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USA: Safety of Tasers questioned as death toll hits 334-mark

Industry claims that Taser stun guns are safe and non-lethal do not stand up to scrutiny, said Amnesty International today as it called on governments to limit their deployment to life-threatening situations or to suspend their use.

The call came as the organization released one of the most detailed reports to date on the safety of the stun gun. The report "USA: Less than lethal?" is being published as the number of people who died after being struck by Tasers in the USA reached 334 between 2001 and August 2008.

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

"The problem with Tasers is that they are inherently open to abuse, as they are easy to carry and easy to use and can inflict severe pain at the push of a button, without leaving substantial marks," said Angela Wright.

Amnesty International's study -- which includes information from 98 autopsies -- found that 90 per cent of those who died after being struck with a Taser were unarmed and many did not appear to present a serious threat.

Many were subjected to repeated or prolonged shocks -- far more than the five-second "standard" cycle -- or by more than one officer at a time. Some people were even shocked for failing to comply with police commands after they had been incapacitated by a first shock.

In at least six of the cases where people died, Tasers were used on individuals suffering from medical conditions such as seizures -- including a doctor who had crashed his car when he suffered an epileptic seizure. He died after being repeatedly shocked at the side of the highway when, dazed and confused, he failed to comply with an officer's commands.

Police officers also used Tasers on schoolchildren, pregnant women and even an elderly person with dementia.

In March 2008, an 11-year-old girl with a learning disability was shocked with a Taser after she punched a police officer in the face. The officer had been called to the school in Orange County, Florida, after the child had become disturbed, pushing desks and chairs and spitting at staff.

Existing studies -- many of them funded by the industry -- have found the risk of these weapons to be generally low in healthy adults. However, these studies are limited in scope and have pointed to the need for more understanding of the effects of such devices on vulnerable people, including those under the influence

of stimulant drugs or in poor health. Recent independently-funded animal studies have found that the use of these kinds of electro-shock weapons can cause fatal arrhythmias in pigs, raising further questions about their safety on human subjects. It was also recently reported that nearly ten per cent of 41 Tasers tested in a study commissioned by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, delivered significantly more current than the manufacturer said was possible, underscoring the need for independent verification and testing of such devices.

Although most of the 334 deaths nationwide have been attributed to factors such as drug intoxication, medical examiners and coroners have concluded that Taser shocks caused or contributed to at least 50 of these deaths.

“We are very concerned that electro-shock weapons such as Tasers have been rolled out for general use before rigorous, independent testing of their effects,” said Angela Wright.

Note to editors

Taser is the commercial name for the most widely used “Conducted Energy Devices” (CEDs) currently deployed in US law enforcement although other products are also on the market. They work by delivering a high voltage, low current, electrical charge designed to disrupt the central nervous system and cause uncontrolled muscle contractions, temporarily incapacitating the subject.

After reviewing 98 autopsy reports and other materials, Amnesty International found that:

- Many victims were subjected to multiple or prolonged shocks, often far more than the standard five-second cycle, despite long-standing warnings of the potential health risks of such use;
- In most cases, the deceased are reported to have gone into cardio-respiratory arrest at the scene, shortly after being shocked.
- In some cases there was no indication that the deceased had taken drugs or had underlying health problems, and they collapsed shortly after being shocked, raising further concern about the role of the CED;
- In many cases additional methods of restraint were applied, including methods known to impair breathing or restrict the flow of blood to the brain, creating a risk of death from asphyxia.

Most departments permit CEDs to be used at a level of threat well below that at which officers would be authorized to use lethal force; some even place them at the level of “hands-on” force or just above “verbal commands”.

The manufacturers of CEDs and the agencies deploying them maintain that they are safer than many conventional weapons in controlling dangerous or combative people and that CEDs have saved lives by avoiding the resort by officers to lethal force.

More than 30 individuals died after being shocked in jails, where CEDs are also widely used, or in the booking area of police stations.

Most deaths occurred in California and Florida -- 55 and 52 respectively. Phoenix, Arizona and Las Vegas, Nevada, had the highest number of deaths of any city, with five deaths reported between 2001 and 31 August 2008.

In 37 of the 98 autopsy reports plus the two inquest transcripts reviewed by Amnesty International, medical examiners listed the use of a CED as a cause or contributory factor in the death. Medical examiners or coroners reportedly made similar findings in at least 13 other cases where Amnesty International did not have

the autopsy reports.