

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**Taser Guns: Less-than-lethal weapons for law enforcement**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Several affordable and effective less-than-lethal weapons are available to law enforcement agencies and their officers, namely, the taser device. The purpose of this policy research paper is to ascertain if taser devices can be safely used as a less-than-lethal weapon in law enforcement. Furthermore, by way of independent surveys, this research paper is anticipated to show that the public supports the use of taser devices when law enforcement officers require a less-lethal approach. The belief is that the advantages of using taser devices in law enforcement outweigh the disadvantages. This paper provides technical information on taser devices as well as the advantages and disadvantages to be analyzed by the command staff of the Galveston County Sheriff's Office and other law enforcement agencies considering using taser devices as a less-than-lethal weapon.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction .....	1
Review of Literature .....	2
Methodology .....	4
Findings .....	5
Discussions/Conclusions .....	9
References .....	11
Appendices	

## **INTRODUCTION**

One of the most important responsibilities any law enforcement officer has to one's self in the course of daily duties is to make sure he/she goes home safely at the end of the shift. If an officer is in law enforcement long enough, he/she will most certainly encounter situations when deadly force is not justified, although some other sort of less-than-lethal approach is required. In the "post-Rodney King era," the public has demanded, whenever practicable, that officers and their agencies employ some form of less-lethal, low-injury means of taking an offender into custody (Simon & Williams, 2001). Currently, the Galveston County Sheriff's Office does not have a policy in place for the use of taser devices, as a less-than-lethal weapon, to assist officers when deadly force is not justified. Putting a policy in place would give officers yet one other capability to ensure the safety of the officer and the uncooperative and/or combative subject.

It is imperative that law enforcement agencies give their officers every resource available to do their job effectively and safely. The agency also has a responsibility to properly train the officer in the less-than-lethal weapon. Several affordable and effective less-than-lethal weapons are available to law enforcement agencies and their officers, namely, the taser device.

The purpose of this policy research paper is to ascertain if taser devices can be safely used as a less-than-lethal weapon in law enforcement. More specifically, this paper seeks to examine the question: Are Taser Guns safe and effective less-lethal weapons for law enforcement? The methodology used in this research paper will include independent research, periodicals from police and tactical magazines, journals, training and informative digital videodiscs, as well as surveys.

The intended outcome of this research paper is to show that taser devices can be a safe and effective less-than-lethal weapon when used properly by law enforcement officers. Furthermore, by way of independent surveys, this research paper is anticipated to show that the public supports the use of taser devices when law enforcement officers require a less-lethal approach. The intended audience of this research paper will be the command staff of the Galveston County Sheriff's Office and intends to provide sufficient information of the feasibility of using taser devices as a less than lethal alternative.

The Galveston County Sheriff's Office can benefit by utilizing the information gathered in this paper to establish policy and guidelines for training law enforcement officers in the use of taser devices as a less-than-lethal weapon. By providing officers with another option in resolving situations that place officers, as well as the public, in danger, and deadly force is not justified, will benefit the officer, agency, and the public. This research may also benefit other agencies in decision-making or policy development for less-than-lethal weapons.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

It is widely recognized in law enforcement that the Rodney King incident was a defining moment in how the public perceives the use of force by police (Simon & Williams, 2001). Less lethal weapons are being used by more and more law enforcement agencies across the country. Though no less lethal weapon is perfect in every situation, the taser device is pulling away from the other less lethal weapons and is being regarded as safer and more appropriate to use before law enforcement officers result to deadly force when dealing with uncooperative and/or combative subjects.

In developing the advanced taser, Taser International chose to follow the same approach that's used in the pharmaceutical and medical device industries (Nielsen, 2001). The findings showed that the electrical outputs of the advanced taser fall well within the safe levels defined by international standards. Using "worst case scenarios", two leading experts in cardiac safety found the advanced taser has no adverse effect on heart rhythms (Nielsen, 2001). The study also indicates that it is extremely unlikely that the Advanced Taser M26 operation could damage an implanted pacemaker or Implantable Cardioverter Defibrillator.

Although less-lethal weapons have been traditionally issued only to tactical teams or supervisory personnel, there's a growing trend to full deployment (Nielsen, 2001). The Sacramento, California, Police Department is one agency taking lead, as it has recognized the legal liability requirements of "reasonable response and action" by first responders to a crime scene, announcing it will issue taser devices to each patrol officer and detective in the department.

However, some law enforcement officers are hesitant to accept another less-than-lethal option with open arms, as some feel they may be sued if they fail to use the appropriate less lethal weapon when made available in a crisis situation. For example, an officer uses a baton and pepper spray before using his firearm to terminate a combative-persons actions (and deadly force is justified), however the officer failed to use a taser device prior to escalating to deadly force and one was made available by the agency.

Recently, the Cincinnati, Ohio, Police Department, has found itself under a legal and public microscope, when a on-board police video showed two officers repeatedly striking a 300 pound combative man, who was under the influence of an illegal drug

and/or mentally unstable, with batons. The man was taken into custody and died on the way to the hospital for injuries he received (as per medical examiner report) as a result of the baton strikes he received at the time of his arrest. Some public outcry was made shortly after the medical examiners report, indicating that the man may have been less combative and lived if the police had used other less lethal weapons, such as taser devices, to subdue the man instead of striking him with batons.

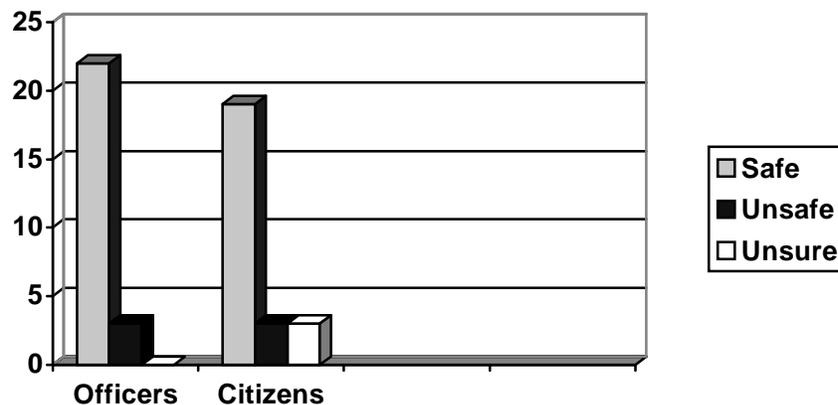
## **METHODOLOGY**

One topic of interest was to determine if law enforcement officers felt taser devices could be safely used as a less-lethal weapon in the law enforcement field and more importantly, how the public would feel about the use of taser devices in law enforcement. This paper intends to show that law enforcement officers and the public feel that taser devices can be safely used in the law enforcement profession.

A survey conducted on this LEMIT class (25 respondents/Module I/#56) as regards their thoughts and insight on the use of taser devices is presented in Figure 1. The class represents a cross section of Texas with various size agencies represented. The surveys were handed out and returned for analysis and comparison. Eighteen of the respondents indicate that their agency(ies) currently do(does) not use taser devices in their use-of-force continuum, although they would consider using taser devices if proper training was provided. Four respondents indicate that their agency(ies) do(does) utilize taser devices in their use of force continuum. Three respondents indicate that their agency(ies) do(does) not utilize taser devices in their use-of-force continuum and furthermore, they personally feel that taser devices cannot be safely used as less-lethal weapons in law enforcement.

Other major concerns were public perceptions and expectations of their law enforcement agencies. A survey conducted of civilians (25) in Galveston, Texas communities as regards their perceptions and expectations of their law enforcement agencies is also presented in Figure 1. The respondents were not limited to any certain age, race, gender, or economic background. The surveys were handed out and returned for analysis and comparison. Nineteen of the respondents indicate that they feel law enforcement officers can safely use taser devices as a less-lethal weapon. Three respondents indicated that taser devices could not be safely used as less-lethal weapons, and three respondents were unsure.

**Figure 1.** Law enforcement and citizen survey on the use of taser devices in law enforcement.



The information obtained through both surveys will be presented to the command staff of the Galveston County Sheriff's Office for analysis to establish policy and guidelines for training law enforcement officers in the use of taser devices as a less-than-lethal weapon.

## **FINDINGS**

Several questions were raised to analyze the issue of using taser devices as a less-than-lethal weapon in law enforcement: 1) What is the need for less-lethal weapons in

law enforcement? 2) What are taser devices? 3) What do taser devices do? 4) What are the advantages of using taser devices? 5) What are the disadvantages of using taser devices? 6) What training is required and who provides the initial training?

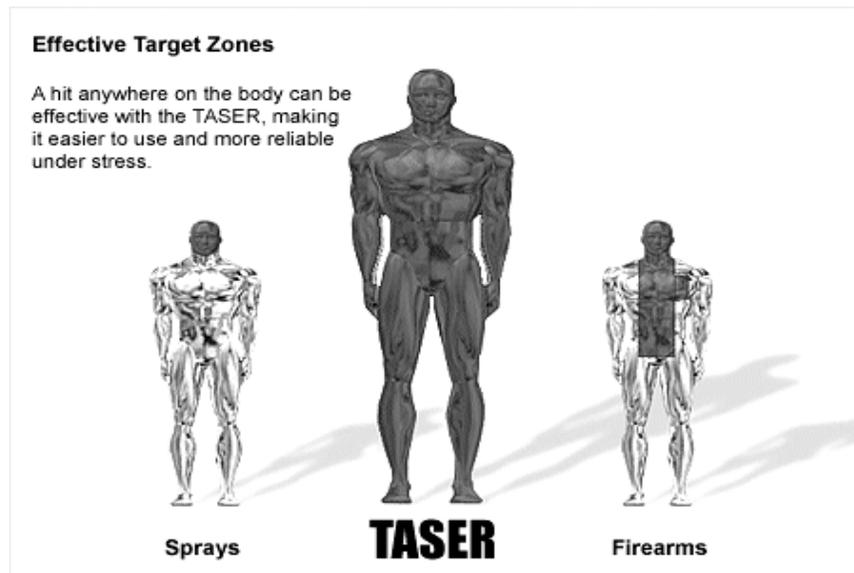
The need for less-lethal weapons in law enforcement has become more and more apparent as law enforcement officers are continuously being scrutinized by the media and the public when faced with situations that do not justify deadly force and the amount of force used is in question. Some examples of these situations are when officers are dealing with mental health subjects, combative or uncooperative subjects, intoxicated subjects, and family disturbances.

Agencies such as the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Office, Albuquerque Police Department, and Sacramento Police Department, are using taser devices to assist officers in dealing with these types of scenarios. The Taser Gun is a handheld conducted energy weapon. It consists of a trigger or button to activate the device, two small darts attached to high voltage insulated transparent wires, which propel and attach to the violator. Once the trigger is activated, the taser device transmits short high-energy electrical pulses.

The Taser Gun is designed to attack a person's central nervous system. The device sends out 50,000 volts at 26 watts, which overwhelm a person's central nervous system. This causes immediate, uncontrollable contraction of the muscle tissue, therefore, stunning the target. Once the Taser has been deployed, it takes effect between a ½ second and 1½ seconds. The effective firing range of the Taser is up to 21 feet. The tethered darts will penetrate up to 3 inches of clothing, although it is not necessary for the darts to make contact with the skin.

Some advantages of using the Taser in the law enforcement profession is the ability to maintain a safe distance from the violator. Distance equals safety for officers when dealing with difficult subjects. It gives officers time to think and react to situations. With a taser device, officers will not have to determine wind direction, as is the case with pepper spray.

**Figure 2.** Effective Target Zones (Taser International, 2004)



Another advantage is that the Taser is easily accessible as it can be mounted to the officer's duty belt. Over 800 human volunteers and suspects in the field have been subjected to the advanced taser. In all cases, there has been virtual 100% instant incapacitation when advanced taser has been employed within its intended design parameters. Even the most focused combat trained individuals have been immediately stopped (Nielsen, 2001). Another advantage is that there has not been any long-term effects or injury from the Taser in any of the volunteers or suspects. Injuries have been minimal, at most some minor skin irritations; similar to mild sunburn or insect bite irritations. Furthermore, more often than not, law enforcement agencies are on a tight

annual budget, with a limited amount for equipment and training. Taser devices can be purchased between \$400 and \$500 each. Several leading agencies have obtained money to fund the deployment of less-lethal technologies through grants. The Sacramento PD deployment of the advanced taser was funded by a grant from the California Department of Justice (Nielsen, 2001).

As with most less-lethal weapons available to law enforcement, there are some disadvantages for using the taser device. However, the taser device is a relatively new less-lethal weapon and does not have years of field use for evaluation. In some of the earlier models, it was found to be less effective on “goal-oriented” subjects. Also, the earlier models operate in the 5 to 14 watt range with only a 7 to 10 feet effective range. There has also been reference made to the risk of physical injury associated with taser devices as a result of falling or being hit in the eye with a probe. While no weapon system is without risk, it is important for law enforcement officers to know the good, bad, and ugly on any use-of-force weapon.

Law enforcement agencies can receive training for their officers from two of the major manufacturers of taser devices, Tasertron and Taser International. Basic operators or line patrol officers are required to receive 4 hours of training with taser devices and are required to update every 6 months with a 1 hour session. Agency-trainers are required to receive 8 hours of training. Instructor-trainers are required to receive 16 hours of training, which is valid for 2 years, at which time the instructor is required to receive an additional 8 hours of training for re-certification. The training certification consists of a written test, verbal delivery, and the user will be required to demonstrate skill. An 80% knowledge minimum is required for passing.

## **DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS**

The purpose of this policy research paper was to ascertain if taser devices can be safely used as a less-than-lethal weapon in law enforcement. More specifically, this paper sought to examine the question: Are Taser Guns safe and effective less-lethal weapons for law enforcement? The intended outcome of this research paper is to show that taser devices can be a safe and effective less-than-lethal weapon when used properly by law enforcement officers. The belief is that the advantages of using taser devices in law enforcement outweigh the disadvantages.

The findings in this research paper support the hypothesis that taser devices can be a safe and effective less-than-lethal weapon when used properly by law enforcement officers. It was discovered that more and more law enforcement agencies are using taser devices in specialized units as well as distributing them to front line officers with a high success rate and more importantly, a high public approval rate. The surveys collected for this research paper showed that both officers and citizens in the Galveston County area both approved of using taser devices as a less-than-lethal weapon if trained properly.

This paper provides technical information on taser devices as well as the advantages and disadvantages to be analyzed by the command staff of the Galveston County Sheriff's Office and other law enforcement agencies considering using taser devices as a less-than-lethal weapon. This paper also provides alternatives for agencies on tight budgets to purchase taser devices through government grants. Police administrators should be prepared to separate fact from fiction in assessing the value of different training techniques (Danaher & Faulkner, 1997).

This study is relevant to law enforcement and the community because, it seems plausible that if law enforcement personnel are equipped properly with less-than-lethal weapons, a savings of citizens lives would occur. Further more, the public has the right to the reasonable expectation that when law enforcement personnel are confronted with a violent individual that they will have been adequately trained to deal with such an encounter and that these personnel will be armed with state-of-the-art “tools” to effectively handle such an encounter with a minimal use of force and minimal injury to the individual and the officer (Trostle, 1990).

The old adage “Better to have and not need than to need and not have” sums up the decision making process for thoughtful police managers concerning the Taser (Vogel, 1998).

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Appendix I

**Taser Guns: Less-than-Lethal Weapons  
Law Enforcement Survey**

1. How many sworn officers does your agency have?  
0 – 50 / 50 – 250 / 250 - 500 / 500 – 1000 / 1000 or more
2. How many years of law enforcement experience to you have?  
0 – 5 / 5 – 10 / 10 – 15 / 15 – 20 / 20 or more
3. Are you in a supervisor position? Yes / No
4. Are you in a command staff position? Yes / No
5. Does your agency currently use taser guns in its use-of-force continuum? Yes / No
6. Given that officers in your agency receive the proper training; would you consider using taser guns in your use-of-force continuum? Yes / No
7. Personally, do you feel that taser guns are safe less-lethal weapons for law enforcement use? Yes / No                      Why?

Appendix II

**Taser Guns: Less-than-Lethal Weapons  
Civilian Survey**

1. What is the population your city/town?
2. Does your neighborhood rely on city or county law enforcement?
3. Do you feel your LE agency does a good job with dealing with combative/uncooperative subjects? Yes /No
4. Do you feel your LE agency can do a better job in dealing with combative/uncooperative subjects? Yes / No
5. Given that officers in your LE agency receive the proper training, do you feel using taser guns should be used in a use-of-force continuum? Yes / No
6. Personally, do you feel that taser guns are safe less-lethal weapons for law enforcement use? Yes / No           Why?