

# Official investigation clears police in Indiana Taser attack

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An internal police investigation last week cleared South Bend, Indiana police officers of all wrongdoing in the brutal beating of 27-year-old paralegal student Tavares Browning. Browning suffered serious injuries, including severe electrical burns to his genitals, when three different police officers assaulted him with their Taser stun guns while he was unarmed and in his northern Indiana home.

Despite the shocking conduct of the police and the severity of Browning's injuries, the assault has received no media attention outside of a September 30 article in the local *South Bend Tribune* by reporter Nancy Sulok.

The Taser assault on Browning is part of an emerging national trend in police Taser violence, increasingly involving youth and students. In one prominent case in November 2006, police used a Taser stun gun repeatedly on a 23-year-old student at the University of California Los Angeles, Mostafa Tabatabaiejad, when he refused to show his university ID. Last month, police assaulted Florida journalism student Andrew Meyer with a Taser gun after he pointedly questioned Democratic senator and 2004 presidential candidate John Kerry at a public forum. These are by no means isolated incidents.

Over the summer, Tavares Browning fell \$1,900 behind on his child support payments and failed to appear in court, and a warrant was issued for his arrest. According to a police report, on July 21, police from the South Bend Neighborhood Enforcement Services Team (NEST) unit were dispatched to Browning's home to arrest him. Browning locked the doors and refused to come out.

The NEST unit responded by summoning more police, including a specialized gang unit, and surrounding the house. The police report acknowledges

that Browning was not armed and made no threats of violence. After a 45-minute standoff, according to the report, two officers ambushed Browning with their Taser guns through a bedroom window and the police stormed the house.

According to Browning, the police burst through the door shouting obscenities and slurs, and struck and kicked him while he lay on the ground, paralyzed by the Taser.

"They kept telling me to get up, but I couldn't get up," Browning told the *South Bend Tribune*. "I couldn't breathe. I couldn't feel my right leg or my privates." During the assault, Browning's left eye was bruised and bloodied and he suffered severe burns to his penis and scrotum from the Taser.

South Bend Uniform Division Chief Darryl Boykins acknowledged to the *South Bend Tribune* that Browning's burns from the Tasers may have been as high as third-degree. In a third-degree burn, the skin becomes blackened and charred, nerves below the surface are destroyed, and the burn victim can permanently lose sensation in the affected area.

Browning currently visits a burn specialist regularly for treatment.

After this violent ordeal in his home, the police took Browning first to the downtown jail to be booked. It was only after he arrived there that jail officials rushed him to a hospital for treatment for his genital injuries. Two of the metal darts from the Taser guns had become lodged under Browning's skin, and the police had been unable to pull them out.

The Taser stun gun fires two small metal harpoon-like darts by means of compressed air and can hit targets at a range of up to 20 feet. Each dart remains attached by a thin wire to the Taser gun itself, which delivers a 50,000 volt shock.

The Taser web site boasts that the latest guns can fire their darts through “2 and 1/2 inches of heavy clothing, including heavy leather jackets.” When such a weapon is deployed against the soft tissue of the mouth, eyes, throat, or genitals, the results can be horrific.

According to a doctor’s report, Browning suffered a total of five Taser burns on his groin, wrist and shoulder. Since there are two darts per weapon, this indicates at least three officers fired their Taser guns at him. The police report insists instead that there were four burns, with two Taser guns involved. It is not clear how many shocks were delivered to Browning after he was stuck by the darts.

The Taser’s electric shock affects the entire sensory nervous system, causing immediate muscle tetany. The subject loses control of his limbs and falls to the ground unable to brace himself. Since the diaphragm is paralyzed, breathing is impossible. While the subject is still hooked up to the gun by means of the darts and wires, further shocks can be administered simply by pulling the trigger on the gun.

According to an Amnesty International report, at least 150 individuals were killed by Taser weapons during the first five years after they were introduced in 2001. Figures are not yet available on permanent vision loss, disfigurement, or other permanent disabilities resulting from the now widespread use of the weapon.

Police in most jurisdictions are not required to use the same level of discretion when using a Taser as they would when using a firearm. Although the Taser gun is billed as a “non-lethal” substitute for a firearm, as this case demonstrates, the police often use the Taser when lethal force is completely unwarranted.

There is no situation in which the use of three Tasers against an unarmed, non-threatening subject guilty of nothing more than owing \$1,900 in child support is warranted.

It should be noted that the Taser gun is the interrogator’s instrument of choice in US-run torture camps such as Guantánamo and secret CIA prisons.

Despite photographic evidence of Browning’s injuries taken soon after the attack, and the fact that all parties agree that Browning was unarmed and non-threatening immediately before the attack, the internal police investigation found no evidence of police wrongdoing.

This remarkable whitewash was defended by County

Prosecutor Michael Dvorak in statements to the *South Bend Tribune* following the conclusion of the investigation. Dvorak acknowledged that no charges were going to be filed against Browning for resisting arrest, but nonetheless Dvorak insisted that the police “acted appropriately.” “They had a responsibility to effect an arrest,” he said. Browning is considering taking legal action against the officers involved.

South Bend is one of a string of Midwest towns and cities once referred to as America’s “manufacturing belt.” Over the past several decades, this area has been devastated by the decline in heavy industry, particularly the auto industry, and is now referred to as the “rust belt.”



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