Policing & the Use of Force: Less Lethal Weapons

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Brian Rappert
University of Exeter

Abstract

In recent years, considerable attention has been given to the role of ‘less lethal’ options in alleviating the varied problems associated with the police use of force. Highly supportive claims have been made by manufacturers, police agencies, and others relating to the ability of such devices to result in reduced injuries to both officers and members of the public. Special Issue 3 of _Policing_ regarding the ‘Use of Force’, for instance, included various positive statements about the place and purpose of less lethal weapons. While not wishing to completely dismiss such claims, this article seeks to bring scrutiny to bear on them. The basis for this skepticism derives from recasting common depictions of these weapons within the spectrum of force options, considering the past history of their deployment, and moving beyond treating them in a narrow, technical manner.

Introduction

The legitimacy of the use of force by the police in democratic societies often generates significant controversy because it raises the fundamental question of exactly what force is justified against citizens
(Waddington 1999, Lawrence 2000). Perhaps as much as any other aspects of policing, the use of force is at the heart of the many tensions in the policing of liberal societies (Reiner, 1997). As issues about what constitutes acceptable force are inexplicably linked with the authority and the legitimacy of the police, they are a matter of considerable importance for many inside and outside of law enforcement agencies. Against this backdrop of possible disagreement and debate, considerable attention has been given to the role of so-called ‘less lethal’ weapons in alleviating disputes and minimizing injuries. Highly supportive claims have been issued by manufacturers, police agencies, and others relating to the ability of such devices to reduce harm to officers, suspects, and members of the public (Rappert 2003a). The resulting decrease in injuries and litigation is said to bring many additional benefits.

This article takes up the call by Denis Bradley (2004) of the Northern Ireland Police Board to ask critical questions about the use of force in policing. While not wishing to dismiss the potential of alternative force options to help realise more preferable outcomes, the deployment less-lethal weapons does raise grounds for concern. How and in what situation they should be used are some issues for concern. It cannot be assumed that their employment will result in minimal or even reduced injury. Moreover, though many government agencies and corporations boast about their safety testing procedures and the strict rules in place governing their use, past experience across many countries indicates such statements should be approached with caution (see, e.g., Rappert 2003b).

**Policing Issue 3**

The contributions in Issue 3 of *Policing* on ‘Use of Force’ provide a number of valuable insights regarding historical and contemporary issues associated with the use of force by the police. With the exception of articles by Kleinig (2007) and Amnesty International (Sprague 2007) about tasers, less lethal options figure as part of wider analyses. Three themes are possible to identify in these remaining articles though.

Firstly, less lethal weapons are overwhelmingly approached as options that can be used in lieu of lethal force (firearms). Burrows (2007), for instance, is concerned about the decision making by firearms officers and therefore how alternative options other than firearms may change an officer’s actions. Both the former British Police Complaints Authority (PCA) and the current Independent Police Complaints Commission (Glass 2007) endorse the introduction of less lethal options and treat recent interest in the UK -specifically in relation to
situations were firearms would be or have been used – as inappropriate.

Secondly, little attention is given to the past development and deployments going beyond very recent years. Although providing a wide ranging study of firearms in the British police, Waldren (2007) treats less lethal weapons as having a short pedigree. In line with the previous point too, he suggests a break with the past, stating ‘Today, the police service is trying to find a ‘less-lethal’ means of dealing with persons who would otherwise be shot.’

And thirdly, the use of less lethal weapons is considered in largely technical terms. They are treated as options that resolve difficulties, not ones that would raise social, ethical, and political questions of their own. So while both Burrows (2007) and Dror (2007) note that the availability of such options might affect (and even complicate) officer decision making, this is treated as a relatively minor concern.

These three themes are important because they help form a particular and a limited picture. This picture is both highly supportive of less lethal weapons and offers little space for bringing critical points to bear. The remainder of this article challenges this framing by questioning the likely uses of these devices in practice, drawing attention to their history, and moving beyond narrow technical considerations.

Effective Tools?

Of central importance to less lethal weapons is whether their introduction fulfils the functions stated for them. Principal among the claims made is their potential to result in reduced injuries to officers and suspects. Another is that they provide effective means of temporarily incapacitating individuals. Speaking about less lethal weapons, Waldren (2007) claims that ‘They all work to a greater or lesser extent if they are used within the parameters placed upon them by their manufacturers’ (emphasis in the original). Yet this sort of statement should beg certain questions: What counts as ‘working’? Does it matter how low the ‘lesser extent’ goes? Are the parameters specified for their use in line with the actual condition of usage?

Incapicitant sprays

It is possible to point to prominent examples where initially highly supportive effectiveness claims have given way to less optimistic assessments. For example, in 1995 the US International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) examined the development of pepper sprays
in the Baltimore Police Department during 1993-4. This well known study was the first of its kind and proved central to the justification for pepper sprays by the US National Institute of Justice. Following its endorsement, these devices were widely adopted in the US. Drawing on use of force data sheets and unstructured interviews with officers, the IACP report made many highly supportive claims about the sprays. For instance, they were said to be effective in 90% of cases. However, a later and much more comprehensive analysis was given of this Baltimore experience in 1999 (Kaminski et al. 1999). The results were significantly more ambivalent. The later findings for effectiveness were based on three officer-based standards: whether the spray eased arrest, whether it incapacitated subjects, and what their behaviour was after receiving the spray. In compiling figures on these different measures, the authors concluded that, ‘researchers can obtain substantively different results regarding the effects of explanatory factors when using different criteria...’ (ibid.: 19). The conclusions of this second study challenged many of the optimistic statements that justified the widespread adoption of the sprays.

In another article (Rappert 20021), I traced out something of the history of highly supportive claims about types of chemical sprays and concluded that,

significant areas of concern and uncertainty exist in relation to the deployment of incapacitant sprays. Those police forces considering such a use of force option are advised to do so with considerable caution and a healthy degree of scepticism regarding benefits of these devices.

This was because major inconsistencies and deficiencies could be identified in the evaluations by police-related agencies, academics, and manufacturers of these devices.

Consider this conclusion in relation to the question of whether the introduction of chemical sprays reduce injuries to officers: in the Fourth Report of the Steering Group (2004) in response to Patten Report Recommendations 69 and 70 relating to public order equipment, the UK Steering Group made various supportive claims about the consequences of CS sprays in England and Wales. As part of this, the Group cited a 2000 report by the PCA – (PCA 2000) – to contest that the introduction of CS sprays in the mid-1990s had decreased assaults on police officers.

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A much more solid basis for evidence about the impact of the introduction of the sprays on assaults was given in the initial trial review conducted by the Police Research Group (PRG 1996). By splitting up forces in England and Wales between those that did and did not carry the sprays, the PRG trial provided the most comprehensive and rigorous testing done of whether their introduction prevented assaults. It found that while CS spray carrying police officers perceived a marked reduction in the number of police assaults against them, force data did not suggest that their possession led to any reported reduction in assaults. The discrepancy between perceived and recorded information raises important questions about the validity of research methodologies. Just as the difference between the ‘fear of crime’ and the recorded rates of crimes has generated much policy discussion, similar dynamics might be identified with regard to officer fear of assault and recorded assault rates. Yet, in any case, this inconvenient PRG finding has failed to receive any attention in the subsequent promotional accounts about the effectiveness of the sprays by the Home Office or others.

As an overall point then, the definition and evidence of the success of less lethal weapons matters.

**Tasers**

Consider another technology on the theme of effectiveness – the Taser. Highly optimistic statements about the degree of its effectiveness in operational situations can be called into question by citing field experience elsewhere. As an instance of this, on the basis of 251 applications of the M26 Taser between January 2001 and December 2002, the Seattle Police Department credited its use ‘with controlling subject or resolving situation [sic] in 82% of all applications and 89% of those where contact was made’ (Kimerer 2003). These figures consisted of 56% dart mode use, 32% stun mode use, and 12% where both were used. By just what criteria instances of force were credited with controlling or resolving was not specified. However, 82% is a rather unexceptional effectiveness figure when compared to other types of force options and not ‘as Close to 100% TAKEDOWN POWER as You Can Get’ as promoted in publicity material describing the Taser (Taser International 2000).

On 21 April 2003, a year long Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) trial began with the Taser International M26 Advanced Taser in five police forces in England and Wales. On 15 September 2003 the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department authorized chief officers throughout England & Wales to deploy Tasers with authorized firearms officers.
PricewaterhouseCoopers (2004) conducted an evaluation of the trial for the Association of Chief Police Officers. One of its main conclusions was that:

In general, the Taser device was viewed by the firearms officers involved in the trial as a useful and effective piece of equipment. The officers to whom we spoke in all of the pilot forces were positive about its potential benefits (ibid: 3).

Yet in making this case, criteria were not given for measuring effectiveness. Rather, the evidence consisted of Taser Deployment Reports and interviews with officers. This was problematic given some of the previous points made here. One issue with officer interviews relates to the previously mentioned and questionable supportive perceptions associated with the consequences of CS sprays. This is perhaps especially pertinent in the case of police forces and police officers that put themselves forward to trial new technology.

In relation to Taser Deployment Reports, while the report form included a slot about the outcomes of incidents, a couple of sceptical observations can be made. First, simply recording outcomes does not provide the basis for the types of differentiation of effects; the kind that Kaminski et al. (1999) relied on to scrutinize and revise highly optimistic statements about pepper sprays. Secondly, attributing the outcome to Taser is not straightforward. This report form had a limited space for officers to describe the result of the operation. It seems reasonable to assume that most officers would have given a short account of the final outcome of a Taser deployment that did not go into much detail about the actual sequence of events. The potential problem with this is that it becomes very difficult to properly assess why particular outcomes resulted. For instance, the trial review states:

in many cases, officers have needed to do no more than aim, or aim and use the ‘red dot’ laser sight, or aim and arc Taser to ensure compliance on the part of the suspect. Taser appears to have a high visual deterrent value which can enable officers to de-escalate possibly violent situations relatively quickly and easily (ibid. 23).

It may well be the case that in many instances Tasers were produced and incidents were resolved without actually firing. However, substantiating that such outcomes were as a result of the Taser is more problematic. The production of any sort of weapon, or even a

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(further) verbal warning, might have had the same result. As an additional point of concern, the power attributed to the red dot raises the question of whether the use of such laser sightings fitted on to firearms, or even separate from them, might have the same effect. At least as far back as 1996, for instance, manufactures sought to develop laser sightings for police pistols so as to gain *compliance* (Houde-Walter 1996).

Certain problems about the size of the M26 Taser, the battery packs which power it, the discharge recorder which records time of firing, and the unfamiliarity of officers with Taser weapon were noted in the PricewaterhouseCoopers, but deemed minor or easily surmountable teething problems; as in line with many of the commentators to Issue 3 of *Policing*. More problematic points about the UK evaluation of Tasers can be raised. During the trial, the Metropolitan Police force also conducted an evaluation. In the *Review Of Taser Within The MPS*, it was stated that between 21 April 2003 and 8 July 2004 Tasers were used 42 times (Turner 2004). This included 15 actual discharges and 22 occasions at which Tasers were only aimed at subjects. The complete commentary on the evaluation section is given below.

**Evidence for the Efficacy of Tasers in MPS Report: Evaluation of Taser use**

18 The Taser has proved to be an extremely effective item of policing equipment. On almost every occasion that it has been “used” it has provided a positive outcome to a violent incident allowing officers an alternative option to that of reverting to conventional firearms. It is no coincidence that the number of police shootings has been significantly reduced since its introduction however; it cannot be seen as a panacea. The Taser has a limited range of 21 feet and due to the spread of the barbs it often cannot be used in confined areas with obstructions. The Taser has also failed on two operational occasions.

19 Taser has been welcomed by officers who see it as another option in the “toolbox”. The option to avoid recourse to conventional firearms is welcomed by all. There are many instances where those who have been the subject of a Taser discharge would have been shot with conventional firearms had the officer not had a less lethal option. The resultant saving in terms of subsequent enquiries and the impact on the community, the Service the officers and the individuals concerned have been immeasurable.
Following on from the points in this section, when the MPS review stated that:

The Taser has proved to be an extremely effective item of policing equipment. On almost every occasion that it has been “used” it has provided a positive outcome to a violent incident allowing officers an alternative option to that of reverting to conventional firearms.

I would argue that such unsubstantiated and ambiguous statements are inadequate. With the reliability and multiple discharge difficulties noted by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2004), it would seem that this statement means that Tasers have made a positive *contribution* rather than directly led to a positive *outcome*. Whether or not such difficulties pertained to the MPS, phrases such as ‘on almost every occasion’ and ‘provided a positive outcome’ need elaboration. The suggestion in point 19 of the MPS Report of 2004 (above) should also be substantiated. It is instructive to compare such optimistic claims with statistics on the police use of firearms. Taking the figures given by Davies (2004), in the *whole* of England and Wales during 2003-4, there was one death from the police use of firearms. In terms of the police forces deploying the Tasers during the trial, official figures indicate that four of the five trial forces had zero firearm discharges between 2001-3. The fifth force (presumably the Metropolitan Police Service), used firearms once in 2003, twice in 2002, and once in 2001; a total of four times in three years. In light of such figures, the claims made in the Met Taser report that between April 2003 – and July 2004 there were ‘many instances where those who have been the subject of a Taser discharge would have been shot with conventional firearms had the officer not had a less lethal option’ could well be questioned.

The above paragraphs suggest the need for caution when considering claims about the effectiveness and implications of deploying less lethal weapons. Such claims deserve close scrutiny, particularly regarding how the data is obtained and how conclusions are drawn.

‘Is it Better to Be Shot?’

Moving beyond matters of effectiveness, additional concerns can be raised about the central pillars for justifying less lethal weapons. A recurring approach for thinking about these devices in *Policing* Issue 3 was as firearms substitutes. Seen in this way, any force option that did not have the same lethality potential would have obvious advantages.
But as is apparent in the aforementioned figures for firearms use in the forces that originally trialled the Taser in England and Wales, even when less lethal weapons are deployed to firearms officers, they are likely to be used in a far wider range of situations than where firearms would be used. In certain respects this is not surprising or problematic. Because they are different types of weapons, they should be used in different types of situations. But this means that instead of being portrayed as a substitute for firearms, Tasers should predominantly function as alternatives to other force options such as ‘hands-on’ tactics, batons, CS sprays or conflict resolution strategies. As such, their benefits and risks need to be considered in relation to these options. When one moves from the most extreme situations, then the acceptability of force options will require a careful weighing of concerns about the safety of officers, recipients and bystanders.

It is unfortunate then that much of the support for the initial Taser trials - as expressed in the Police Complaints Authority (2003) Firearms Report 2003 - derived from their use as an alternative to firearms. This is especially so because, as expressed in the summary findings of the trial review by PricewaterhouseCoopers and the Review Of Taser Within The MPS, it is apparent that individuals in some forces sought a much more extensive deployment from early on. But during the trial period, this looming and likely wider remit was not a topic for public discussion. As in the case of the CS sprays, much of their initial public justification related to extreme situations which would only constitute a fraction of usages.

However, issues about usage and effects go further. Both Kleinig (2007) and Amnesty International (Sprague 2007) raised concerns whether the likely effects of Tasers means that ‘officers may find themselves tempted to employ a particular means in circumstances in which it is unnecessary or inappropriate’ (Kleinig 2007). Here the concern is that because of their likely limited long terms effects certain force options might become a routine and convenient option when dealing with troubling situations.

Amnesty International (2004) concluded that in the US and Canada ‘some Departments are deploying Tasers in routine arrest situations, at the first sign of resistance or in the face of relatively minor resistance.’ These included individuals rejecting an order, acts of passive resistance, refusals to be handcuffed, situations where individuals were being handcuffed, and against unarmed children or elderly adults who were arguably posing little threat to themselves or others. In a survey Amnesty International conducted at the time with 30 US Police Departments known to deploy Tasers, it was apparent
that the weapons were often used very soon after soft ‘hands-on’ or verbal techniques.

Such practices should not be seen as aberrations. The use of Tasers as compliance devices is not unexpected - such practices have been actively promoted by the main manufacturer. In October 2002 I attended a Taser International sponsored promotional European conference/training workshop in Brussels (Rappert 2003c). Based on practices in the US, attendees learned how to employ the Taser as a compliance device for getting unruly individuals in police cars. A shock to the outside of the knee, for instance, and a suspect would swiftly fold. Instead of manually applying physical force to sensitive pressure points in the body (for example during handcuffing), attendees learned that electroshocks were highly effective. Finally, a Taser International representative suggested that these devices were ‘good for demonstrators’, this including ‘tree huggers’ and those shouting ‘hell no, we won’t go’. The Taser International lesson plan at the time stated:

The ADVANCED TASER is not a substitute for lethal force. However, many situations that begin as standoffs have the potential to escalate to lethal force. Early, aggressive use of a less-lethal weapon like the M26 can prevent many of these situations from escalating to deadly force levels (TASER International 2003: 2).

Applying force early in potential conflict situations or using it as a means of gaining rapid compliance might reduce injuries to officers. Yet, it is less than clear that operational efficiency should be the only or dominant consideration.

Tasers (and related electroshock devices) are not the only sort of less lethal weapons where questions have been raised about whether the availability of certain types of force options eventually results in greater use of force. Lumb and Friday (1997) conducted a study of OC (Oleoresin Capsicum) sprays in Concord, North Carolina (US) and found a substantial increase in use of force reports during the trials than that recorded pre- or post-trial. This disparity could not be explained by trends in arrests or other factors. They conjectured that the sprays gave officers a perception of having more control over situations and thus led to an increased willingness to use force.

Concerns about how the use of an option can spread over time have been voiced in the UK with regard to chemical sprays. CS sprays were originally popularly portrayed as an intermediate option between the baton and firearms (Campbell 1996; Rayment 1996). During the trials and for some years afterwards, the spray was intended as a last
measure in the restraint of violent individuals (Straw 1999: column 691). However, some have argued that in practice the mentally ill, pensioners, and children have all been on the receiving end of sprays in situations that posed little serious threat to officers (Kossoff 1998).

**Force Guidelines**

Of course, against such potential concerns it can be argued that what Nick Hardwick (Chair of the Independent Police Complaints Commission) said in relation to Taser: ‘the key to successful deployment lies in continuing to provide clear guidance and adequate training’ (IPCC 2004). While the sort of statement that is ubiquitous in discussions about less lethal weapons and guidance, such a statement also belies much of practice. This should raise questions about what is commonly sought from guidance in relation to its role in public reassurances about force. For instance, the **ACPO Operational Guidance** given to officers for the 2003 trial was almost completely absent of details regarding when the use of Tasers is appropriate or inappropriate. Even where a ‘don’t’ was identified in Para 9.6 of the **Guidance** (‘In stun mode the Taser should be pressed directly to the subjects body [sic]. Unless absolutely necessary in order to protect life the Taser should not, due to increased factors, be applied directly to the subjects’ neck or head.’), this restriction was itself qualified.

There is a basic tension in devising guidance on the use of force. If they are highly proscriptive they lack flexibility and are likely to be seen as unrealistic. However, rules without any teeth would lack public credibility and risk allegations of an *ad hoc* deployment. Just how this tension gets resolved speaks to basic matters about assuring police accountability.

The issuing of guidance meant to ‘inform and support decision making’ in UK policing rather than specifying ‘do’s and don’ts’ is not limited to Tasers. The previous 1996 Guidelines for CS sprays exhibited a similar tension. The non-legally binding guidelines specified that the sprays should be used against:

1. those offering a level of violence which cannot be appropriately dealt with by ‘empty hands’ techniques, and
2. violent offenders, other than those armed with firearms or similar remote injury weapons, where
failure to induce ‘immediate’ incapacitation would increase the risks to all present (ACPO 1996).\(^3\)

Certain proscriptions were given. The use of the spray against those with a firearm, for instance, was deemed ‘inappropriate and should not be considered.’ Officers should not use the sprays within three feet of a target ‘unless life is at risk’. Despite the qualified and provisional character of such stipulations, their inflexibility brought a rewriting in 1999 (Haynes 2000). Whereas in 1996 Guidelines were issued, in 1999 Guidance was issued – with the effect of reinforcing the provisional character of the ‘do’s and don’ts’. The latter Guidance was intended to ‘support and inform’ individual officers in determining what constitutes reasonable and necessary force. So, the 1999 Guidance advised officers not to use the sprays below three feet, unless it cannot be avoided. Possibilities for cross-contamination meant the sprays should not be used in crowd control situations unless the officer can justify their actions. Etc. The general thrust of the Guidance was that it is for officers to decide on and justify the suitability of resorting to the sprays on a case-by-case basis.

As noted by Kleinig (2007), the notion of a use of force continuum in many US police agencies stands in contrast to the common approach for thinking about force guidelines in Great Britain. In the US, questions about the appropriateness of force options turn on where they are placed along a spectrum. Of course, it should be remembered that rules given to officers on the appropriateness of use of force in the US and the UK do not stand on their own, but are part of wider systems of training and oversight.

The point of this section is not to advocate a more US-style model as an alternative to the discretionary centred model in England & Wales. Instead, it is to point out that one of the pillars often cited for ensuring the appropriate use of force – guidance to officers – needs to be given close scrutiny. That guidance does not always play the clear role accorded to it in public assurances. Instead, as with other aspects of the governance of less lethal weapons, it should be treated as a matter that raises basic questions about policing, discretion, and public accountability.

**Institutional Governance**

The last point suggests the need to move beyond a narrow consideration of technology in considering the possible issues at stake. To continue, the attention afforded to the medical effects of less-lethal weapons has increased significantly in recent years. That is evidenced in the contrast between the minimal studies in past decades and the types of pre-deployment reviews given in reports of the Steering Group for Patten Report Recommendations 69 and 70 Relating to Public Order Equipment.

While the rigour and adequacy of medical evaluations is a continuing source of concern for some (see Sprague [2007]), predicative evaluations are just one part of ensuring appropriate deployments. Like any technology, with these weapons there is the potential for unforeseen risks that no amount of precaution can completely avoid. Medical and technical assessments, no matter how rigorous, cannot in and of themselves guarantee the acceptability of the effects of such weapons in practice. The types of encounters experienced and the manner weapons are used, can often differ from what is specified in agency or manufacturer recommendations. Surveillance procedures need to be in place to monitor deployments and police forces need to adopt their tactics and technology depending on experiences.

Much of the focus of the Steering Group in the UK as well as elsewhere vis-à-vis medical effects has been on considering possible technical innovations rather than institutional reforms. The latter are required to achieve a reliable understanding of effects within police forces and to make these transparent to the public. For instance, a group of physicians in California considered a number of the problems associated with assessing the injuries sustained by kinetic impact weapons (Brito et al. 2001). They made various points about the potential for underestimating injury from less lethal weapons because of ill-judged presumptions about how they would be used (i.e., according to the formal guidelines) and the need for more robust assessments systems than might be envisioned. Elsewhere, I have argued that accurately assessing the injuries for officers and members of the public from CS sprays in England and Wales would require organizational reforms in the way the use of force reports, injuries, and compensation claims are monitored and made available to police forces and the public (Rappert 2003b). Indeed, a central conclusion of that study was that it cast ‘considerable doubt on the robustness of the precautions taken and demonstrates a continuing failure for relevant government agencies to respond and learn from problems identified’ (ibid: 1269). The basic deficiencies then identified in relation to monitoring the health effects of the sprays remain today. The introduction of adequate post-incident procedures for understanding the effects associated less lethal weapons should be a
part of documents such as the *Code of Practice on Police Use of Firearms and Less Lethal Weapons*.

Sprague (2007) made the case for other types of institutional reform regarding the transparency of policy decisions. The author can offer additional remarks along these lines. Much has been made of the enhanced transparency associated with the reports of the Steering Group for *Patten Report Recommendations 69 and 70 Relating to Public Order Equipment*. In the Phase 3 report, Jane Kennedy (2002: 1), then Minister of State for Northern Ireland, commented, ‘I want to draw attention to another, unprecedented aspect of the programme, namely its transparency.’ Whilst it may be true that the reports were a significant step up in transparency from previous reviews practices (e.g., those for the CS sprays), the extent of transparency was still questionable. The author was one of very few who offered written comments on the Phase 2, 3, and 4 reports. Yet, while letters of acknowledgement were sent in responses, almost no effort was made to address the numerous questions posed, many of which were repeated over the submitted comments. Addressing matters of transparency should be central to the introduction and continuing assessment of force options.

**The Pain Factor**

The level of pain inflicted needs to be addressed within a discussion of less-lethal weapons. When and how much pain is acceptable to inflict on members of the public is an important question no matter what the extent of long terms injuries sustained. This is particularly the case if less lethal weapons become used in compliance functions. Feelings of pain are extremely difficult to convey or assess by others, and this is certainly the case for electrical discharges. Rejali (1999) poignantly commented on the comparative difficulty of assessing the appropriateness of the use of electrical force when, in relation to the video taping of the Rodney King episode in 1992, he wrote ‘We all remember how badly Rodney King was beaten by L.A. police but no one remembers how many times King was shocked and how much voltage he received.’ One issue is the lack of visible cues during and after the use of certain weapons.

Individuals also experience pain in different ways. What is a traumatic experience for one person may not be regarded as so by another. In its marketing material Taser International includes numerous reassuring accounts of volunteers being shocked. As stated in the company instructor material for trainers the:
reasoning for recommending such a sample is that the Instructor is truly enabled to know and understand how the M26 works. This will help better articulate the ADVANCED TASER’s effects both as an instructor and potentially as an expert in court if necessary (Smith n.d.).

In contrast, as far as the author is aware, the Police Federation of England and Wales still forbids officers from being shocked as part of trials. Elsewhere, where individuals were allowed to volunteer to be shocked, the experience (even in highly controlled conditions) has not been regarded as a passing one. British reporter Glenn Campbell received a 2 second shock and gave the following account:

It was the most painful experience of my life. The shocks paralysed my thigh and legs and I was screaming in agony. If there is any doubt over the effectiveness of these stun guns, which could be issued to police in Britain this year, I am proof that they work [...] As crime reporter with Carlton TV's London Tonight I volunteered to test the effect - the first journalist to take part in such a trial. But had I known the consequences I would never have put myself forward. The whole left side of my body went into spasm. It was like being filled with boiling concrete which was going hard very quickly. It felt like it lasted an eternity. I am almost ashamed to say that I let out a primal scream which seemed to come from the bottom of my stomach. I did not lose consciousness but it was like a goods train had run over my legs. I was completely incapacitated. It took 15-30 seconds to recover... (Campbell 2001).

Lest such accounts be dismissed outright, it should be noted that officers receiving shocks from stun guns in the field have reported considerable distress from such experiences, and these have been categorized as exceptional and traumatic events within the police (Cowan 2001). All of these points highlight the problems associated when determining what is an acceptable level of pain to inflict on members of the public and others, and should inform debates about the appropriateness of the use of Tasers in particular settings.

Conclusion

Experience with the development, introduction, and management of less lethal weapons in the UK, the US and elsewhere has given numerous grounds for concern. This concern centres around whether such activities have met the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials’ call for the development and deployment of non-lethal weapons to be ‘carefully evaluated’ and
‘carefully controlled.’ If police forces in the UK are to achieve high standards of conduct, further measures and renewed diligence are required. This would encompass the evidential basis for assessments, the rigor and transparency of testing procedures, the mechanisms in place for post-approval monitoring and feedback, and the accessibility of use of force, injury, compensation, and complaint figures to both the police and the public. In the end, it should be remembered that less-lethal weapons don’t save lives, good policing does. New force options can be a part of professional policing, but not substitutes for it.

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