

I realise I've missed the final submission date by one day, but hope that this can still reach the Scrutiny Panel. I've ccd in the Children's commissioner for obvious reasons.

The recent proposition to increase the use of Tasers to more ordinary police officers rather than just trained firearms officers is something which I think needs very careful consideration.

I highlight in the research below two areas which I think any relaxation of the rules needs to address.

The first is the increase in use on children and young people in conflict situations, which has been rising significantly in the UK. This is alarming, but not perhaps unexpected, especially when young people may be violent, or may threaten violence congregating en mass.

The second is what is termed "Lazy Cop Syndrome" whereby more traditional methods of defusing a situation take second place to the easier option of using a Taser, in the first instance to threaten with a "red dot" but in the second to actually fire. This becomes a substitute for more traditional means of de-escalating situations, because it is quick and less onerous.

In my original posting which I submitted last time when Tasers were introduced (<http://tonymusings.blogspot.com/2012/02/sparking-up.html>), I highlighted the issues which had already been seen in the UK by widespread use of tasers, and would recommend that the panel review that.

I noted then:

Clearly the safety aspects of Tasers is one of balance between not using them, and the risks involved in using more conventional methods of policing. When there is a strict policy of only using them as a substitute for conventional fire arms, the number of cases is relatively small, and the risk to individuals less – a risk also balanced by the risk of being shot in a confrontational situation. But where that is relaxed, and the Taser becomes a weapon of choice for dealing with a belligerent and perhaps not necessarily violent individual, the greater number of cases will make fatalities more statistically likely.

Part of the problem is the "quick fix", where the Taser is deployed without adequate - and costly - training, and seen as an instrument of first resort, rather than one of last resort, because it achieves results quickly.

As I stated last time, I have no problems with them as a substitute weapon for armed response officers; I do have a problem with the wider use, as the risk to members of the public, and the less discriminate use of them poses a serious hazard to the safety of those subjected to Tasers.

Kind regards

Tony Bellows

Increased use on children and youths (under 18)

A survey of some of the literature shows that the use of tasers on children is on the increase. Wales On Sunday (: July 9, 2017) has an article which reports that

"Tasers Used on Children on the Increase" It states that: "There were 597 incidences of Tasers being used against children across the UK in 2016, according to figures released by police under the Freedom of Information Act. This was a rise of 25% from 476 uses in 2015. Taser usage on under-18s averaged around 500 uses per year between 2013 and 2015, after rising steadily since Tasers were introduced in 2003."

"Red dotting - where the Taser is aimed at a person, showing a red dot, usually used as a warning - was the most common useage in 2016, with 328 incidents, up 29% from 254 in 2015. Tasers were drawn on 166 occasions, up 29% from 129 in 2015."

Tasers were slightly more likely to be fired, up from 40 discharges in 2015 to 42 in 2016. There were also two incidents where young people were drive-stunned. However, these numbers have been relatively consistent in recent years. The youngest children a Taser was used against in 2016 were a 10-year-old by West Mercia Police, where a Taser was drawn, and a 10-year-old in the West Midlands Police force area who was red-dotted.

Oliver Sprague, Amnesty International UK's arms control director, said: "Any rise in the use of Tasers against children is of significant concern, not least because children are at much greater risk of serious harm from being subjected to this weapon."

*"This is written loud and clear in Government scientific medical advice, with warnings given about using it on younger people. **Police guidelines and training in this area must be significantly strengthened, with a very clear presumption and warning given against using Tasers on children.** "Everyone recognises that police officers are often faced with life and-death situations and have to act quickly to deal with imminent and serious threats.*

*"With young people, given the clear risks of using Tasers against them, **it must truly be a weapon of last resort, subject to intense scrutiny by the appropriate authorities with the most robust safeguards in place to protect children in these situations.**"*

When we move forward to 2019, we find the rise in use continues. This time, the Manchester Evening News (December 22, 2019) reports that:

TASERS were drawn on children under the age of 11 multiple times by Greater Manchester Police last year. The news emerged in new figures that showed overall Taser use was soaring across the area. The data, released by the Home Office, revealed the police force used Tasers on 1,442 occasions in 2018/19.

That's up from 832 in 2017/18 - an increase of 73 per cent in a single year. The rise is partly to do with improvements in reporting practices, but is also due to the fact that more and more officers are actually carrying the weapon.

Ché Donald, national vice chair of the Police Federation of England and Wales, said: "With the government, and an increased number of chief constables backing a wider roll-out of Taser, it is unsurprising there were more incidents where this tactical option was selected."

Tasers were drawn on children under the age of 18 a total of 118 times in Greater Manchester in 2018/19 - and on eight of those occasions, the child was aged 10 or under. It is unclear whether the Tasers were actually fired on any of the children, however, as the figures include cases where they were simply drawn and used as a potential threat.

*Louise King, director of the Children's Rights Alliance for England, part of Just for Kids Law, said: **"The latest government figures on the use of Taser on children is alarming. In recent years, the number of police officers with these devices has increased significantly yet the more Tasers we have on our streets, the more they are used on children. The police say Tasers can help them to protect the public and officers, but that mustn't come at the cost of children's safety and human rights."***

Pensioners have also been targeted, with people aged 65 and over targeted by Tasers on five occasions in the last year.

An age breakdown is not available, but out of the 1,442 occasions where Tasers were used by Greater Manchester Police in 2018/19, 242 involved a Taser being discharged – 17pc of the total. In most of those cases the Taser was fired with a live cartridge, where the probes are fired towards the subject with the intention of incapacitating them.

Likewise, in Scotland, the Scottish Sunday Mail reports on February 24, 2019 the following:

Police Scotland's use of Tasers on suspects has risen by 400 per cent in three years, figures have revealed. Officers deployed the devices on members of the public 65 times during a 12-month period until March last year. The figure compares to 27 the previous year and 13 occasions in 2016.

Human rights group Amnesty International expressed concern over the upward trend and said it was worried Taser usage was becoming part of "day-to-day policing" in Scotland. Naomi McAuliffe, the charity's Scotland programme director, said: "Trained officers should be able to deploy a Taser if they feel there's a serious and present threat. However, Tasers are potentially lethal weapons that require robust training to ensure they're used safely and properly in accordance with established medical and legal standards."

"We have concerns about the use of Tasers becoming the norm for day-to-day policing and hope that the rise in use is not indicative of this."

This year, in July 31 2020, the Manchester Evening News called for a ban on such widespread use of tasers. I disagree that they should be abolished, but keeping their use to trained firearms officers would seem the prudent way to proceed:

TASERS should be abolished says a pressure group – as their use by Greater Manchester Police increased by more than 70 per cent in a year. A report also claims GMP uses the device on more children than any other force outside London. But a senior GMP officer said the presence of a Taser-trained officer can resolve a dangerous situation safely. He added that the issuing of Tasers to more officers was necessary as the number of assaults on them had increased.

Latest figures for GMP show a slight decrease in the number of Taser incidents for 2019/20. The report says GMP recorded more incidents involving Tasers, whether discharged or not, than any other with the exception of the Metropolitan Police. It highlights racial disparities, with black people subject to the use of Taser by GMP at nearly four times the rate of white people.

The report, A Growing Threat to Life: Taser usage by Greater Manchester Police, is authored by Dr Kerry Pimblott, a lecturer in international history at the University of Manchester, and published by the Manchester-based pressure group Resistance Lab.

The report says GMP's use of Tasers increased by 73pc from 832 incidents in 2017/18, to 1,442 incidents in 2018/19. This rate of increase exceeded the national average of 39pc, as well as that of comparable forces such as the Metropolitan Police, which reported a 49pc increase. The report says in 2018/19, GMP reported more incidents (118) involving the use of Tasers against children under the age of 18 than any other force with the exception of the Met.

In relation specifically to these figures GMP said in a statement: "In 2018/19 there were 13 incidents which involved the discharge of a Taser in reference to young people under the age of 18, with the youngest being 15. These incidents predominantly involved the use of knives and other weapons."

Dr Pimblott said: "It is clear that the rollout of Tasers across England and Wales presents an intrinsic and growing threat to life and public safety." Sibia Akhtar, of Resistance Lab, said: "This report shows that Tasers are being disproportionately used against black people and that in Manchester we have among the highest levels of Taser usage nationally."

The Unintended Consequences of Widespread Taser Use

The Law and Society Review of 2019 had an article by Michael Sierra-Arévo on “Technological Innovation and Police Officers' Understanding and Use of Force”, This is based on a study in the USA, but nonetheless I think it still has significant lessons to each us.

He notes the advantages of Taser use:

TASERs are understood and used by officers as a force option that can enhance safety for them and the public, including during "hidden" TASER use whereby officers threaten electrocution to ensure suspect compliance without leaving any physical evidence of the TASER's use. Second, officers understand and use the TASER as a force option that allows them to refrain from using their firearm in situations they believe would have justified lethal force, particularly when confronting suspects suffering from mental illness.

But then he highlights a failure that has been noted in its widespread use:

Despite these apparent benefits of the TASER, officers also link understanding of the TASER as a safety-enhancing force option to the use of less-than-lethal but still excessive force by young, inexperienced officers already prone to unnecessarily escalate interactions with the public.

The benefits of Taser use are highlighted:

Given the attractiveness of the TASER as a safe, effective option for subduing a resistant suspect, research also considers how the TASER is substituted for other types of force. Using a randomized field-training experiment, Sousa et al. (2010) find equipping officers with a TASER changes their likelihood of using other force options: officers are less likely to respond to a deadly threat with their firearm if they have a TASER and are more likely to use a TASER instead of their baton or OC spray in the event of aggressive physical resistance.

But that was a “small scale experiment”, and a study of more than 36,000 force incidents in Chicago brought up other significant facts.

Officers substitute lower and equivalent force options with TASERs and that the introduction of TASERs is related to an overall increase in use of force incidents (Ba and Grogger 2018).

*Such research provides some support for a hypothesized "lazy cop syndrome," whereby "police officers may turn to a [TASER] too early in an encounter and may rely on a [TASER] **rather than his or her skills in conflict resolution or even necessary hands-on applications***

The benefits of TASERs described by officers notwithstanding, this less-than-lethal technology is no panacea for the longstanding issue of excessive force. Although this technology provides tangible benefits to officer and suspect safety, understanding of the TASER as a safety-enhancing technology can combine with the inexperience of young officers to result in excessive force.

And he notes that rather than using other non-confrontational approaches to calm a situation, perhaps by talking down a suspect, “young officers are prone to use force first and ask questions later.” The use of a TASER can lead “**officers to unnecessarily escalate situations**, ultimately resulting in the use of excessive force via TASER.”