

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## Media Briefing

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## **USA / Canada: Excessive and lethal force? -- AI's concerns about deaths and ill treatment involving police use of tasers - Facts and Figures**

### **Tasers - What are they?**

Tasers are dart firing electro-shock weapons designed to cause instant incapacitation by delivering a 50,000 volt shock to the body.

They fire two barbed darts which strike the subject from a distance, penetrate the skin or clothing by up to two inches and deliver the shock. They can also be used directly on the skin as a stun gun.

Tasers are less lethal or injurious than firearms; manufacturers maintain that they are a safer alternative than many conventional weapons.

They were first introduced in the 1970s by Taser International, but the take-up rate has increased in recent years with the development of powerful "new generation" models such as the M26 and X26 tasers.

In the USA more than 5,000 US law enforcement agencies are currently reported to be deploying or testing tasers. In Canada, approximately 60 police departments have been issued with tasers.

The take-up rate for using tasers is rapidly growing both in the US, Canada and internationally.

### **Consequences of the use of tasers**

Tasers are promoted as a safer alternative than firearms or impact weapons when dealing with dangerous suspects. However, in practice they are used as a routine force tool against people who do not pose a serious threat. They are frequently used in situations where use of firearms, or even batons, would never be justified.

There have been numerous reports of police using tasers inappropriately and abusively, including multiple discharges, and in conjunction with pepper spray and restraint holds which dangerously restrict breathing and carry a risk of death from "positional asphyxia". Amnesty International is concerned that using combined techniques such as pepper spray, tasers and physical restraint could exacerbate stress levels, leading to cardiac or respiratory failure.

Since June 2001, more than 70 people have died in the USA and Canada after being struck by M26

and X26 tasers, sometimes combined with techniques described above. The number of deaths are growing every year.

Most of those who died were unarmed men who, while displaying disturbed or combative behaviour, did not appear to present a serious threat to themselves or to the lives and safety of others. There have been several cases of police use of tasers against children.

Tasers are also authorised for use by the general public in the USA. For instance, they have reportedly been used as instruments of private torture or abuse, including against children and women by abusive partners.

There has been no rigorous, independent and impartial study into the use and medical effects of the "new generation" tasers.

AI has found use of tasers in many instances violate international standards which require that officers should only use force as a last resort, after exhausting non-violent alternatives, and in proportion to the threat posed. In many instances their use has amounted to torture or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

### **Amnesty International recommendations**

#### **To the US government:**

Suspend all transfers and use of tasers and other electro-shock weapons pending a rigorous, independent and impartial inquiry into their use and effects;

Ensure that all officers are trained to use force strictly in accordance with international standards and that all use-of-force training programs also include international standards on human rights, particularly the Convention Against Torture;

Ensure that all allegations of human rights violations and other misconduct are fully and impartially investigated and that all officers found responsible are disciplined and, where appropriate, prosecuted;

Where law enforcement agencies refuse to suspend their use of tasers:

- to strictly limit their use to situations where the alternative would be use of deadly force;
- Operational rules and training should include a prohibition against using tasers on the following groups except as a last resort: pregnant women, the elderly, children, emotionally disturbed people, the mentally or physically disabled, people in vulnerable positions, people under the influence of drugs;
- Repeated shocks should be avoided unless absolutely necessary to avoid serious injury or death;
- Introduction of guidelines which prohibit the application of prolonged shocks beyond the five-second discharge cycle.

#### **To the Canadian government:**

All the recommendations for Canada remain the same as above. However, given that there is currently a review by the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police into police use of tasers, AI is urging the federal authorities to widen the review to incorporate new research into the medical effects of new generation tasers.

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