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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.

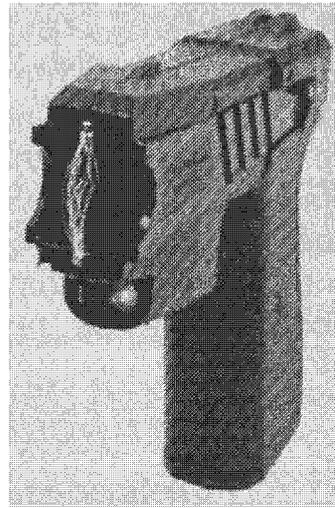
In one incident, a 14-year-old boy went into cardiac arrest after being stunned. Police were called to a group home after the teen injured his hand in a violent outburst. Police said that the Taser gun, which is designed to temporarily incapacitate an individual with an electric jolt, was used after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

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