UK police fire stun guns 2,500 times as deployment of weapon escalates

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Figures released by the Home Office show that the use of stun guns is on the increase in the UK. For the year to March 2019, stun guns were deployed in 23,000 incidents and fired on 2,500 occasions.

These figures underscore that the use of these life-threatening weapons is now routine, with their use up by more than a third on the year to March 2018 and double the 2016 total.

The use of stun guns has sparked controversy since their introduction, following the growing numbers of deaths they have caused when deployed. According to Amnesty International, 18 people in Britain have died after a stun gun was discharged on them by police since their introduction in 2003 and rollout to all forces in 2013.

Jordan Begley, aged 23, from Manchester died following the use of a Taser while being arrested in July 2013. A jury at the inquest into his death, in 2015, delivered a narrative verdict concluding he died partly as a result of being "inappropriately and unreasonably" tasered.

There is also evidence that the use of a stun gun can potentially escalate a situation, rather than protect someone from being assaulted.

A study carried out by Cambridge University and City of London Police found that the presence of electroshock devices in a given situation leads to greater hostility in police-public interactions, with researchers describing this as the "weapons effect."

Dr. Barak Ariel, lead researcher from Cambridge's Institute of Criminology, said, "We found that officers are more likely to be assaulted when carrying electroshock weaponry, and more likely to apply force."

The study took place between June 2016 and June 2017 and researchers randomly allocated 400 front-line shifts between a Taser-carrying officer and an equivalent number of non-Taser-carrying officers. A total of 5,981 incidents took place over the study.

It showed that those officers carrying stun guns were involved in the use of force 48 percent more than those officers not carrying them. The use of force also increased with officers who were unarmed but accompanying armed officers on shifts, with an increase of 19 percent, compared to the control study using unarmed officers.

Ariel said, "For many, a weapon is a deterrence. However, some individuals interpret the sight of a weapon as an aggressive cue—a threat that creates a hostile environment." This can lead to a fight or flight dilemma, with potentially heightened aggressive behaviour and assault.

Under the Conservative government, there have been calls from the Home Office for all police officers to be trained in the use of Tasers. A survey carried out by the Police Federation of England and Wales found that 94 percent of police officers think Tasers should be issued to more front-line staff.

At present it has been left to the discretion of each police force to decide if they use stun guns or not. To date, both Northamptonshire and Durham Constabularies issue them to all front-line police officers.

In her keynote speech to the ruling Conservatives conference last year, Home Secretary Priti Patel said that up to 60 percent of police officers in England will be able to carry Tasers whilst on duty. An additional £10 million is being allocated to fund this. This allows an additional 10,000 front-line police officers to be able to carry a Taser. Police forces estimate that this will mean every officer who wants to carry one will be able to do so.

The most high-profile death at the hands of a police Taser was that of former Premier League football player Dalian Atkinson. Both police officers involved in the arrest that led to the death of Atkinson on August 15, 2016, following the use of a Taser will now stand trial in September later this year. One of them is charged with murder.

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In November last year, a court order was lifted by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), that had been used to provide anonymity to both officers. The decision to lift the ban came after lawyers acting for six news organisations, including the *Guardian*, argued that the order was an "unjustified" and serious interference with the principle of open justice.

It is usual practice to name suspects charged by the CPS. The lawyers representing the police officers accepted that their anonymity could not be justified but asked that the addresses of both defendants not be disclosed.

PC Benjamin Monk, 41, from the West Mercia police, was charged with murder that could lead to a sentence of life in prison. His colleague, PC Mary Ellen Bettley-Smith, 29, was charged that she assaulted Atkinson occasioning actual bodily harm, to which she entered a not guilty plea.

Following a pretrial hearing at Birmingham Crown court in December, both officers will stand trial in September 14.

This decision comes just over one year after the case had been referred to the CPS, by the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC), which had been conducting a criminal investigation into the case for over 16 months.

At the time of Atkinson's death, there were concerns raised as to the overwhelming use of force by the police officers involved.

Atkinson had been visiting his 85-year-old father, Ernest, at his home in Telford, Shropshire. It was alleged that he may have been arguing with his father prior to the police arriving on the scene.

Following the deployment of the Taser, Atkinson's health rapidly deteriorated and despite attempts by ambulance and medical staff to save him, he later died at the Princess Royal Hospital, following a cardiac arrest.

Paula Quinn, a neighbour living in a first floor flat near the Atkinson property, was one of the witnesses. She described seeing Atkinson being stunned with the Taser several times by police and then being kicked as he stumbled towards police officers. She told the BBC, "They were shouting and kicking so much all I could hear were the boots hitting him."

Monk is being charged with his murder, but no police officer has been found guilty of murder or manslaughter since civil liberties organisation INQUEST began monitoring cases in 1990.

INQUEST director Deborah Coles said, "The hope of many bereaved families, that police officers involved in a death are held to account to a criminal standard, is too often denied. As such the … decision from the Crown Prosecution Service—though long awaited—is welcome.

In 2017, an independent review into deaths in police custody carried out by Dame Elish Angiolini QC highlighted the problem with delays in investigations and prosecutions. Angiolini recommended that cases be dealt with in timescales equivalent to civilian homicide cases.

The report raised concerns about procedural issues following a serious incident that could potentially compromise an investigation. Police officers, who may have been witness to an incident by one of their colleagues, are allowed to confer with each other prior to any formal investigation by the Independent Office for Police Conduct—the body charged with investigating deaths in custody.

Police Federation members who spoke to the review claimed that only matters of fact would be discussed at such meetings, not belief or opinion. Yet the report points out that even if there was no deliberate intent on the part of the officers involved, it can result in contamination of accounts, which is harmful to the integrity of the evidence.

The report recommended that officers do not confer or speak to each other following an incident, prior to producing their initial accounts, other than for pressing operational reasons.

Other concerns were raised by families, campaigners, lawyers and even police officers who spoke to the review about the independence of the Independent Office for Police Conduct, when investigating deaths in custody. Many of those investigating incidents were themselves former police officers.

In the light of evidence as to the dangers to life involved in carrying and using stun guns, the government insistence on rolling out the weapons must be seen as part of the strengthening of the state that is underway in anticipation of a major escalation in the class struggle post-Brexit.

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