

Bay City, Michigan: Fifteen-year-old dies after Taser shooting

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On Sunday, a Bay City, Michigan teenager died soon after police used a taser "stun gun" on him.

Police were responding to a reported altercation between Brett Elder, 15, and another man early Sunday morning. Police claim that Elder then "attempted to fight the officers." According to a witness, however, Elder was already handcuffed when police fired the Taser.

Police took Elder to a local hospital where he was pronounced dead. He may be the youngest person to die in a Taser-related killing. Elder's family had planned to celebrate his 16th birthday on Tuesday.

A reader comment on a *Bay City Times* article concerning the incident reported to have intimate knowledge of what took place.

"Brett was handcuffed while being tased," the comment reads. "Brett was not fighting or swinging or throwing punches or kicks." After being tased, "he fell over and screamed as most people would do so they tased him again... The tasing caused Brett to vomit so now he is laying face down in his own vomit and his heart stops... The family that was there now started to yell at the cops he's not breathing, he's not breathing. This we have on audio recording." The police, the writer claims, would not allow a relative to administer CPR, nor did they undertake to do so themselves.

Family members say Brett Elder had recently lost his mother, and was going through drug and alcohol rehab. They say he was drunk, but that was no reason for him to die. "He was killed by the police," said Wendy Elder, the victim's sister-in-law, "the police are supposed to protect you, not hurt you."

The Taser gun, also called an "electrical control device," delivers a high voltage shock to the victim's body via wires connecting it to a pistol. The weapon

overrides the body's nervous system, causing uncontrollable skeletal muscle spasms, disabling the victim. The electrical current is supposed to last for five seconds. The pain, victims say, is agonizing.

The boy's aunt, Cindy Hernden, described the boy's reaction to the Taser. "He was flopping around and looked like a fish out of water," she said. "That's the only way to explain it—his whole body was bent over."

The officer who fired the Taser has been placed on administrative leave for several days, according to Bay City Police Chief Michael Cecchini. The police will conduct an internal investigation of the incident, and the Michigan State Police will also investigate.

There have been no criminal charges filed against the police.

Elder was a student at Wenona High School. According to its web site, the school provides an "alternative education program for students who have been unsuccessful in traditional high and middle schools." The school's principal, quoted in the *Bay City Times*, called Elder "a pleasant enough young man."

Police and advocates of Taser use claim that it is a "soft" weapon that helps to avert police use of handguns. Indeed, police commonly use Tasers for situations in which guns should not be used, for example firing them into the backs of fleeing suspects, using them to shoot allegedly "uncooperative" suspects, and, most frequently, using them on those already arrested or otherwise under police control. This appears to have been the case with Elder.

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that Tasers are lethal weapons. One web site that keeps a tally of Taser-related deaths reports that the weapon may be linked to at least 399 deaths in North America since 2001. A recent Canadian study has found that Tasers can cause lasting damage to the nervous system.

Amnesty International, along with a number of civil rights organizations, has called for a moratorium on the use of Tasers pending further scientific study of their effects.

The death of Brett Elder is the second story in recent months to bring national attention to Bay City, Michigan, (population 36,000). In January, a 93-year old man, Marvin Schur, froze to death after city officials placed a "limiter" on his energy consumption due to unpaid electricity bills. (See "Michigan man, 93, freezes to death after city cuts off electricity")

See Also:

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