Public Interest Law Reporter

Volume 10 Issue 2 Spring 2005

Article 4

2005

Taser Guns: A Safer Alternative for Police?

Felisha L. Thomas

Follow this and additional works at: http://lawecommons.luc.edu/pilr



Part of the Law Enforcement and Corrections Commons

Recommended Citation

Felisha L. Thomas, Taser Guns: A Safer Alternative for Police?, 10 Pub. Interest L. Rptr. 5 (2005). Available at: http://lawecommons.luc.edu/pilr/vol10/iss2/4

This News is brought to you for free and open access by LAW eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Public Interest Law Reporter by an authorized administrator of LAW eCommons. For more information, please contact law-library@luc.edu.

Taser Guns: A Safer Alternative for Police?

By Felisha L. Thomas

The use of Taser stun guns by police has faced a wave of criticism recently, including in Chicago where the Chicago Police Department recently halted distribution of Taser stun guns to its officers after two recent incidents.

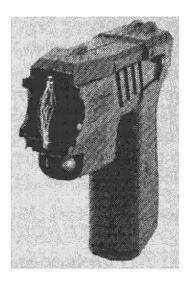
In one incident, a 14-year-old boy went into cardiac arrest after being stunned. Police were called to a group home after the teen injured his hand in a violent outburst. Police said that the Taser gun, which is designed to temporarily incapacitate an individual with an electric jolt, was used after he lunged at an officer.

In the other incident, a 54-year-old man died after Chicago police used a Taser to subdue him as he was fighting with officers. According to police, the man was trying to kick and bite officers and threatening to infect them with HIV. He went into cardiac arrest and later died after he was "shot" with the Taser. CPD Superintendent Philip Cline defended the officers' use of the Taser in both incidents. However, in addition to the police department's decision to halt distribution of the stun guns, the Chicago City Council voted to look into police alternatives to Taser guns in response to concerns about the guns' safety.

Stories of fatalities and severe injuries caused by Tasers are not unique to Chicago. According to the Associated Press, a report released last year by human rights group Amnesty International claimed Taser guns were responsible for as many as 85 deaths since June 2001.

TASER guns are the most popular brand of stun guns, and all brands of stun guns are commonly referred to as Tasers. Tasers work by interrupting electrical signals that communicate messages back and forth from the brain to the rest of the body by delivering a high voltage combined with a low amperage charge to temporarily disable an attacker for several minutes. The guns can transmit as much as 50,000 volts.

Tasers were developed specifically for



the use of adults. Some children's advocates and lawmakers believe that Tasers should never be used on children, since even adults have died after being stunned. Team Amber Alert, an organization that issues alerts concerning children's welfare and safety issues, is calling for a moratorium on the use of Tasers on children until an independent study can be made to establish medical guidelines for safe use.

There is currently little information about the known medical effects of Tasers on children. According to Dr. William Schulz, executive director of Amnesty International, "We simply don't have definitive studies of any of those things."

A study conducted by the U.S. Air Force and reported by CBS News found that repeated shocks from a Taser stun gun led to heart damage in pigs. Specifically, the study examined the pigs' blood and found a jump in the enzyme Troponin T, the body's clearest sign of heart injury. It also found the pigs suffering high levels of blood acid, a potentially life-threatening condition called acidosis. The pigs in this study were shocked 18 times, and none of the pigs died.

TASER International vice president Steve Tuttle issued a statement saying medical tests have shown the shock devices to be

Taser, continued on page 6

Taser, continued from page 5

"among the safest alternatives available to law enforcement to subdue violent individuals."

Florida state senators Gary Siplin and Tony Hill have called for a statewide "The only studies that have been done on Tasers thus far ha[ve] been on a pig and a dog, yet they're using 50,000 voltage on a human being."

Florida State Sen. Gary Siplin

juveniles, the elderly, and pregnant women. In addition, anyone who is shot by a Taser must be examined by medical personnel immediately, and no per-

son may be stunned more than four times. Similarly, the Department of Homeland Security's two largest law enforcement divisions have rejected the use of Tasers for about 20,000 agents and officers, largely because of questions about safety. Bans have been adopted by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection bureaus

Proponents of Taser stun gun use by law enforcement believe that Tasers are a safer alternative to firearms in subduing those with violent behavior. Opponents can't understand why they would ever be used in situations when a firearm could not.

ban on Taser guns until a study can determine how dangerous the guns are. "The only studies that have been done on Tasers thus far ha[ve] been on a pig and a dog, yet they're using 50,000 voltage on a human being," Siplin said. Siplin sponsored a bill requiring 100 hours of police training in the use of Tasers and other disabling techniques, and a proposal forbidding anyone except police officers to own, sell or even repair any type of stun gun. Hill sponsored a bill forbidding use of Tasers on all school grounds.

The Toledo, Ohio, Police Department has issued new rules prohibiting the use of Tasers on a suspect who is handcuffed, as well as on

California School Abandons Electronic Tracking Program

By Maura Deady

In February, Brittan Elementary School in Sutter, Calif., terminated an experimental Radio Frequency Identification program in response to complaints from parents, the American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and the Electronic Privacy Information Center.

As part of the program, students wore tags that transmitted their encrypted ID information to antennas placed above classroom doors. The teachers and administrators were then able to confirm class attendance for each period through a handheld device. Among the concerns cited were children's safety and privacy.

Brittan Elementary School Superintendent Earnie Graham said the use of the devices was a test to determine whether the technology improves campus safety. Students from kindergarten through As part of the program, students wore tags that transmitted their encrypted ID information to antennas placed above classroom doors.

eighth grade wore the RFID badges around their necks while attending school. InCom Corp. provided the devices as well as a small donation to the school in return for their participation in the program. The school ran the RFID pilot program in the summer of 2004 after it was unanimously approved by the school board, and again from January 2005 until the program's termination in February.

Complaints began when parents noticed their children wearing badges when they came home from school. According to the ACLU, parents Michael and Dawn Cantrall were among those dis-

Electronic Tracking, continued on page 7