

Killing Them Safely: The big business of police tasers

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Directed by Nick Berardini

The opening scene of first-time director Nick Berardini's documentary *Killing Them Safely* is not easy to forget. A herd of buffalo roam peacefully in a pen. Suddenly, the viewer hears the characteristic clicking caused by a taser's electrical discharge. An unsuspecting buffalo is shot with darts attached to wires and crumples to the ground, writhing in pain. If such a large beast is stopped dead in its tracks, what chance does a human being stand?

The subject of the film is TASER International, the company that has monopolized the manufacture of "electrical control devices" (ECDs), sometimes referred to as "stun guns," but most commonly as tasers. The documentary explains how the founders of TASER International, having equipped more than 17,000 police departments around the world with their products, have created a highly profitable business for themselves.

Berardini's film is a compelling look at a company that exploits police brutality for profits, needlessly endangering people in the process. Masterfully constructed from original interviews, videos of police encounters, news reports and filmed depositions, the documentary is at once objective and emotional, without being overly clinical or dispassionate.

After introducing the company, *Killing Them Safely* demonstrates how relentless promotion and company-sponsored training sessions have led to police tasing individuals in trivial situations like routine traffic stops. Tasers have been used on children as young as six as well as on women in their 80s.

While promoted as a safe alternative to other forms of police violence, the current generation of higher-power tasers has been associated with approximately one thousand deaths since they were introduced in 2000. So

far this year, at least 47 people have died in the US from police tasers, according to a study by the *Guardian*. Yet the company insists that their product is safe and had nothing to do with any of the fatalities, not unlike arguments used by tobacco companies in defense of cigarette sales.

The documentary highlights cases brought by police-misconduct lawyers that resulted in the exposure of lethal risks the company sought to obscure. One of the attorneys featured in the film, John Burton, ran as the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for governor of California in the 2003 recall election and contributes as a writer to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The founders of TASER International, brothers Tom and Rick Smith, have an almost pathological commitment to their product, which spokesperson Steve Tuttle claims to be "the biggest revolution in law enforcement since the radio." The Smiths founded the company in 1993 with money borrowed from their parents, supposedly motivated by the shooting death of a friend in a road rage incident, a connection that makes little sense.

Berardini's *Killing Them Safely* does not demonize the Smith brothers. If anything, one almost feels sorry for the two, hopelessly lost in self-delusion. That is, one would feel sympathy for them if they weren't multimillionaires with blood on their hands.

Berardini, however, does not need to paint a negative portrait of the pair since more than enough damning evidence comes out of their own mouths. Indeed, the most telling moments are the brothers' responses during video depositions when asked by lawyers what they know about the dangers of their products. Their answers are as evasive as they are self-serving. The Smiths argue that the fault lies with police training, not tasers, which given the increasingly militarized

characterized of police forces has a grain of truth, but obscures the fact that the company has been hiding information about how its product can kill.

In fact, taser training manuals are drawn up by the company, a weapons manufacturer, without any federal or local oversight. Moreover, when forced to acknowledge scientific proof that tasers could induce cardiac arrest if discharged too close to the heart, the company updated its manual and recommended not aiming directly at the chest area—not out of any safety concern but for fear of litigation!

The most moving and effective parts of *Killing Them Safely* portray victims, along with family members, telling their stories. Several deaths were captured on video, including that of Robert Dziekanski, a middle-aged man from Poland, who was needlessly shocked and asphyxiated by Royal Canadian Mounted Police at the Vancouver International Airport on October 14, 2007. His death led to an official inquiry, which concluded that the weapons were far more dangerous than represented, and that their use should be significantly curtailed in Canada.

Equally tragic is the fate of Stanley Harlan, 23, of Moberly, Missouri who died after being tasered. Police stopped Stanley for speeding outside his home. One watches the dashcam video in horror as the young man succumbs to a taser-induced cardiac arrest with the police providing no medical attention and his mother screaming in the background. The city eventually agreed to an indefinite moratorium on tasers and paid the family \$2.4 million. TASER International escaped liability, however.

In an interview with *The Film Stage*, Berardini was asked his thoughts about recent cases of police brutality. The filmmaker commented: “It’s good for business when there is strife between the police and the community. It’s good for business when officers use tasers—even when they use them inappropriately—because TASER International is not the one that shoulders the blame. The officers do. I think in a lot of cases, TASER International is as culpable or more culpable.”

Virtually every review of *Killing Them Safely* has been positive. TASER International has been caught red-handed using its employees as trolls to post negative reviews on Amazon and iTunes, where the film is available for download.

The biggest weakness of Berardini’s film is the lack of any broader explanation as to why tasers have played such a prominent role in recent cases of police brutality. Moreover, what sort of environment produces figures such as the Smith brothers, and rewards them so handsomely for their operations? Also problematic is the fact the documentary tends to absolve the individual police officers for their actions. Even if it were the case that tasers were being used “inappropriately,” should anyone be surprised that cops view electroshock weapons as another tool with which to repress the population?

Having said that, *Killing Them Safely* provides an unsettling look at the link between the police and “security” apparatus and the generation of massive profits. As a postscript we learn that TASER International is now making body cameras for police. What could possibly go wrong with that?



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