taser is simple to use, allows officers to keep their distance and immobilizes instantly. A [2004 study](#) in San Jose, California concluded that Tasers were highly effective and reduced officer injuries by twenty percent. A [recent North Carolina study](#) revealed that despite its apparent hazards the Taser was greatly favored over pepper spray for dealing with combative suspects.

How dangerous is the Taser? Although death reports keep coming in, a [2007 medical study](#) of the weapon's after-effects determined that it was safe and effective. Indeed, following a string of questionable police shootings, [RAND recently recommended](#) that New York police substantially increase the deployment of Tasers so that officers would have less lethal options than firearms. Still, confidence in the Taser's safety is by no means universal (see, for example, the report by [Amnesty International](#)). There is considerable concern about the Taser's effects on persons who are ill or have heart conditions, particularly when repeated shocks are administered.

Here's where a little self-criticism can pay off. No matter how easy and convenient Tasers are to use (and that might be part of the problem) they should not be viewed as a solution to the rough-and-tumble of everyday policing. "Going to the mat" is often inevitable. Instead, their real value lies in helping officers gain a *momentary* advantage over the physically belligerent so they can be taken into custody without anyone getting hurt. To that end, officers should be trained in appropriate physical control techniques so that a single jolt is all that's necessary.

No approach will always apply, and special rules and tactics may be necessary for cops working alone. Still, if we blindly continue on the same path and Taser-associated fatalities keep mounting it's only a matter of time before this valuable tool winds up occupying the same place in the use-of-force continuum as a gun. And that's an outcome that no one wants.