



OPINION

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Tasers at Worst are Killers

Electro-shock devices may do more harm than good

Editor's note: The following is a response by the group Portland Copwatch to the Portland Police Bureau's experiment with a new taser electric dart gun, a weapon developed as an alternative to lethal force.

On Monday, June 17, Portland Police Chief Mark Kroeker announced that the Portland Police Bureau is now equipped with tasers, small electro-shock devices which are supposed "less lethal" alternatives to guns or pepper spray.

Tasers are at best an unknown danger and at worst, two-time killers, according to human rights group Amnesty International.

A 1998 book on police brutality and prison abuse in the USA, "United States of America: Rights for All," describes the taser and its cousin, the stun gun, as devices that "jolt" a suspect with 50,000 volts of electricity.

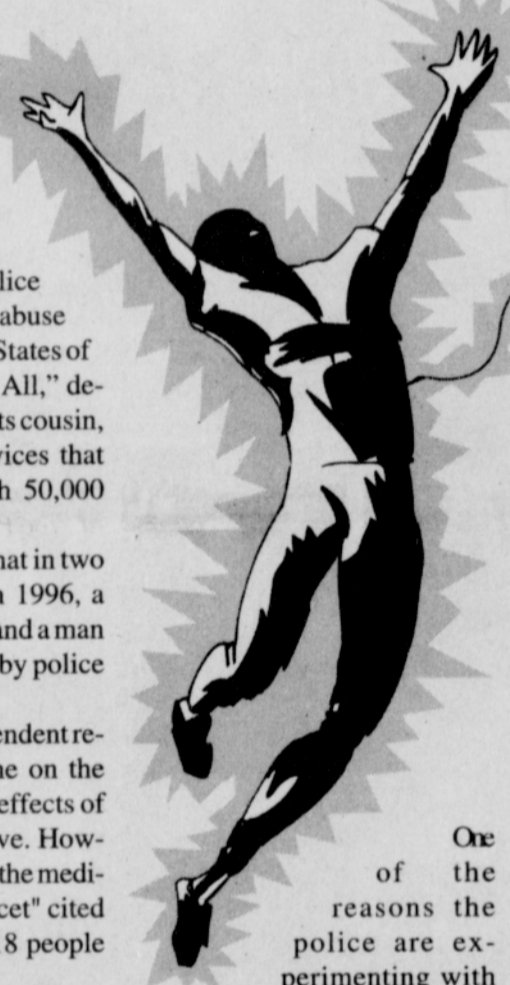
The book claims that in two separate incidents in 1996, a 29-year-old woman and a man died after being shot by police with tasers.

Not enough independent research has been done on the short-and long-term effects of tasers to be conclusive. However, last September, the medical journal "The Lancet" cited three deaths from 218 people hit by tasers.

The Lancet also articulated the need to study "injury thresholds" and the effects on nerves, adding that two people with no history of cardiac disease went into cardiac arrest between 5 and 15 minutes after being hit with tasers.

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—Kristian Williams of Copwatch



on people who have epilepsy—a neurological disorder that Mejia suffered.

Members of local police accountability group Portland Copwatch question whether the taser has been fully and independently tested for safety on people with specific health ailments such as heart conditions or epilepsy.

The group also worries that once the new devices are readily available, police may misuse them, as they have with other weapons like pepper spray and "beanbag" guns; each of which have been used against unarmed civilians including peaceful demonstrators.

"We are very concerned that the chief is adding to the police arsenal with no

community input," said Kristian Williams of Copwatch. "He seems to have forgotten his promise to leave L.A.-style policing in L.A."

Copwatch also raised the issue of officer training and noted that other "less lethal" technologies have proven quite deadly. They pointed to the Portland deaths of Brian Penton and Richard "Dickie" Dow in 1998 as probably related to the "less lethal" OC Pepper Spray (the manufacturer paid Dow's family \$10,000 earlier this year), and the use of "beanbag" guns—which is being curtailed nationally in the wake of numerous deaths caused by those supposedly "non lethal" weapons.

One of the reasons the police are experimenting with these devices is due to the community outcry following the shooting death of Jose Santos Mejia Poot last year in a psychiatric hospital. Ironically, it appears that the manufacturer of the gun suggests not using the taser

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