

Australia: Police use Tasers as “weapon of choice”

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Video footage of a Western Australian prisoner being repeatedly tasered and the death of a Sydney man have highlighted the alarming increase in the use of electric stun guns by Australian police. Far from being deployed as a last resort, police are using these potentially lethal weapons, which deliver a 50,000-volt shock, to control and punish people.

A Western Australian Corruption and Crime Commission (CCC) report released last week into police use of electric stun guns included a shocking video of police officers firing a Taser into Kevin Spratt, a 39-year-old Aboriginal man, at an East Perth lockup in late August 2008.

The unarmed Spratt, who was tasered 13 times (five times off camera), had simply refused to allow police to strip-search him. The video shows Spratt on the floor of the watch-house and surrounded by nine officers. One of the policemen yells: “Do want to go again? Wanna go again” (see video).

Two days after the video was released, Western Australian prison officials admitted that Spratt was tasered 11 times, a week later, this time by members of the Department of Corrective Service’s Emergency Support Group, while transferring him from the East Perth lockup to a state prison.

No charges were laid against any of the police or prison guards involved in what can only be described as torture. In fact, a corrective services spokesman told the media that the department had reviewed the incident and the actions taken by its officers were “appropriate and in accordance with current policies and procedures.”

According to the CCC report, even though the police actions were on video, no charges were laid because the Aboriginal man did not remember the incident and therefore was unable to present evidence in court. The police initially lied, claiming that Spratt had not been tasered. After an internal police disciplinary hearing, two senior constables were found to have used “undue and unnecessary force” and fined a total of \$1,950. One of the officers has since been promoted to sergeant.

The death of Ba Le, a 25-year-old Vietnamese man, after being tasered by Sydney police in the early hours of Tuesday morning raised further concerns. Police allege that the man, whom they wanted to question over sexual assault allegations, was drunk and ran at them with two knives. He dropped to the ground after being tasered directly in his chest from a distance of two to three metres. Police handcuffed the unconscious man then realised he was not breathing. Efforts to revive him failed.

Even before any official inquiry, the New South Wales (NSW) Police Commissioner Andrew Scipione and Premier Kristina Keneally defended the police actions. NSW Deputy Police Commissioner Dave Owens went one step further, telling the media that he would have used his gun, as he was not trained to use a Taser. The exact circumstances of Ba’s death are not clear as there is no independent report. Contrary to the manufacturer’s advice, the stun gun was fired at the man’s chest.

The aggressive police use of so-called non-lethal weapons was further underlined by the death a day earlier of Steven Bosevski, 35, during a confrontation at the St Georges Leagues Club in Sydney following the football club’s grand final win. Police, including the riot squad, were called to the club following a brawl between security guards and fans trying to get into the crowded premises.

One witness, Trudy, told Ten News that the police used unprovoked and undue violence against Bosevski, who died after being pepper-sprayed and beaten. His brother Tony was tasered. The dead man’s twin brother Steve later told the media that all three had been batoned and sprayed. Tony and Steve were detained but later released without charge.

In a third incident last weekend, NSW police officers tasered a man involved in a domestic dispute on the state’s Central Coast. The man was naked when he was tasered. He tried to run, tripped and was seriously injured after falling down a stairwell and is now in an induced coma with severe head injuries.

The introduction of Taser guns in Australia followed a wave

of 69 police shootings between 1984 and 1995, in which alleged suspects or mentally ill people were killed. Governments and police commissioners claimed that the stun guns would prevent future tragedies by providing a non-lethal alternative weapon, which would be deployed as a last resort against armed and seriously violent people. The authorities insisted that Tasers would be used only by specialised police units.

Over the past three years, however, state and federal governments in Australia have purchased over 7,000 Tasers, with almost 1,900 of these in use in NSW. Contrary to official claims that “Tasers save lives,” the stun guns have resulted in the death of four people in Australia since 2002. Last year two men were killed—an Aboriginal man in the Northern Territory and Antonio Galeano from Queensland. Queensland police shocked Galeano 28 times with the electric stun gun. Both men were mentally unstable (see: “Australia: Man dies after being tasered by police”).

Far from being “weapons of last resort,” Tasers are increasingly being used to inflict serious injuries and humiliating pain on anyone that the authorities deem to be troublemakers. Tasers are now available to frontline police in Queensland, NSW, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. The weapon can only be used by Special Operations Group officers in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania but two of these states are conducting trials of the weapons for general police use.

Releasing the CCC’s report, director Roger Watson said Tasers had become the “force option of choice” among police. The report was based on information from 2007—when the stun gun was first introduced in the state—until 2009. It revealed a significant increase in Taser deployments during “Use of Force” incidents—from 49 percent in 2007 to 74 percent in 2008, with a slight decline to 65 percent in 2009.

According to the CCC, Aboriginal people were 30 percent likely to have the weapons used against them compared to non-indigenous Australians. Taser use against Aboriginal people had risen from 16 percent of cases in 2007 to 30 percent in 2009. Tasers were also widely used to impose compliance with police directives, and their use against those resisting arrest had doubled from 22 percent of cases in 2007 to 43 percent in 2009.

The CCC revealed that rather than police firearm use declining with the introduction of Tasers, it had actually doubled, from 6 percent of all Use of Force incidents in 2007 to 12 percent in 2009.

Evidence that NSW police are mostly using Tasers against unarmed and non-violent individuals was also unearthed in data

collected during a state trial of the weapon in 2008-09. The report, only made public following Freedom of Information action, showed that between 2001 and 2008 Tasers were used 50 times by two specialist units. During the 2008-09 trial, when Tasers were issued to sergeants and inspectors at 80 police commands, alleged suspects were armed in only one-third or 134 of the 397 occasions when Tasers were removed from their holsters. In one incident, a man was tasered because he “refused to comply with a police direction to show his hands”.

According to the most recent figures, NSW police are now using Tasers more than twice a day, on average, or over 800 times per year, almost doubling the number of annual incidences since the 2008-2009 trial.

In response to the latest outrages, moves are being made to standardise and legitimise the use of Tasers. Federal Home Affairs Minister Brendan O’Connor announced on Wednesday that the Australian New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency would draw up guidelines which would be presented to state and federal police ministers early next year. “The Gillard government is keen to ensure that the highest standards are achieved and that all jurisdictions agree to work together to achieve nationally consistent standards on the use of electronic shock devices,” he said.

O’Connor’s comments make clear that this lethal weapon will continue being rolled out to police agencies throughout the country. And as social tensions increase as governments institute austerity measures, there are signs of preparations to use Tasers for broader purposes, including against protests and demonstrations.

A former member of the Special Operations Group of the Victorian police George Hateley, who heads Breon Enterprises, Australia’s sole distributor of Taser guns, told the media last year that police forces throughout the country were considering using semi-automatic Tasers. These can fire three sets of electronic darts in succession from any standard 12-gauge pump action shotgun. Also under consideration are multi-shot “Shockwave” crowd control units—banks of 12 Tasers which fire probes out to about eight metres. A dozen of these units can be connected to a single control box, creating a field of fire the size of a football field.



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