

Facts about Tasers

The Minister for Police has announced that Tasers will be made available to operational police in Queensland after the current 12-month trial of Tasers finishes in June 2008 (see Ministerial Media Statement, 29 January 2008).

What is a Taser?

A Taser* is a hand-held, electro-muscular disruption device that is capable of incapacitating a person and causing pain through the application of an electrical current. For example, Tasers could be used by police to temporarily incapacitate a violent or combative person during arrest.

Tasers are not intended to replace firearms but are an additional use of force option for police officers.

How do they work?

Essentially, a Taser is two weapons in one. It can be used as an immobilisation device or simply as a device for inflicting pain on a person.

A Taser can be operated in two modes.

The first is called 'probe mode'. When a Taser is used in probe mode, two probes connected to the Taser by insulated wires are fired into a person's skin or clothing. The successful deployment of the probes completes an electrical circuit, allowing a high voltage, low amperage electrical current to pass from the Taser to the person. This causes uncontrollable muscle contractions resulting in the immediate loss of neuromuscular control and the inability of the person to perform any voluntary actions—thereby immobilising them. It also causes considerable pain. The immobilisation and pain associated with Tasers cease as soon as it is deactivated.

The second is called 'drive stun' mode. When a Taser is used in drive stun mode, the probes are not usually fired. Instead, the Taser is applied or pushed directly onto a person's skin or clothing. When used in this way, the Taser does not affect a person's motor functions and does not immobilise them. Rather, it inflicts acute pain for up to five seconds at a time and can therefore be used as a way to restrain or control a person.

Drive stun mode can also be used by police officers to complete an immobilisation circuit if the probe mode fails.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of Tasers?

A review of the research literature has identified a number of advantages and disadvantages relating to the use of Tasers by law enforcement officers (see next column). Most of this research focuses on the immobilisation or probe mode of Tasers.

Advantages

- » Tasers are a 'less than lethal' use of force option that may assist officers when dealing with combative, violent or aggressive people.
- » Using Tasers could reduce risk of injury to police officers, offenders, and members of the public.
- » When used in probe mode, Tasers are effective against people who do not feel or respond to pain. This includes people who are particularly motivated, extremely aggressive, or under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- » Tasers can be deployed at a safe distance.
- » Immobilisation and pain effects cease as soon as Tasers are turned off.
- » Usually, only minimal aftercare is required.

Disadvantages

- » Use may be limited in some operational environments — e.g. near flammable agents or on heightened platforms such as balconies, roofs or on the top of stairs due to the risk of people falling after being tasered.
- » Multiple and/or prolonged applications of the Taser may increase the risk of harm or injury to people.
- » Use may result in secondary injuries such as minor skin irritation, blistering, bruising and lacerations. More substantial injuries may occur if a person falls onto hard surfaces.
- » It has been reported that in some overseas law enforcement agencies there is an over-reliance on the use of Tasers (see RCMP Report).
- » It is considered a controversial use of force option and has been linked to deaths overseas (see Amnesty International Report).

Who is using Tasers?

In Australia, Tasers are predominantly used by specialist law enforcement units, such as the Special Emergency Response Team (SERT) or Special Tasks and Rescue (STAR) unit, in all states and territories. In 2007, Western Australia Police issued Tasers to all first response officers. In Queensland, the Taser is currently being trialled by District Duty Officers and Regional Duty Officers in Brisbane, Logan and the Gold Coast.

* Taser is a registered brand.