

Toronto Star report outlines alarming police Taser use

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Based on an analysis of data obtained through Freedom of Information requests, the *Toronto Star* reported last week that local police officers “often override shock times, using lengthy or repeated deployments” when subduing citizens with Taser electric shock guns.

Toronto police are required to file a report anytime they deploy a Taser. In addition, data printouts displaying the number of shocks administered and the amount of time of each shock, are downloaded from deployed Tasers. Forty-five such reports were filed by Toronto police between January and June 2014. Of those, the *Star* requested information on 43 incidents. Toronto Police Services released 41 files, claiming that no usage reports were downloaded for the two other cases.

The newspaper reported that “21 printouts describe multiple deployments, ranging from one to 24 seconds each. More than one officer sometimes fired multiple times against a single suspect. Eleven reports describe three or more deployments from a single weapon. The data doesn’t indicate whether the Taser was making consistent contact—shocking the suspect—throughout a deployment. Officers sometimes indicated in their reports that a Taser dart had missed its target.”

The report goes on to state that “single shots were often sufficient, with 19 data printouts showing single deployments ranging from three to six seconds. A (separate) public report from Toronto police indicates that Tasers were fired for a single cycle in 44 incidents in 2014 and for multiple cycles in 43 incidents.”

Immediately jarring in this small snapshot of Taser usage is the amount of “multiple deployments” ranging for as long as 24 seconds. The weapon is typically defaulted at a five-second burst of electrical current. In the wake of a number of cases that involved the death

or serious injury of victims hit by Tasers (and resulting in law suits and other court proceedings lodged against police and/or TASER International), some North American police forces have adjusted Taser usage guidelines to limit (with loopholes for “emergency situations”) the length and number of shocks that can be administered. The Toronto police force has no such recommended limits.

While promoted as a safe alternative to other forms of police violence, the current generation of higher-power Tasers has been associated with approximately 1,000 deaths since they were introduced in 2000. Last year police shocks with stun guns, just in the US, resulted in the deaths of at least 47 people.

Medical experts have concluded that if a victim is shot with a Taser near the heart, the voltage can cause the heartbeat to jump from a normal resting rate of 72 beats-per-minute to as many as 220. According to TASER International, the “peak-loaded” voltage from a Taser at impact ranges up to 40,000 volts, but the average for the duration of the firing is 600 volts.

In 2010, the British Columbia Supreme Court handed down a ruling vindicating the finding of a provincial public inquiry into the police killing of a disoriented traveler at Vancouver Airport, Robert Dziekanski, that Tasers can cause serious injury or death.

TASER International, however, insists that its product is safe and has had nothing to do with any fatalities, not unlike the arguments trotted out by tobacco companies in defense of cigarette sales. The company argues that the fault lies with police training, not Tasers, which, given the increasingly militarized character 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 governmental 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!

TASER International’s prevarications have been enough for the Toronto police department. “While the Service recognizes the value of continued research, it remains satisfied that the current medical research has found no persuasive evidence of risk to vulnerable persons,” stated Deputy Chief Mike Frederico. “The officers are aware that ... repeated or long-term application is not recommended, but the circumstances may still dictate that that’s the only available response a police officer has.”

Contrary to police claims, the Taser is generally not used in lieu of deadly force. Instead, it is used to inflict pain and undeserved punishment, with citizens increasingly liable to be targeted for electrical assault for minor infractions, or for simply failing to promptly follow an officer’s command. Particularly egregious cases, often caught on video, show handcuffed suspects, truant schoolboys, pregnant women, the elderly and wheelchair-bound patients writhing in pain after a “deployment.”

It is estimated that as of 2012 at least 2 million people in the United States, or more than 1.5 percent of the total US population, had already been tasered. The weapon is now standard issue in prisons to not only “punish” but to enforce immediate inmate docility including against inmates with mental illness.

The proliferation of stun gun use across North America, without due regard for the safety of the devices, represents an attack on the democratic rights of the population. Amnesty International has called for a moratorium on Taser usage until more is learned about its lethality, while the United Nations Committee Against Torture has condemned the use of stun guns as “a form of torture that can kill.”



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