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Tasers: 50,000 Volts of Controversy

by 14

By Tony Eubank

Nation-wide there is growing concern over various police departments' use of tasers in the course of law enforcement. A taser is a powerful electrical weapon that is pistol shaped and designed to subdue subjects with a charge of 50,000 volts. The taser uses compressed nitrogen gas to fire darts up to a distance of 21 feet. These darts can penetrate up to two inches of clothing. Once the darts have hit the target the electrical charge is sent from the taser down two wires, which are attached to the dart. This charge causes muscle spasms, which incapacitate a suspect. A taser can also be used in "drive stun mode," as a close up, direct contact stun weapon. The "drive stun" is specifically designed as a pain compliance measure or in other words, a means to coerce cooperation with officers of the law through the use of pain.

The controversy stems from what seems to be liberal and at times unnecessary use of the taser. There are several incidents nation-wide and even locally where the questionable use of a taser has resulted in severe injury or even the death of suspects in police custody. There are many advantages to the use of tasers in the arena of law enforcement, such as the fact that a taser allows officers to subdue a violent suspect at a safe distance, thus helping to reduce the number of officer injuries. The use of tasers has also nearly eliminated the use of batons by police, thus resulting in a reduction of injuries sustained by suspects via strikes from a blunt object. Tasers also reduce the frequency of firearm use by officers by providing an alternative to lethal force when dealing with a violent suspect.

According to a report issued by Amnesty International, there have been 152 taser related deaths in the U.S. between June 2001 and February of this year. Now, while there were other factors besides the use of a taser in most of these cases, (such as drug use and pre-existing medical conditions) there have been several instances where the taser was the sole cause of the fatality. The aforementioned report, titled Amnesty International's Continuing Concerns About Taser Use, gives some examples of such cases. For instance, the case of 29 year-old Maurice Cunningham, tasered on July 23, 2005. After Cunningham allegedly tried to assault two officers in Lancaster, South Carolina, while trying to escape from his jail cell, he was pepper sprayed and shocked with a taser six times. One of these taser shocks lasted for 2 minutes and 49 seconds. Cunningham died shortly after this and the medical examiner determined that he died from cardiac arrhythmia that was caused by the taser use. The toxicology report determined Cunningham had not taken any illegal substances that would have contributed to his death.

Despite this and other instances of taser related death, police departments continue to use them at varying degrees of discretion. Often, those that are tasered have already been restrained or are in police custody. This is where the questions of how and when a taser should be used come in. As mentioned before, in most of these taser related deaths the taser was not the sole cause of death. Pre-existing health problems and drug or alcohol abuse among suspects puts them at a greater risk for serious injury. The fact that tasers are often used in conjunction with other police tools, like pepper spray, can create an even more dangerous situation for a suspect. A high stress situation, coupled with a high voltage electrical shock, pepper or