

Stun Guns for Everyone

Are tasers the ultimate in self-defense or tools of torture? A new model for consumers sparks debate

By ANITA HAMILTON

SURPRISING NEW PRODUCTS POP UP all the time at high-tech trade shows. But at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas last month, one was particularly shocking. Volunteers by the dozen lined up at the Taser International booth for a chance to get blasted with 50,000 volts from the company's newest stun gun. "It felt like I

Granted, Americans are concerned about security these days, but will arming everybody with stun guns really make us safer? The weapons have been linked to more than a dozen deaths¹ and outlawed in seven states.² Amnesty International has labeled them "tools of torture" and called for a worldwide ban. In one notoriously brutal incident, New York City cops zapped a teenager several dozen times.³ The teen filed suit and won a \$600,000 settlement.

stun gun, that's a tiny fraction of the 30,000 or so Americans who die from gunshot wounds each year. "What our weapon does is highly unpleasant," concedes Taser CEO Rick Smith, "but it can save lives."

Gerald Le Melle, deputy executive director of Amnesty USA, doesn't buy it. "There is a fine line between protection and torture," he says. He complains that of the 43 states where it is legal to buy a stun gun, none requires a background check. Taser requires that buyers be 18 or older, but Florida is the only state that enforces the rule.⁵

Curiously, one of the biggest complaints about tasers is not that they are dangerous but that they don't do the job. Los Angeles police department statistics show that over the past three years tasers were effective only 56% of the time.⁶ Although all 1,100

SHOCK AND DROP

Tasers emit a series of short, high-voltage bursts that trigger searing pain and make victims' muscles contract uncontrollably

Microprocessor
This chip controls the shocks' force and timing

Safety

Batteries
Eight AAs power as many as 200 zaps

Laser
The red light helps users pinpoint their target

Confetti
Tiny ID tags are ejected with each shot, discouraging criminal use

Cartridge

Compressed nitrogen gas hurls electrode-tipped wires at 100 m.p.h.

Electrodes Barbed prongs on the end of 15-ft. copper wires hook into skin or clothes

50,000 volts of electricity can pass through up to 2 in. of fabric

TIME Graphic by Len Tweeten

got hit by lightning 100 times," said Jeremy Friedbaum, 46, of Provo, Utah.

The new stun gun, the Advanced Taser M-18L, looks like a pistol. But instead of firing bullets, it shoots tethered darts that hook into the skin or clothes. Victims typically scream in pain and writhe on the floor until the shock subsides—usually within a minute. Heavy-duty tasers are already used by more than 1,000 police departments in the U.S.; United Airlines just bought 1,300. And now Taser, sensing a new market opportunity in post-Sept. 11 anxiety, is launching its first models aimed at ordinary citizens. Prices start at \$389.

How dangerous are tasers? Not quite as bad as they sound. Although they put out 50,000 volts—roughly the same as a high-voltage power line—they do it in very short (.00001 sec.) bursts of much lower current. Every time there has been a fatality, the victim was either drugged or suffering from pre-existing medical conditions that made it hard to determine a cause of death. At TIME's request, Dr. Patrick Tchou, a cardiologist at the Cleveland Clinic, reviewed the few existing scientific studies on stun guns and concluded there is "some potential for causing harm, such as an irregular heartbeat" that could lead to death.⁴

Taser enthusiasts argue that even if a few dozen deaths could be attributed to the

field officers in the San Diego police department are issued tasers, they rarely use them. "They aren't real confident with them," says Sergeant Stephen Margetts. He notes that stun guns work best in a very limited range—8 ft. to 10 ft. from the suspect—and must be held at precisely the right angle.⁷ Most officers, he says, just reach for their pepper spray.

But Jeremy Friedbaum, who won a free taser for his momentary pain in Los Vegas, has few qualms about his new weapon. "I was really happy to bring this home to my family," says the father of four children, ages two to 12. He plans to teach his older kids how to use it. ■



Footnoted Corrections

1. This is a more than a little misleading. Three of these cases died of multiple gun shot wounds when the older Tasertron TASER® did not stop them. The remainder all had toxic levels of PCP and/or cocaine in their systems and died more than 15 minutes after they were subdued with the TASER. These cases are studied in a 1991 report published in the Journal of Forensic Sciences, Vol. 36, No. 2, March 1991, pp. 434-448. According to Dr. Robert Stratbucker, the leading medical expert in this field, there is no plausible mechanism that a low power electric shock like the TASER can lead to a fatality more than 10 minutes after the application of the shocks. The fact the TASER was used to subdue them would not have affected the course of blood toxicology from illegal narcotics that would lead to their eventual death. To quote Captain Sid Heal of the LA Sheriff's SWAT Team "Does the cock's crow make the sun rise?" Two things that happen at the same time are not necessarily connected.
2. Actually, the ADVANCED TASER® and AIR TASER® have never been outlawed in any state. There were 7 states that outlawed stun guns back in the early 1980's in reaction to a flood of imports. Unfortunately, there was no strong industry advocates to advise legislators on the safety aspects of stun technology. Since the AIR TASER was introduced in 1995, several states considered bans, including Minnesota and Florida. However, once we briefed legislators on the safety of the weapon and on the AFID tracking system (the revolutionary tracking system that tracks registered users to confetti-like ID tags that are dispersed with every firing), the Minnesota State Senate Crime Prevention Committee voted unanimously to kill the bill. The Chairman of the Crime Prevention Committee testified that he felt the public availability of TASERs would save lives by offering a safer, more traceable alternative to conventional firearms. In Florida, we worked proactively with state legislators to actually help write the regulation which requires that dealers register every weapon sold using our AFID tracking system. It was a great example of government and industry working together to use technology and regulation hand-in-hand to help solve potential problems. We continue to work proactively with states such as Hawaii, where the ban on stun guns for law enforcement was recently lifted, and Michigan, where we anticipate a bill will be introduced shortly to allow both law enforcement and citizens access to TASER technology.
3. This incident involved a regular stun gun, not a TASER®. This incident is one of the reasons why we built a Dataport into the ADVANCED TASER that records the time and date of every firing -- so that officers will know that their usage patterns can be tracked, thereby deterring misuse. The microprocessor controlled Dataport makes the ADVANCED TASER the first true smart weapon.
4. Unfortunately, you can never prove something cannot ever happen. However, we find it interesting that the phrase could lead to death was outside the quotes (i.e. from the reporter, not the physician). We've never seen a medical study, or plausible theory whereby the output of the TASER weapons can cause a fatal heart arrhythmia.
5. Actually, several states including California have minimum age requirements. Florida is the only state that requires the dealer to register the weapon with the manufacturer, and that the weapons discharge serialized ID tags. We are supportive of other states introducing similar legislation to help enforce responsible anti-criminal weapon tracking programs.
6. The 56% effectiveness data is for the 1970's era Tasertron TASER (manufactured by a different company), **not** our ADVANCED TASER. This is exactly the reason why LAPD upgraded to the ADVANCED TASER in December, 2001. This is like criticizing Microsoft for bugs in the original Apple operating system. The data's over 20 years out of date -- and it's for a competitor! It would have been more relevant to quote an agency like Seattle, that has used the ADVANCED TASER for over a year with a 94% effectiveness rate.
7. The San Diego PD deploys the AIR TASER model 54000, our earlier 7-Watt system. It is exactly this feedback (that the flashlight shape is awkward to handle) that caused us to design the 18 to 26 Watt ADVANCED TASER to look and handle like a pistol. It makes the ADVANCED TASER much easier to use. We're hopeful that San Diego will upgrade to the new ADVANCED TASER for increased effectiveness and ease of use.