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USA: Stricter limits urged as deaths following police Taser use reach 500

The deaths of 500 people following police use of Tasers underscores the need for tighter rules limiting the use of such weapons in law enforcement, Amnesty International said.

According to data collected by Amnesty International, at least 500 people in the USA have died since 2001 after being shocked with Tasers either during their arrest or while in jail.

On 13 February, Johnnie Kamahi Warren was the latest to die after a police officer in Dothan, Alabama deployed a Taser on him at least twice. The 43-year-old, who was unarmed and allegedly intoxicated, reportedly stopped breathing shortly after being shocked and was pronounced dead in hospital less than two hours later.

“Of the hundreds who have died following police use of Tasers in the USA, dozens and possibly scores of deaths can be traced to unnecessary force being used,” said Susan Lee, Americas Programme Director at Amnesty International.

“This is unacceptable, and stricter guidelines for their use are now imperative.”

Strict national guidelines on police use of Tasers and similar stun weapons – also known as Conducted Energy Devices (CEDs) – would effectively replace thousands of individual policies now followed by state and local agencies.

Police forces across the USA currently permit a wide use of the weapons, often in situations that do not warrant such a high level of force.

Law enforcement agencies defend the use of Tasers, saying they save lives and can be used to subdue dangerous or uncooperative suspects.

But Amnesty International believes the weapons should only be used as an alternative in situations where police would otherwise consider using firearms.

In a 2008 report, *USA: Stun Weapons in law Enforcement*, Amnesty International examined data on hundreds of deaths following Taser use, including autopsy reports in 98 cases and studies on the safety of such devices.

Among the cases reviewed, 90 per cent of those who died were unarmed. Many of the victims were subjected to multiple shocks.

Most of the deaths have been attributed to other causes. However, medical examiners have listed Tasers as a cause or contributing factor in more than 60 deaths, and in a number of other cases the exact cause of

death is unknown.

Some studies and medical experts have found that the risk of adverse effects from Taser shocks is higher in people who suffer from a heart condition or whose systems are compromised due to drug intoxication or after a struggle.

“Even if deaths directly from Taser shocks are relatively rare, adverse effects can happen very quickly, without warning, and be impossible to reverse,” said Susan Lee.

“Given this risk, such weapons should always be used with great caution, in situations where lesser alternatives are unavailable.”

There are continuing reports of police officers using multiple or prolonged shocks, despite warnings that such usage may increase the risk of adverse effects on the heart or respiratory system.

Deaths in the past year include Allen Kephart, 43, who died in May 2011 after he was stopped by police for an alleged traffic violation in San Bernardino County, California. He died after three officers shocked him up to 16 times. The officers were later cleared of wrongdoing.

In November 2011, Roger Anthony fell off his bicycle and died after a police officer in North Carolina shot him with a stun gun. The officer reportedly shocked Anthony – who had a disability and hearing problems – because he did not respond to an order to pull over.

Neither man was armed when police shocked them.

“What is most disturbing about the police use of Tasers is that the majority of those who later died were not a serious threat when they were shocked by police,” said Susan Lee.