

American Civil Liberties Union of Mount Holyoke College
Talking Points on Public Safety's Proposal to Adopt Tasers

How Tasers work:

The Taser works by delivering 50,000 volts of energy, albeit at a very low amperage, to the body, causing a disruption of its electrical energy pulses and locking up the muscles.¹

Tasers are unsafe:

The Taser may be fatal if it hits the subject during the vulnerable period of the heart beat cycle, is used on particularly susceptible populations, or is used multiple times and for an extended time period.

Between 1999 and 2005 at least 148 people in the United States and Canada have died after encounters with the police who shocked them with Tasers.

If the Taser sends its energy to the heart beat at the wrong time, the electricity may cause ventricular fibrillation, a state in which the heart muscles spasm uncontrollably, disrupting the heart's pumping function and causing death.

A former Los Angeles medical examiner published a report on his review of several deaths of people who died after being shocked by Tasers. He found that "certain medical conditions including drug use or heart disease may increase the risk that the Taser will be

¹ All sources, unless noted otherwise, are taken from Mark Schlosberg, "Stun Gun Fallacy: How the Lack of Taser Regulation Endangers Lives," (American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California: September 2005).

lethal. Pre-existing heart disease, psychosis, and the use of drugs including cocaine, PCP, amphetamines, and alcohol may substantially increase the risk of fatality. Since Tasers are most likely to be used on psychotic or intoxicated individuals, in whom the medical history is unknown, the priorities for the use of the Taser...must be carefully considered.”²

The same increased risks apply to individuals who take certain medications that are used to treat psychiatric problems.

According to Roger Barr, professor of bio-engineering at Duke University, those of smaller stature are at greater risk.

Even Taser International’s (the company which produces and markets Tasers) own training manual suggested that its devices are potentially lethal. In the section concerning conduction of training sessions, the manual states that “any student with concerns over present or past medical conditions should refrain from voluntary exposure.”

An investigation by the New York Times found that Taser International conducted safety studies that were based on limited experimentation with animals. These studies were conducted by company-paid researchers and the results of these studies were never subjected to peer review.³

² Terence Allen, “Discussion of Effects of the Taser in Fatalities Involving Police Confrontation,” 37 J. of Forensic Sciences (1992).

³ Alex Berenson, “As Police Use of Tasers Rises, Questions over Safety Increase,” New York Times (July 18 2004).

Tasers are not necessary on this campus:

Public Safety has continually kept students safe without the use of Tasers. They use the tools already at their disposal safely and effectively, therefore an escalation in the tools they have is not needed.

At the November 14, 2006 Public Safety presentation to the SGA, Paul Ominsky stated that the use of these other tools on campus has been very rare. Barbara Arrighi estimated the number of times has been less than ten in a period of ten years. If these tools are so underused on campus, and when they are used, they are used safely and effectively, then there is no need to add Tasers as an additional tool.

An increase in some campus crimes one year does not indicate that there will be an increase of crime in subsequent years.

At the November 14, 2006 Public Safety presentation to the SGA, Paul Ominsky stated that tasers would not have a great affect in changing crime on this campus.

Tasers are not a “middle ground” option:

Amnesty International believes that electro-shock weapons, which have a powerful impact on the body and can cause acute pain, should never be considered a “low” or “intermediate” force option.⁴

⁴ "Excessive and Lethal Force? Amnesty International's Concerns About Deaths and Ill Treatment Involving Police Use of Tasers", (Amnesty International: Nov. 2004).

In the England, Tasers can be used only when lethal force is authorized. The report that led to this restriction found that “operational benefits of a wider deployment of the Taser were outweighed by residual medical concerns...particularly in respect of special population groups.”

For the most part, in the United States, Tasers are used in situations in which officers would never, and could never legally use a gun.

The vast majority of shocks fired by police officers are not actually alternatives to guns, but rather alternatives to other, non-life threatening forms of law enforcement-batons, chemical sprays, physical holds, and other weapons.

Taser International only says that the stun gun is less lethal than firearms, not less lethal than other law enforcement tools.

In Wisconsin, media reports indicated that department officers used Tasers on at least 84 occasions, but in only six of those instances was the use of deadly force averted by the use of a Taser.⁵

Some data suggests that officers are more willing to apply the Taser to suspects who are not armed or are already restrained.

⁵ Lisa Schuetz, “Wray Won’t Change Taser Policy,” *Wisconsin State Journal* (Feb. 3, 2005).

Taser International themselves say that 85% of shock recipients are not armed.

The New York Times cited a study by the Sheriff's office in Orange County, FL that found a 58% increase in the use of force since Tasers were adopted there.⁶

Concerns over Taser training manuals:

In its training manuals, Taser International advocates the use of multiple hits, and especially for those under the influence of drugs. The use of multiple hits and the use of a Taser on a person under the influence of drugs both increase the risk of fatality.

Most training manuals from Taser International were published in 2003 or 2004, and are outdated considering the new information about the safety risks that have recently come out.

The medical studies mentioned in the training manuals are largely taken out of context and lack relevant information. In the latest manual, "independent conclusions" of studies are presented that are actually not independent or are taken out of context.

Others concerned about Tasers:

⁶ Alex Berenson, "As Police Use of Tasers Rises, Questions over Safety Increase," New York Times (July 18 2004).

The Scottsdale, AZ based Taser International promotion practices and safety claims are currently being examined by the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Arizona Attorney General.

Earlier this year, two major Department of Homeland Security law enforcement divisions, Immigrations and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection, announced that they are not purchasing Tasers because of safety concerns.

The International Association of Chiefs of Police concluded that independent data does not exist concerning in-custody deaths or the safety of EMDT (Electro-Muscular Disruption Technology) when applied to drug or alcohol-compromised individuals, and are urging reassessment of Tasers.