

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

Thu, Feb. 14, 2002 (Death on Feb 2 02)

Northeast man dies after police use stun gun in arrest

**Officers said he was vocal after being hit. He had cocaine in his system, but whether it was a factor is still unclear.**

**By Thomas J. Gibbons Jr.  
Inquirer Staff Writer**

A Northeast Philadelphia man reported to be brandishing a knife early yesterday died after police attempting to arrest him shot him with a Taser gun. It was the first such fatality since police began using the electric weapon last year, authorities said.

Preliminary tests showed the victim, Anthony Spencer, 35, of the 6200 block of Brouse Avenue in Mayfair, had cocaine in his system, police said.

Whether the drug played a part in the death of Spencer at 1:43 a.m. at Frankford Hospital's Frankford Division - 38 minutes after officers responded to a call reporting a naked male with a knife - will not be determined until autopsy reports and final toxicological tests are analyzed.

Police said that when officers arrived at the house, they found a formidable foe in Spencer, who was more than 6 feet tall and weighed about 280 pounds. They said he was naked outside the house and brandishing a 7-inch folding knife with the blade open.

As officers approached, Spencer went inside, followed by police. Family members warned that he was still armed with the knife, said Capt. Thomas Lippo of the Homicide Division.

Spencer went upstairs to a bedroom and then came back down as officers tried to calm him, Lippo said.

"At this point, the male pushed past police and once again went outside," Lippo said.

Then, in an effort to subdue him, police employed pepper spray.

"When this had no effect on the male initially, the supervisor on the scene then utilized his Taser," Lippo said.

Police sergeants across the city carry Tasers in their patrol cars and are certified to use them after completing an eight-hour training course. The gun, which looks like a 9mm Glock, fires two darts, or probes, designed to stop a human with a 50,000-volt electrical current. Recovery time is almost immediate.

The Taser shot disrupts the muscles that control arms and legs while leaving the heart and breathing reflex alone. The weapon, which went into service early last year, has raised eyebrows at the American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania.

Larry Frankel, executive director, said Spencer's death "is reason for the Police Department to review their use of these weapons."

"If something was wrong here, they should take appropriate steps," Frankel said.

It was the first time a death occurred here after the weapon was used, police said.

After Spencer was struck with the current, he was handcuffed and placed in a patrol wagon for the ride to the hospital.

"He was conscious at the time. He was talking the whole time, ranting the whole time on the way to the hospital," Lippo said. "At some point, he became unconscious and expired."

The death is being investigated by the Homicide Division and the Internal Affairs Division.

"All indications are obviously they did follow procedure," Lippo said of the officers' actions.

Police said they were familiar with the Brouse Avenue address and had answered a half-dozen calls there for domestic issues since Jan. 1. Spencer's behavior yesterday was nothing new, they said.

"We do have indications that he did have a drinking history in the past and he has utilized drugs, and as a result of that, sometimes he became irrational. And in this case, we believe that's essentially what happened," Lippo said.

According to criminal records, Spencer was convicted of retail theft in 1995. The next year, he pleaded guilty to receiving stolen property, and last year, he was convicted of unauthorized use of a motor vehicle, receiving stolen property, and a weapons offense.

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## Man Dies in Police Custody

Philadelphia, PA

Wednesday, February 13, 2002 - 09:57 PM ET



**(KYW)** An autopsy is under way to determine what caused the death of a Northeast Philadelphia man late Tuesday night.

Authorities say police were called to the 6200 block of Brouss Avenue in the Mayfair section of the city for a sixth time by the sister of 35-year-old Anthony Spencer.

Upon arrival, they saw the naked man chasing his girlfriend with a knife. Police say they tried to talk to him but he would not respond and continued to yell. They maced him, but still he would not calm. Then, they used a non-lethal taser gun to subdue him.

The man was enroute to Frankford Hospital when he died.

Preliminary reports show no sign of trauma or injury, but cocaine was found in his system. The full autopsy will not be completed for several weeks.

Police say this is the exact situation that tasers were designed for and say that only trained sergeants are allowed to use them. They doubt that the shock killed Spencer, but a full investigation is underway.

Spencer's sister spoke with [Eyewitness News](#) Reporter Marge Pala, but did not want the interview to air. She says Spencer's death could have been avoided.

Watch [Eyewitness News](#) for an update on this story.

## **NE Phila. Man Dies After Being Subdued with Stun Gun**

by KYW's News Radio 1060 AM Cheryl Elias, **Thursday, February 14, 2002**

An autopsy is being performed on a man police tried to subdue early Wednesday morning during a domestic dispute at a home in Northeast Philadelphia. The 36-year-old died shortly after he was taken down with pepper spray and a Taser stun gun.

Homicide captain Thomas Lippo says police responded to a call around 1:00 Wednesday morning about a naked man wielding a knife at a home in the 6200 block of Braus Avenue:

"As it was relayed to us, he was kind of ranting and raving and the family was insistent that he has a knife and obviously they wanted the police to help them. So that's why the officers were there."

Lippo says efforts to talk Anthony Alexander down from his rantings and ravings failed, and when pepper spray didn't work they used the Taser in accordance with police protocol:

"Our directives -- and police followed that to the letter -- that the person would be taken directly to the hospital, which they did."

Alexander died not long after his arrival at Frankford Hospital, where tests showed he had cocaine in his system.



## **Man dies in police custody** February 13, 2002

by **Cindy Hamill**

A naked man who's armed with a knife is picked up by police. A short time later he dies in their custody. Police say they used a taser gun to shock and subdue the man because he was unruly, but it's still not known how he died. NBC10's Cindy Hamill has more.



Thu, Feb. 14, 2002

Ranting man, subdued with stun gun, dies

## Cocaine suspected as cause; family had called police, who also used pepper spray, to help them

By JIM NOLAN

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It took pepper spray, a stun gun and a group of police officers to subdue a ranting, naked, knife-wielding, 280-pound man outside his home in Mayfair early yesterday.

Less than 45 minutes later, Anthony Spencer, 35, was pronounced dead at the Frankford division of Frankford Hospital, of an apparent heart attack.

"Initial investigation from the medical examiner's office indicates there was no major injuries or trauma to Mr. Spencer," said Homicide Capt. Thomas Lippo.

"Also, initial drug-screening tests indicate that he had the presence of cocaine in his system."

Official toxicology and autopsy reports will not be finalized for several weeks. Homicide and police internal-affairs units are investigating.

Lippo said that Spencer's family, who placed a 911 call summoning police, told investigators he had a history of drinking and irrational behavior.

Police had been called to the house on Brous Avenue near Devereaux approximately six times since the beginning of the year to quell various domestic disturbances involving Spencer, who had a criminal history of three minor convictions dating from 1995, sources said.

At 1:05 a.m. yesterday police arrived to find Spencer, naked and irrational, wielding a seven-inch folding knife.

"He was ranting and raving, and the family was insistent that he had a knife," Lippo said. "They wanted the police to help them, and that's why the officers were there."

Spencer quickly fled inside the house to a second-floor bedroom, before again running out the front door.

"Police tried to calm the situation down," said Lippo, who said Spencer continued to act irrationally while brandishing the knife.

That's when cops used pepper spray on Spencer.

"When this had no effect. . .the supervisor on the scene then utilized his Taser [stun gun]," Lippo explained.

Although the cause of Spencer's death won't be known until tests are completed, a toxicologist says cocaine was the likely culprit.

"Cocaine is very deadly," said Dr. Paul Kolecki of Thomas Jefferson University, and pepper spray and Taser guns are "generally safe."

However, deaths have been attributed to pepper spray, particularly among people with asthma.

According to a published report, Taser guns have been linked to deaths of people on cocaine or PCP, or with heart conditions.

The Arizona-made Taser used on Spencer is a slightly different version of what is commonly known as a "stun gun." It fires two electric probes that transmit a disabling 50,000 volts of electricity to the target. The shock temporarily disrupts the muscles that control arms and legs while leaving the heart and breathing reflex in tact, according to department experts and the weapon's manufacturer.

Last year, the department issued 65 Tasers to supervisors to be used in violent confrontations as an alternative to lethal force.

Department policy calls for any suspect subdued by pepper spray or Taser to be taken to the hospital.

Spencer was "conscious and talking the whole time, ranting the whole time on the way to the hospital" after he was handcuffed and put into the police wagon, said Lippo.

"Afterward at the hospital at somepoint, he became unconscious and expired."

Spencer was declared dead at 1:43 a.m.

Spencer's family said they were upset about how police handled the incident but declined further comment. \*

Staff writers Gloria Campisi and Myung Oak Kim contributed to this report.



## **Philadelphia Man Hit With Stun Gun Outside His Home Dies While in Police Custody**

The Associated Press

Published: **Feb 14, 2002**

PHILADELPHIA (AP) - A suspect who had been subdued with a stun gun died while in police custody, becoming the first fatality since Philadelphia police began using the Taser last year, authorities said.

Preliminary tests showed Anthony Spencer, 35, had cocaine in his system when he died Wednesday. Police were awaiting final results from an autopsy and toxicological tests.

According to police, Spencer, who is six feet tall and weighs 280 pounds, was naked and brandishing a seven-inch knife in front of his house when police arrived. After pepper spray failed to subdue him, police used a Taser, which delivers a 50,000-volt electrical current.

"He was conscious at the time. He was talking the whole time, ranting the whole time on the way to the hospital," Capt. Thomas Lippo said. "At some point, he became unconscious and expired."

Spencer's death is under an internal police investigation. The American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania called on police to review their use of the Taser.

AP-ES-02-14-02 1246EST

## **Want Stun Guns Safety Issue Raised**

By *JOANN LOVIGLIO* Associated Press Writer

*The Associated Press*

PHILADELPHIA (AP) \_ The death of a man shot by police with a Taser stun gun highlights the potential dangers of weapons that are considered nonlethal, civil liberties groups say.

"Our understanding is that the reason for using these kinds of weapons is that a person can be (subdued) but not killed," said Larry Frankel, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania. "The safety issue needs to be closely looked at, and if there is a growing body of facts that this is a more dangerous weapon than was first thought, then it's time for reconsideration."

Many police departments nationwide have added weapons like pepper spray, electronic shockers, rubber bullets and net guns to their arsenals in recent years, in an effort to subdue suspects without firing a gun.

Now, groups such as the ACLU and Amnesty International are calling for closer scrutiny of such weapons. Amnesty International has urged law enforcement and correctional agencies to suspend use of the weapons until an independent inquiry is conducted, spokeswoman Gwen Fitzgerald said.

In the Philadelphia incident, Anthony Spencer, 35, was standing outside his home naked and brandishing a 7-inch knife when police arrived Wednesday. Officers used pepper spray in an effort to subdue him but it didn't work, so they used the Taser 50,000-volt stun gun, police said.

The Taser fires two projectile darts, connected to the weapon by wires, that can reach a subject up to 21 feet away. An electrical charge temporarily overrides the central nervous system; if the suspect continues to resist, the officer can deliver a second charge by pulling the trigger.

After the 6-foot-tall, 280-pound man was dropped by the current, he was handcuffed and placed in a patrol wagon for the ride to the hospital. He was conscious at the time of his arrest but died on the way to the hospital.

Preliminary tests showed he had cocaine in his system, police said. No cause of death has been determined, and whether the drug played a part will not be known until autopsy reports and toxicological tests are analyzed.

The incident was the first such fatality in Philadelphia since police began using the Taser device last year, authorities said. Other fatalities have been reported in Taser-assisted arrests in Florida, California and other states, but none have been blamed on the Taser itself, said Steve Tuttle of Taser International, which sells the weapon to 1,200 police departments worldwide.

"The Taser is an alternative to a firearm that has saved thousands of lives," he said. "Our biggest problem is a lack of knowledge about how it works."



2/18/02

### **Philadelphia man hit with stun gun outside his home dies while in police custody**

PHILADELPHIA (AP) \_ A suspect who had been subdued with a stun gun died while in police custody, becoming the first fatality since Philadelphia police began using the Taser last year, authorities said.

Preliminary tests showed Anthony Spencer, 35, had cocaine in his system when he died Wednesday. Police were awaiting final results from an autopsy and toxicological tests.

According to police, Spencer, who is six feet tall and weighs 280 pounds, was naked and brandishing a seven-inch knife in front of his house when police arrived. After pepper spray failed to subdue him, police used a Taser, which delivers a 50,000-volt electrical current.

"He was conscious at the time. He was talking the whole time, ranting the whole time on the way to the hospital," Capt. Thomas Lippo said. "At some point, he became unconscious and expired."

Spencer's death is under an internal police investigation. The American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania called on police to review their use of the Taser.

## **Taser death to have no effect on UI**

**By Peter Rugg**, February 18, 2002  
The Daily Iowan

Reacting to the Taser-related death of a Philadelphia man last week, UI officials said they were aware of such risks when they supported the plan to arm Public Safety officers with the weapons later this year. They said the death will have no effect on the plan, which was approved by the state of Iowa Board of Regents in January.

"There's always the chance something will happen, but in terms of this case affecting the university, I don't think anything will be changed," said UI Student Government President Nick Klenske. "I think it's a done deal."

Philadelphia police failed to subdue Anthony Spencer with pepper spray when he was found naked and wielding a knife in front of his house last week. The officers then used a Taser on him, administering a 50,000-volt electrical jolt. Spencer died soon after he was hit. Drug tests revealed cocaine in his system; autopsy and toxicological tests are underway.

The incident is under internal police investigation.

The M26 is a 26-watt device that shoots two barbs with attached wires into a person from up to 21 feet away. The weapon, which hit the market in 1999, delivers a 50,000-volt shock to the victim, causing instant loss of neuromuscular control.

Jeff Cox, the UI Faculty Senate vice president, said he doubts whether any changes will be made to the Taser plan, but he is concerned about possible fatalities. Members of the faculty group narrowly voted to support the plan last semester; Cox was one of the dissenters.

"We did know making the decision that there were fatalities," he said. "It can affect people with heart irregularities, and there have been instances where a Taser combined with something else can cause death.

"It was never 100 percent accurate to say they're not lethal."

With a recent report showing that the UI had the most on-campus drug arrests nationally among public schools with a student population of 28,000 or more, there is a likelihood that someone under the influence of narcotics will be stunned, Cox said. According to Chuck Green, the UI assistant vice president for Public Safety, the department recorded 137 arrests for drug violations in 2000, 62 involving students.

While the Philadelphia chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union has asked police to reconsider using the weapons, the local chapter does not have a stance on the issue, said Cox, who is a board member of the group.

Cox said senators asked for a scheduled review of the Taser use after the program had begun.

Public Safety Lt. Steve Stange said no deaths had ever been solely attributed to the M26 Advanced Taser that will be issued to the department. The deaths have been affected by outside factors, such as drug use, he said.

"We are going to undergo training, and it will be lengthy," said Stang, who is licensed to teach officers how to use the weapons. "We will be hit by one as part of the training. We do it so we experience it and know what it feels like."

It would likely take mixing drug use and the stun from a Taser to produce a fatality, said Mark Dyken, an associate professor of neurology.

"There are low-level electric shocks that can induce cardiac arrhythmia, but with that device, it's on a level that will probably just knock you out," he said. "An awful lot of people view these things and say, 'This person was on cocaine or drugs,' but that by itself will kill you. I would tell someone if you're going out around police, you probably shouldn't use cocaine."

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## Man dies after Philly police use taser gun on him

**2/15/02- PHILADELPHIA (AP)** — A naked man brandishing a knife outside his home died after police shot him with a stun gun, authorities said.

Preliminary tests showed Anthony Spencer, 35, had cocaine in his system, police said. Whether the drug played a part in Spencer's death Wednesday will not be determined until autopsy reports and final toxicological tests are analyzed.

It was the first such fatality in Philadelphia since city police began using the electric weapon last year, authorities said.

Police said that when officers arrived at the house, they found the 6-foot-tall, 280-pound man naked and holding a 7-inch folding knife with the blade open.

Officers used pepper spray in an effort to subdue him but it didn't work, so they used the Taser, police said.

Police sergeants in Philadelphia carry Tasers in their patrol cars and are certified to use them after completing an eight-hour training course. The gun fires two darts designed to stop a human with a 50,000-volt electrical current.



### February 20, 2002

Suspect dies after stun-gun shock

A Lower Merion man subdued by Philadelphia police with an electronic shock from a Taser stun gun early last Wednesday died at Frankford Hospital's Frankford Campus less than an hour after his arrest.

The man, Anthony Spencer, 35, of the 6200 block of Brouse Ave., allegedly was naked in the street outside of his home and waving a pocket knife when police arrived shortly after 1 a.m.

Someone inside Spencer's home had called 911, according to Inspector James Boyle, commander of the police department's homicide division.

Officers attempted to talk Spencer into going inside and getting dressed, Boyle said. Instead, Spencer allegedly went inside, dumped the knife and re-emerged from the house, still naked.

During a struggle with the 6-foot-1-inch, 270-pound Spencer, officers used pepper spray in an attempt to subdue and arrest him. Then a sergeant used the Taser, a so-called non-lethal weapon issued to patrol supervisors throughout the city.

The weapon, shaped like a handgun, sends a burst of electrical current through a target's body and is designed to immobilize the person for several seconds.

"That didn't seem to have an effect," Boyle said. "He went down, then got back up again."

Eventually, more officers arrived and overpowered Spencer. They handcuffed him and took him to the hospital. A preliminary toxicology report revealed that he had a quantity of cocaine in his system, Boyle said. A detailed report is pending.

Officers reported that Spencer remained conscious and active on the way to the hospital, where he lost consciousness and was pronounced dead at 1:43 a.m.

There were no other reported injuries, Boyle said, although Spencer and an officer both fell over a railing at one point during the scuffle.

Boyle said the Taser remains in use by the department. The incident remains under investigation by homicide detectives and the police department's internal affairs division.