

450 US deaths since 2001

Florida man dies after police Taser him

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A 33-year-old man in Orlando, Florida died after police officers used a Taser on him early Friday morning. Adam Spencer Johnson of Winter Haven, Florida, is the latest of hundreds of American to die as the result of police wielding Tasers since 2001.

According to Orlando police officials, Johnson was outside the AMC Universal Complex movie theater at Universal Studios' CityWalk and behaving unusually some time after midnight. Four off-duty police who work security at Universal Studios amusement park arrived on the scene, later reinforced by an on-duty Orlando cop.

Sgt. Barbara Jones, of the Orlando Police Department, told the media that the individual "was asking very irrationally, kind of grabbing his beard, pacing around. They tried to calm him down. And at one point he grabbed the officers, they ended up tussling with him, and one of the officers ended up using his Taser ... The guy went down, they put him in handcuffs, and they realized he was unresponsive, they immediately began CPR." Johnson was later taken to Dr. P. Phillips Hospital in Orlando where he was pronounced dead.

Johnson, who had just turned 33, had no prior history of difficulty with the police and the only blemish on his record was a number of parking tickets.

No other details, including the immediate cause of death, have been forthcoming, pending the report of the medical examiner.

The use of Tasers is one of the more brutal elements of American law enforcement.

The WSWS explained in 2008: "The device, shaped like a pistol, fires two darts attached to 21-foot wires. When both darts hit, an electrical circuit is completed and the weapon automatically discharges an excruciatingly painful five-second cycle, which contracts the skeletal muscles, causing the person to become rigid and collapse.

"The trigger can subsequently be pulled over and over, delivering additional five-second cycles, and it can be held down, discharging a continuous flow of electricity until released. Each weapon has a computer chip, called the dataport, which records the number of trigger pulls." (See "Northern California jury holds TASER International responsible for man's death")

Amnesty International reported in 2008 that 351 people had died in the US since June 2001 as a result of being jolted with a Taser. A blog tracking the phenomenon suggested in September 2010 that another 96 people had died by that date.

According to the *Orlando Sentinel*, "Orlando police officers used their Tasers 315 times in 2010, 357 times in 2009, and 278 times in 2008, according to [Sgt.] Jones. The numbers for 2011 were not immediately available."

The *Sentinel* notes that five individuals died after Orange County deputies (Orlando is located in Orange County) "stunned them with Tasers between 2001 and 2008. Those deaths sparked an investigation of the sheriff's office by the U.S. Department of Justice.

"The Sheriff's Office ultimately came to an

agreement with the justice department in October of last year to tighten up its rules for using the devices.”

The provisions of the agreement included the following:

- Tasers cannot be used to awaken, prod or threaten someone.
- Deputies must give a verbal warning before deploying a Taser.
- Deputies must alert medical workers before deploying Tasers at extremely agitated people.
- Except in extreme circumstances, Tasers cannot be used on passive subjects, people in handcuffs, children, the elderly, pregnant women, the disabled, someone driving or riding a bicycle or inside an elementary school.
- Only one deputy can deploy a Taser at a time.

Some of the incidents—including the use of a Taser against an 11-year-old!—that prompted the complaint against the Orange County Sheriff’s Office, and led to the three-year Justice Department investigation (which resulted in no charges being filed against any officers), included these, according to the *Palm Beach Post* (October 14, 2010):

- José Aníbal Amaro, 45, died Oct. 1, 2008, after deputies shocked him three times with a Taser. Reports said he was foaming at the mouth and running in and out of traffic.
- A man who was threatening to jump off a 25-foot embankment onto the East-West Expressway was stunned October 13, 2008. A deputy standing in a bucket truck caught the man after shocking him.
- John Mattiuzzi, an out-of-state filmmaker (attending the Global Peace Film Festival, no less), was stunned twice and struck with a baton on September 21, 2008, after taking pictures of a crime scene with his phone. Police warned him twice to move back, then chased and subdued him after he ran from officers.
- An 11-year-old girl at Moss Park Middle School was stunned by a Taser in March 2008 after she swung at a deputy. The latter’s nose was bloodied. The girl

was “taken to Florida Hospital East to have the Taser prongs removed.”



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